

# Carving out quality time

However busy life gets, it's important to set aside a period every day to give your child undivided love and attention. Such regular one-on-one times are likely to be the most special moments for both of you.

In children's eyes, the word "love" really does equate to "time" – it may sound corny, but it's true. Even if you're working hard to provide for them, children can process your busy-ness as rejection, so carving out precious time to be with them is really worthwhile.

While you can't create more hours in the day, you can prioritize the setting aside of some special time in what you do have. Be reassured that all your efforts

will be rewarded. Such together times are when your child feels most close to you – and some of your best memories are made.

It's good to know, too, that a lot of attention-seeking behaviour, jealousy, and whining can be headed off when your child knows there's always going to be a period in the day when he feels like he's the most important person in the world to you.



! TAILORED ADVICE  
**Age by age**

**2–3**  
YEAR-OLDS

**Cuddles please**  
Children are still reliant on touch to help them feel close and comforted.  
**Whatever you say**  
When possible, give your child the choice of what to do together. It sends the message: "I don't mind what we do. This is about being with you."

**4–5**  
YEAR-OLDS

**A little helper**  
Now your child is a little older, ask them to help you cook dinner or fix things around the house.  
**All ears**  
When your child tells you about school, don't try to teach or advise. Just listening and reflecting back what he says is often enough. The best question is often: "Tell me why".

**6–7**  
YEAR-OLDS

**Staggered bedtimes**  
If you have a younger child, once a week let your older child stay up half an hour past his usual bedtime so you can do something as just the two of you.  
**Taxi time**  
Often older children find it easier to talk about things that are bothering them if they don't have to make eye contact – travelling in the car is one such opportunity.

GOOD PRACTICE

8 key principles

1

**Set aside 10–15 minutes**  
Aim for short chunks daily with each child and be consistent. You will enjoy these times and soon start to reap the behavioural benefits.

2

**Label it**  
It's key that your child understands that you have set aside this time to be with him. At the start, tell him it's your "special time" together.

3

**Focus on the freebies**  
Spend time with your child on activities that don't cost money. There's so much you can do – playing card games, cooking, taking family walks or bike rides, and walking the dog – to show that just being together is enough.



4

**Make the most of holidays**  
As well as recharging batteries, holidays are key bonding times. Really connect with your child by creating opportunities for "attachment play", where you sit or stand opposite your child, which relays "I love being with you".

5

**Maximize every opportunity**  
Whenever you are with just one child, running errands or in the car, for example, be aware that this time can easily become meaningful if you tune into their moods and interests – ask him what he'd like to talk about.

6

**Find the best time of day**  
Whether you choose to get up a bit earlier and start your day sitting on your child's bed, stroking his hair, and chatting about the day ahead or have some extra quiet time before bedtime at the end of the day is up to you. Find what works best for you and your child.

7

**Have fun together**  
Fun activities release feel-good neurochemicals and contribute to a positive self-identity.

8

**Turn off the tech**  
Always put away your phone. Try to clear your mind of other things, so you can stay present with your child.



**SETTING ASIDE EVEN A SHORT AMOUNT OF 'SPECIAL TIME' DAILY CAN GO A LONG WAY TOWARDS IMPROVING YOUR BOND.**



# “No broccoli!”

When you first weaned your child onto solids, she would probably happily gobble up most of the foods you fed her. By 2, she's testing her new-found independence by being fussier and may be turning down some of the foods you now offer her.

## SCENARIO | Your child is playing with her food instead of eating it.

### SHE SAYS

*“No broccoli!”*

Your child is naturally suspicious of new foods and, because her taste is acutely sensitive, some foods may not taste nice. Certain vegetables have flavours that are too intense for her taste buds.

### YOU MIGHT THINK

*“I spent ages making this meal. She's not getting what she needs. I'm not doing a good job of feeding her.”*

Because food often represents love in our minds, it can feel like a rejection when a child refuses meals. It's frustrating, too, if you've cooked something especially. Try not to get hung up on what's happened at one mealtime, she'll be getting enough nourishment across the day.



**BY LEARNING THAT MEALTIMES ARE ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHATTING AND TRYING NEW THINGS, CHILDREN LEARN POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS WITH FOOD.**

### WHAT SHE'S THINKING

*“It's great to be boss at mealtimes. And it's funny watching Mummy clear up the food when I drop it.”*

Your child is in a highly sensory phase and wants to explore new textures – including foods – with her hands as well as make her own choices as she feeds herself. So, she may prefer to squidge the food between her fingers than eat it. Children also play with food because they are little scientists. Dropping food on the floor is watching gravity in action.



### HOW TO RESPOND

#### *In the moment...*

1

**Offer less** A plate piled high can look daunting, so serve small portions and then offer more when she's finished it. Ask her to try a bit of everything while letting her respond to her feelings of fullness. Never insist on a clean plate. If your child has shifted from eating to just playing, remove the food. The next meal is never far away.

2

**Eat with her** Even if you're eating later, sit down and eat a little of the same food. She will get more pleasure from her food if she sees you enjoying it, too.

3

**Stay neutral** Keep your praise for eating vegetables low-key. This phase will pass quicker if you don't nag her, get angry, or get upset. Research has found that children eat far more veg when parents don't make a fuss either way.

4

**Avoid bribes** Resist offering sweet foods as rewards or threatening to remove treats till she's eaten the vegetables. Otherwise you give her the idea that eating veg is a punishment.

#### *In the long term...*

**Try, try, and try again** Research has found toddlers have to try foods 15 times before they accept them. Keep offering the new foods, alongside foods you know she will eat.



# "I give up."

Resilience is the ability to cope with challenges and bounce back from disappointment. To develop this skill, your child will need to find out what she is capable of through trial and error, and discover that persisting and learning from mistakes is the best way to improve.

**SCENARIO |** Your child is trying to glue two boxes together to make a model. When it doesn't work, she storms off.

## SHE SAYS

*"I give up."*

As a parent, it's natural to want to protect your child from difficulties and stress. But children need the time and space to find things challenging so they can practise their problem-solving and coping skills without you "fixing" their difficulties.

## YOU MIGHT THINK

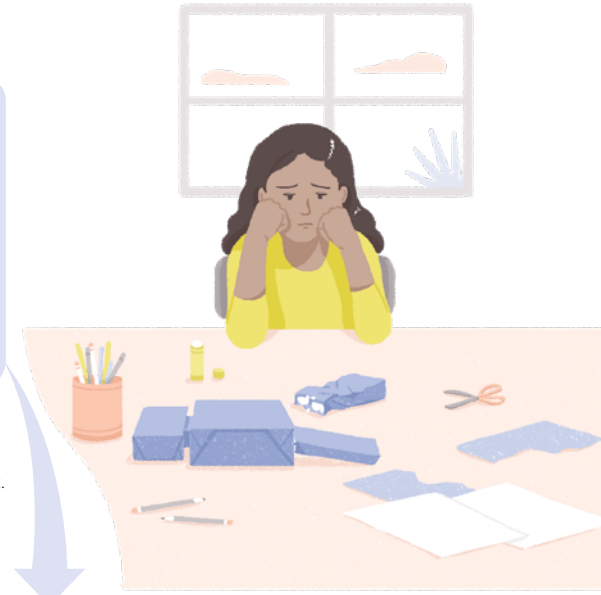
*"She needs to learn how to stick at things. But I hate seeing her so upset."*

You may want to intervene as it feels uncomfortable to see your child distressed. You may also want to avoid her having a meltdown, which will be stressful for you. But by letting her finish this project on her own, you will be sending the message that you have faith she can do it without help.

## WHAT SHE'S THINKING

*"If grown-ups have to help me it must mean I can't do it on my own."*

Instead of enjoying the process, your child believes there's only one way to do her project. If you keep intervening, she will assume you think she can't manage it on her own. She'll need space and practice to develop resilience and keep trying.



## HOW TO RESPOND

### In the moment...

1

**Reframe her thinking** Ask your child to use her problem-solving skills to think of other ways to glue the boxes together. Or suggest she uses her creativity to think about how to turn it into a model that is different from the one she is trying to copy. Validate her efforts by saying: "I can see you're trying hard to do that".

2

**Show her how far she's come** Remind her of the things she wasn't able to do when she was little but can do now, for example, drawing pictures. Tell her that, with practice, she will get better at art projects too.

### In the long term...

**Don't "get in the way"** Parents who hover over children and step in to fix their problems allow them to believe they can't do things on their own. Take a step back.

**Give her lots of opportunities for free play** Children learn to feel confident by feeling competent. At this age, this happens through giving children lots of real-world, hands-on play, which she chooses to do by herself. This will help her work out what she is capable of.

**Encourage steps in the right direction** Give your child targeted praise to show you are noticing the small progress she is making in learning new skills. Praise her flexibility and perseverance so she doesn't feel she has failed if she doesn't produce the "perfect" end result.



# “I’m bored.”

Children are usually bursting with enthusiasm, so when your child says she’s bored, you can feel worried that you are not stimulating her enough. But children need to be left to their own devices, so that they learn to direct themselves.



**SCENARIO |** Your child says there is nothing to do and she’s not interested in any of her toys or games.

SHE SAYS

*“I’m bored.”*

YOU MIGHT THINK

*“She’s got so much stuff. Do I have to entertain her every second?”*

WHAT SHE’S THINKING

*“There’s no school, no screens, and only myself to play with. What am I supposed to do now?”*

**Boredom can be a good thing** – it’s a sign your child has the free time to do whatever she likes. The catch-all phrase of “I’m bored” could be used by children to mean other things: trying to bring up a topic that’s bothering them, feeling flat but not knowing why, or wanting attention.

**Many parents fall** into the trap of believing they must be constantly “building” their child’s brain with all sorts of activities. But research shows that having nothing to do stimulates a child’s thinking and boost creativity. Don’t feel guilty about her complaints of boredom.

**Sometimes children complain** of boredom if they’re looking for something to fully engage their brain or if they’re unsure of what to do next. Over time, your child will get better at working out what to do without adult guidance and, in doing so, will get to know herself better.



**LEARNING HOW TO BEAT BOREDOM IS A CRUCIAL LIFE SKILL. IT TAKES EFFORT AND PRACTICE TO WORK OUT WHAT TO DO WITH THEMSELVES.**

## HOW TO RESPOND

### *In the moment...*

1

**Acknowledge her feelings** Listen and tell her you know what it feels like. Tell her that while boredom may feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable, that feeling will soon pass when she lets her brain guide her towards a new activity.

2

**Don’t come up with every solution** If your child has the usual options – toys, books, craft materials, and going outside to play – it’s not your job to “fix” her boredom. Let her come up with her own ideas.

3

**Challenge your child** Suggest she writes a list of all her toys, so she remembers what she has, digs out some of her old ones, or creates something and shows you. This will guide her towards exploring activities on her own but also reassure her she has an interested audience. Praise her efforts.

### *In the long term...*

**Let go of the guilt** Instead of feeling like “having nothing to do” is a failing on your part, see it as a chance for your child to daydream, decompress, and let their imagination run free.

**Set aside more free play** Research shows that extracurricular activities mean children have far less unstructured time than ever before. This can leave children feeling at a loss when they do have some. Give your child more free time, so she develops hobbies and pastimes to entertain herself.

