

## Giftedness and Classroom Boredom: Maybe It's Not All Bad

There's value in handling boredom effectively--if, in fact, they're truly bored.  
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In my jobs, both as a [gifted](#) resource specialist for a public school system and as a part-time consultant for other school divisions (in fact, even as a column writer for this *Psychology Today* blog) I see it as my duty and responsibility to be an advocate for gifted learners. This is not always easy. As I educate teachers and [parents](#) about the unique and very real needs these student have, I've learned that diplomacy typically gets more results than, say, a collegiate style lecture on the characteristics of gifted learners. I might, for example, point out that a gifted student typically needs far fewer practice opportunities in order to master a new skill—but that new teacher I am talking to may be more convinced to actually decrease this student's required number of worksheets if I also point out that, "Hey, it'll be less grading for you, too!" Similarly, I might be more likely to help smooth a path for a gifted student if I clarify for his parents that taking a unit pre-test to assess what the child *already* knows is a pretty standard M.O. in education—that it's not, in fact, "just an excuse to give yet another test."

I think I'm pretty successful at walking this tricky "professional educator-child advocate" line but there are times when I am challenged to remain poised and objective, and never is that more the case than when a parent opens up a conference by stating that the sole reason her child is not doing well in school is because he is "bored." Boredom, in my experience, is the number one reason parents of gifted students offer to explain any kind of trouble in school—from behavior issues in the classroom to sub-standard performance on report cards.

Let me be explicit: I do not believe that saying a gifted child is bored by his schoolwork is irrelevant to the issue of solving those problems. But at the same time, I do not think that simply "being bored" is always enough of a reason to demand a complete overhaul of that child's curriculum. Here's why boredom might not be such the terrible, catch-all culprit many parents imagine it to be.

**Not infrequently, parents confuse their child's claims of "boredom" with some other underlying issue.** Here sits the child at the kitchen table. He's been there for twenty minutes, staring alternately at the prompt for the five paragraph essay and the blank paper on which he is supposed to write it. He complains that he is "uninspired by the prompt", that having to do all the pre-write "brainstorming" and composition of a "rough draft" is just a "waste of time." He questions why he even has to do the assignment when it's not "really going to be graded anyhow." All of these sound like legitimate complaints and perhaps even they are. But it is also possible that a bit of further digging might reveal the *real* reason the child's paper is still blank thirty minutes later: he is actually afraid of even getting started. His [perfectionist](#) tendencies make the task of executing a "perfect" essay too intimidating to begin—especially when the concept of a perfect essay is *so* subjective. Alas, all that mom and dad hear are his complaints about how tedious and pointless the assignment is.

Alternatively, it's possible that the child is simply confused about the assignment's expectations. According to what he wrote in his assignment pad at school that afternoon, he has to "make a PowerPoint about Ecuador" for his Spanish class. But now he can't recall how many slides he was supposed to have,... or how much of it was supposed to focus on culture,... or how many words from that week's new vocabulary sheet he should include. He can't find the assignment's description in his folder because, well, he left it in his locker. And now, with so many unanswered questions about the task, he simply doesn't know how to begin because he can't picture the final product. He really doesn't "want to waste time" doing it wrong, but the words that he chooses to express aloud his frustration about "this whole stupid thing" convince his mom and dad that it's all just "useless

busywork anyhow.”

It’s possible that the teacher has assigned a meaningless task, of course. But if we give that child’s educator the benefit of the doubt, it’s also potentially true that...

**The child has decided a given task is “boring” or “useless” merely because he does not see its purpose.** This is human [nature](#): we tend to declare a task that *seems* pointless as “a waste of time.” But surely this is not always true or the best mindset. A soldier going through basic training may dread callisthenic exercises that require him to crawl a hundred yards or more with his torso hovering just inches above the ground. His back aches, his shoulders sing in agony, and his abs cramp convulsively. But then, two weeks later, he is ordered to shimmy under a net of barbed wire as live ammunition flies overhead, and it’s then that he realizes that perhaps those other drills were not so worthless after all. Sometimes knowing the reason for doing a task helps take the sting out of its tedium. It might even help us reinterpret its “boring” nature in a more effective way. So, should a teacher in a classroom explain the purpose for *every* assignment at the start? While it might go a long way in helping to convince others of its ultimate value, there are times when a teacher might deliberately choose to wait. His view, perhaps, is one of a longer endgame, wherein all the bits and pieces add up to a larger payoff. Students may “practice” repeated addition again and again, for example, so they can see that, in the end, multiplication really is an altogether much tidier algorithm. Having said this, boredom is boredom. And yet...

**Sometimes, in an effort to advocate for our child’s [happiness](#), we forget that being bored is a part of life—and that extremely valuable lessons can come out of facing it head on.** Everyone is bored at some point--in school, in a job, in life. No matter what dream occupation we may eventually hope to have, parts of it are bound to be dull, tedious, monotonous. As adults we learn that there are ways to cope with these realities, if only to get through them. We sit down, we suck it up, and we power through filing our taxes because, when we are done, we’ll know how much money our refund check will be worth. We’ll clean out that garage, the project we’ve been dreading for months, and when it’s done perhaps we’ll congratulate (and reward) ourselves with a celebratory beer. Persevering against boredom in the very face of that boredom is what builds tenacity and the patience to solve long-term problems. Scientists have not discovered a cure for cancer yet, but surely they are far less likely to do so if they find the task of crunching the numbers after an elaborate experiment too dull or boring to do. Furthermore,...

**Struggling through tasks that seem tedious or remedial may in fact be the very ones that, in the long run, add up to mastery.** Michelangelo is credited with commenting that, “If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery, it would not seem so wonderful at all.” Tedium may not be useless. Ask yourself this question: what are you really good at and how many times did *you* have to go through the boring stages of practice before you got there? (In my case, you can see this in action by going [here](#).) How many thousands and thousands of backhand swings must Venus Williams have executed before she became a pro? Students in school need the opportunity to figure out these lessons as well.

Lest I leave you with the wrong impression, let me be clear: classroom boredom that is merely the result of lazy instructional decisions is not desirable... and in the next article we’ll discuss how to address this effectively. But, truly, handling boredom properly—reinterpreting it, even bending it to your own will perhaps—*is* a life-long skill.

And, frankly, no amount of altering a child’s school curriculum is likely to eliminate it altogether.