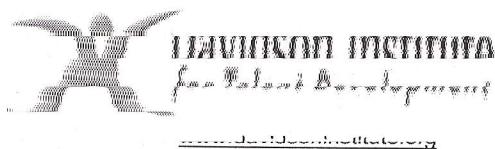


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Tips for Parents: Where's the Spark? Managing Boredom In/Out of School

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Source: Davidson Institute for Talent Development/Young Scholar Seminar 2007

Boredom has been associated with early dropout rates, school dissatisfaction and lack of achievement in the scholarly literature of education (Fogelman, 1976; Gjesne, 1977; Robinson, 1975). In the health sciences, eating disorders (Abramson & Stinson, 1977; Leon & Chamberlain, 1973), hostility (Broadbent, 1979) and depression (Giambra & Traynor, 1978) are linked to boredom.

However, the construct is elusive since there is no consistent definition for boredom that is agreed upon in the literature, or in life. Indeed, boredom like beauty is often in the eyes of the beholder; described in myriad ways (see Figure 1).

Vodanovich and Katt (1990) conducted a factor analysis study related to an instrument for measuring boredom (The Boredom Proneness Scale), but just what the five significant factors mean, and what utility they have for alleviating boredom remains obscure. We just don't know very much about boredom, just as we don't know much about how to define time other than to give examples of it.

I could make a plea to scholarly colleagues to begin exploring this construct; but, dare I say, it just might be a little too depressing of a topic? Or, perhaps a more accurate comment would be that the construct is so loosely defined it is very difficult to even begin empirical work.

Either way, a scarcity of scholarly effort is being spent on describing or defining this construct; which leads to some very intriguing questions:

1. How often are gifted students bored in school? In life?
2. What effect does this self-perceived boredom have on these individuals?
3. How does boredom effect motivation and/or task completion (achievement)?

What Parents Can Do

The above questions might be intriguing, but they do little to address the needs most parents of gifted and highly/profoundly gifted (HGP/PS) face on a daily basis. In a recent parent seminar, I had the opportunity to discuss the issue of boredom with parents. Together we developed a set of guidelines you might consider when faced with the issue of boredom at home or school:

Defining "boring" or "boredom" in an understandable form. The construct is often stated by learners as, "I'm bored" or "It's boring." This description does little to help a parent or a teacher address or alleviate the situation. Indeed, boredom can mean a litany of things (see Figure 1).

Parents and teachers should zero in on the construct and continue to question the meaning behind boring or boredom until a statement is made that is addressable. Once the meaning behind "boring" is understood, something can be done.

For example, at the end of the day as our son comes in the house we ask how his day was. Very commonly, his immediate response is that school is boring. As parents, we can sympathize with this state of affairs since our jobs often leave us feeling this eerie sense of emotional letdown as well.

Yet, it is unlikely the entire day was boring. Our perception as parents that his day was a depressing miasma of worksheets and lectures is hardly on target. As we press for information, we eventually gain insight (sometimes!) that not all is wrong in the world. Sometimes we find out our son had a grand time during the day.

We also have learned that our son is not a fan of worksheets that drill and then re-drill information. He finds this redundancy a waste of time; and becomes frustrated and angered when required to show what he knows again and again to be sure he has a good grasp (for "the Test") instead of moving on to more interesting or different work.

As parents, we can address and advocate for a change, but we are unable to do so without knowing the meaning behind the

statement, "school is boring." Getting to an addressable definition of boring should be your first priority as a parent. Don't let use of the construct by your child leave you with wild perceptions about school and the challenge of the curriculum. Pin your daughter/son down, get an understanding of the meaning they have, then develop a plan.

Look carefully at expectations (yours and your child's). Very similar to the above suggestion, taking stock of the meaning behind our tendencies and behaviors can be enlightening (and sometimes shocking). If your daughter/son has always been a fast learner able to digest and recall information at a high rate throughout childhood this might mean (s)he has a broad knowledge base. But, through work I have been doing in schools with HG/PG secondary level students, this knowledge base is a mile wide and an inch deep! The majority of these exceptional learners are unable to apply information in ways other than rote regurgitation of definitions. When engaged in a complex task requiring complex and critical thinking, these HG/PG individuals are more likely to shut down (e.g., "it's boring, I know it already") than to muddle through and show a lack of ability. I "chalk this up" to the difference between a concrete and abstract thinker (thinking along the lines of Jean Piaget's work). It isn't a sign of failure; rather, it is the struggle to make knowledge one's own and apply it in creative and imaginative ways. This is hardly the focus of most school (or homeschool) curricula; but, is one of the most important aspects of raising a successful HG/PG child.

Perfectionism can be learned and is very difficult to alleviate when the construct of boredom can be so casually used to stop communication and effort. Look and listen carefully to what your HG/PG child is doing and saying. Is (s)he working at the concrete level? Or, has (s)he moved to the abstract level of thinking?

Awareness and ableness are important for everyone to know. Obviously, school personnel need to know what your child is capable of doing including if (s)he was an early reader, talker or walker. The most descriptive way of providing this information is via a portfolio of evidence (i.e., names of books read, at what age, with what fluency, etc.). Another means of identifying and documenting ability is via standardized testing and grade comparisons. Sometimes the schools are happy to receive outside expert assessments; other times, they won't recognize these assessments until (or unless) the district's chosen measurement instruments provide some evidence of high ability.

It is also important for parents to be aware of the school's "ableness" to meet your child's needs. Check with district personnel to see if there is a gifted/talented program in existence. Check to see what types of services are provided for gifted and HG/PG children. Check to see if acceleration (both content and full grade) is a possibility for a highly able learner. Check to see if a parent group exists for families of gifted/talented children.

And, on the awareness front, you need to know that the vast majority of schools follow a deficit model of education. This means personnel look for limitations in student ability and focus efforts on "fixing" these as a primary focus. This stems from reaction to the high-stakes accountability systems levied upon schools by state legislatures. Due to the focus on ensuring minimum levels of competency (standard levels of performance), school personnel draw attention to deficiencies in the effort to help students perform well on the Test.

Most twice exceptional families would agree that the first focus is on the disabling condition; then, and often only after this deficit is addressed, will the "secondary concern" of high ability even be discussed. This example might not seem to fit your family's situation but, you have likely already been heavily involved in advocating (fighting!) to have your child's advanced abilities even recognized in school settings. Being aware of the school's position and ableness to perform is just as important as sharing your child's ableness with school personnel. It might do nothing more than aggravate you, but at a minimum you know where you stand and what options are available to request.

"Run interference" for interests and passions to develop. If your son/daughter has an interest, provide as many opportunities for him/her to muck around with the interest as you can. This will mean after school enrichment as well as some involvement on your part as well in the process.

Get involved with (or start!) the local parent group for the gifted/talented. The parents you'll meet will be able to provide you with useful information related to community activities, camps or other opportunities that exist in your locale. These folks will also have useful insights to share about raising a gifted or HG/PG child. Depending on your beliefs, two heads are better than one; or, misery loves company—so, becoming associated with other adults raising challenging kids is an important way to build camaraderie.

In school, to alleviate "boredom" advocate for your child's interest(s) to be the theme used for class assignments. This can be most readily done with book reports and writing assignments, but can, with some creativity and imagination, work with any content area. The process does take some advocacy (negotiation) by parents with teachers, including perhaps meetings and written assurances that standards for the assignment are (will be) addressed. For example, if your daughter is absorbed by American Girl Dolls®, you can advocate with your daughter's teacher for writing assignments to use Felicity as the focal point for the story developed or for reading the Felicity book as the choice for a book report.

Ratcheting the focus up a bit more, you can attempt to advocate for curricular changes that address your child's

interests/passions in more concerted ways. This might be requesting Independent Study options or school releases to attend programs offsite (like university courses). These attempts to "run interference" are more involved and difficult to negotiate, but if you have a supportive relationship with a teacher and a principal, doors can open that provide flexibility unrealized for most.

Reflection/Connection

Although a dearth of information exists in the literature to provide guidance to alleviate boredom for gifted and HG/PG individuals, the construct does exist and has been the focus of measurement and empirical study (although not in the population of the gifted). This article provides some context for further focus on boredom from a descriptive level, providing a platform to begin addressing closely the meaning behind boredom.

But, this clarion call for scholars to take up the charge of empirically wrestling with the construct of boredom does little to help parents of gifted and HG/PG children work through the construct in and out of school. With the assistance of parents who took part in a bulletin board seminar on the topic and currently face the bane of boredom, the following guidelines were developed as a means of addressing the situation:

Define "boring" or "boredom" in an addressable form
 Look carefully at expectations (yours and your child's)
 Awareness and ableness are important for everyone to know (from the child's ableness to the school's ableness to meet learner needs)
 "Run interference" for interests and passions to develop

This set of guidelines is hardly comprehensive. But, it does provide some insight and suggestions to try. Parents and teachers need to know exactly what boredom means before they can address the issue. Taking the time to clarify and communicate meaning and understanding is a crucial first step in the process.

Taking stock of the learner's cognitive level of function, and gaining awareness of the entire educational setting also provides guidance useful for developing an action plan to address the situation. Finally, enabling interests and passions to grow is the most important way to help gifted and HG/PG individuals gain exposure to opportunities and develop a love for learning.

"It's Boring" can mean:	It's too easy.
	I'm confused, but I don't know how to ask for help.
	I don't like to (read, write, perform, etc).
	It's too difficult. I don't know where to begin.
	I'm not interested in this (content, course, etc).
	Everyone says this, and I want to fit in.
	It's not deep, complex, broad enough to tap my interest.
	I get A's without even trying. What's the point?
	I'd rather do _____.
	Just how many times do I have to show I know this work before you believe me?
	Something in my personal life is more important right now.
	I don't like the teacher because...
	I read the book already. What else can I read?
	I don't want to talk about this.

Figure 1: Possible meanings behind "boring"

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