

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Dr. Peggy Drexler is a research psychologist, gender expert, and author. She published “Why Alone Time Is So Important for Boys and Girls” on July 17, 2012, in The Huffington Post. The original text has been adapted slightly to make it more suitable as an exam passage.

## WHY ALONE TIME IS SO IMPORTANT FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

Seven-year-old Tommy is bright, active, and always on the go. He’s very much what we think of when we think of a “typical” boy: loves bikes, sports, comic books. As soon as he comes home from school—or, in more recent weeks, his half-day sessions at basketball camp—he expectantly asks his mom, Maggie: So what do we do now?

Most days, Maggie responds to this question by discussing with Tommy what they might do together. Then she stops whatever she’s doing—whether it’s work, laundry, or getting dinner ready for the rest of the family—and does the chosen activity with him. They’ll play cards or take a walk to get ice cream, or run around the park. Although Maggie sometimes wonders if Tommy couldn’t do some of these after-school activities by himself—or maybe spend a quiet afternoon reading a book. She wants him to feel engaged, and enjoy being a kid. In part, she’s filling a role: Tommy isn’t an only child, but his little sister is too young to be a playmate, and there are only a few other kids in the neighborhood. In any case, Maggie figures, better than sticking him in front of the television, right?

Better than television, certainly. But constantly entertaining our kids is not without consequence. The role of the ever-present playmate that I see many parents slipping into can indeed be damaging. We’ve been reading lately about how Americans, by and large, are raising a generation of spoiled children. In many ways, overindulging kids with scheduled time and constant parental attention is akin to spoiling them rotten with material goods.

Modern parents are almost obsessed with filling up their children’s time. There are after-school classes, team sports, camps, lessons. What’s often missing from the schedule is time spent alone. Alone time is time sons and daughters use to learn how to entertain themselves or just relax, without help or input from parents, siblings, friends, or babysitters. And it is a crucial aspect of the development of independence. In fact, studies show that children who know how to fill their time alone rarely feel isolated or lonely. Instead, they learn to be content with whatever situation is at hand and truly have fun being creative in the moment.

The feeling of needing to entertain children is common among parents. The parents of one third-grade boy Glen, the younger child in a family with an older sister, hired a young, adult male babysitter, who followed Glen around all day, at the ready for any activity Glen chose, whether it be tennis, basketball, or attending a local sports event. But by filling our kids’ every waking moment with sports or just plain companionship, we risk stifling their self-sufficiency, as well as their imaginations. We risk raising children who always seek support.

Take nine-year-old Sam. Sam’s weekends are jam packed with little league, scheduled play dates, hikes with his dad. Most weekends also include some “special” event, like a trip to the circus, a museum, or a professional baseball game. No one could say that Sam is lacking quality time spent with his parents, who by all accounts are involved, loving, and supportive.

These are good things. Still, although he is almost always busy, Sam gets bored easily. He complains often, and expects others to help him shake that boredom. Sam's mother, Lisa, reports that it has become virtually impossible to ask Sam to go play by himself—he's got a bedroom full of toys and books—or even color at the kitchen table while she's making dinner. "He thinks we're punishing him," says Lisa. "He doesn't understand what he's done to 'deserve' this alone time." But Sam doesn't know how to play by himself because he's never had to.

Many parents feel the need to be their child's main source of entertainment because they want their kids to like them or fear that lack of stimulation will put their kid at a disadvantage, and somehow their achievements will lag behind their peers. Others feel guilty—for working or for not giving their child a playmate in the form of a sibling. Other parents want to protect their children from being lonely. But if your child has trouble making friends, the answer is not to simply fill that role yourself. When you're stepping in as a playmate, you're preventing your child from developing the qualities needed to go out and make friends, and further compromising her ability to connect with kids her own age.

Instead, try incorporating some structured and unstructured alone time. This is a time when your son or daughter can choose, within boundaries you set, where he/she wants to be and what he/she wants to do. Explain that "everybody's doing it"—Mom's going to make a few phone calls. Dad's going to spend some time working in the garden—so that your child knows he/she is not missing out on fun other family members are having. Let your child know it's his/her special time to enjoy being alone. No sharing or talking required. And then say it's up to him/her to figure the rest out. Turn being alone from a negative thing into a positive way to encourage self-reliance, creativity, and an enjoyment of self.

Of course, spending quality time with your child is far better than giving in to constant demands for "stuff" or, yes, sticking them in front of the TV. I'm *not* suggesting not spending time with your child. That's important, certainly. But it's also important to remember that alone time is a crucial, and too often forgotten, part of development. The real world is not a constant party, or a day at camp. The real world includes downtime, and it includes alone time. And your job as a parent isn't to entertain your children 24 hours a day. Introducing your child early on to the idea of spending time alone—and liking it—will help your son and/or daughter become a better companion to others and get more from relationships with friends—and with you. Your child will grow to be an adult who can be happy on his/her own, or with someone else. And isn't that the goal?

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## ESSAY TOPIC

According to Drexler, why is "alone time" so important for boys and girls? What do you think of her views? In formulating your response, be sure to use specific examples or illustrations, which can be drawn from any of your reading, your experience, or the experiences of others.