

# PHP'S PARENTING FORUM



NAGC provides a Parent Resource Specialist service, whose role involves supporting parents and others who advocate for appropriate and challenging educational opportunities for high-potential children and youth. Our Parent Resource Specialist, Dr. Robin Schader, has agreed to expand her services to include a regular “question-and-answer” column for *Parenting for High Potential*.



Dr. Robin Schader

**Important Notice.** *Dr. Schader's services as NAGC's Parent Resource Specialist are designed to help readers find and understand general information on parenting high-ability children. The responses in this column (or on NAGC's website) contain advice and comments from individuals with training and experience in gifted education. Responses from the Parent Specialist, or other participating experts, are not intended to provide a basis for action in particular circumstances without consideration by a competent professional. By submitting your question for a response, you understand and agree that your question, and the Parent Specialist's answer, may be used by NAGC in print or on the NAGC website, although names and other obvious identifiers will be removed. Often the best way to resolve issues for your child is to talk with your child's teacher, school principal, pediatrician, or doctor. If you haven't already done so, we encourage you to investigate the resources available through your state or local gifted education organization. Contact information for NAGC state affiliates can be found on the NAGC website at: <http://www.nagc.org/> or by calling NAGC at (202) 785-4268. Submit your questions in an email, or as document attachment to an email, to: [parentspecialist@nagc.org](mailto:parentspecialist@nagc.org)*

## *Excerpts from Parent Email: The Challenges of Boredom*

- My almost 8-year-old-daughter is in the 2nd grade. She is currently making all “A”s. However she hates going to school, shows little interest in her work, and says she’s bored. How can I keep my child’s enthusiasm for learning alive? Especially in a classroom that requires work that she has already mastered?
- I wonder if my son’s behavior at school could be because he isn’t stimulated enough. He’s now in 6th grade and recently made the honor roll even though he constantly “goofs off.” It seems as though he is not being stimulated enough, and when he’s finished with his work he’s looking for something else to get into. When I talk with him about the problems, he says school is boring. What can I do?
- How do we find ways to challenge our highly gifted daughter? What is the school required to do? Our public school says there are no resources for gifted children, so their solution is to give her more boring work. Is it our responsibility to do extra work at home? Her teacher expects her to wait for all the other students to catch up. That will never happen. What can I do?
- My son is in the 1st grade and has been identified as gifted. His teacher reports that he is a “behavior problem” in class and gives examples such as: he blurts out the answers to questions, makes noises, or talks with his peers during class. Every day he reports that school is boring, just sitting and doing the same thing day after day. Where can I get more information about strategies to deal with this?
- Once again my daughter is having a terrible school year. She has loathed school almost from the start and now is having serious problems with her teacher. I know she’s bored – gets the point before most of the directions are complete. She no longer cares about the quality of her work. Her apathy is growing and it’s hard to keep her interest level up.

Boredom. Who among us hasn’t experienced the dullness of predictable routine? Why has the phrase, “My child is bored” become a growing refrain in email from parents who want their children to be happily engaged, interested, and learning during their time spent at school? How does it happen that bright minds become bored? Are some people more prone to being bored than others? To discover ways to combat the deadly, mind-numbing battle with boredom, we must first look into what it is and how it might manifest in a gifted child. Whose responsibility is it to make sure daily experiences aren’t boring? Finally, how can we help our children develop practical skills to deal with life’s inevitable monotonous moments?

Many years ago, a young mother at a workshop complained to Zabelle Helen Tracy (California’s 1973 Teacher of the Year) that her highly gifted child was continually bored in the classroom. “Oh, my dear,” Mrs. Tracy replied, “I wouldn’t disclose that in public. Very bright children aren’t bored. These are the children who always have ideas to develop, inventions to imagine, experiences to savor, or dreams to explore. No. Boredom is not part of their vocabulary.” That provocative comment may have more than a germ of truth; however, current research would indicate there’s another side to the story, as well.

## What Is Boredom?

Boredom is a relatively recent phenomenon. It only became part of our vocabulary in 1760 at the beginning of the industrial revolution, according to Lars Svendsen, author of *A Philosophy of Boredom* (2004). Since then some professionals have written about boredom as a personality trait, yet others regard boredom as a situational, temporary state of mind. This is an important distinction for parents who want to effect change. When a child's zest for learning and willingness to work at a difficult task is noticeably greater at home (with self-selected projects) than at school (with regular coursework), his or her boredom should be relieved by more appropriately challenging material. On the other hand, if a child reports boredom both in and out of the classroom, she or he may be less able to self-motivate and be easily distractible. This child may respond well to novel situations, but become quickly dissatisfied and frequently require fresh stimulation. In both cases, the phrase "I'm bored" indicates a need for change.

## Look For Clues

What does your child mean with those plaintive words? S/he might be asking for something more, but could also be asking for something different. In a classroom, for example, the problem might be the pace of learning rather than the actual content. The phrase could also be a safe thing to say, a socially acceptable way of trying to fit into groups of peers who don't really share the same interest or ability level.

"I'm bored" has become a catchall expression to cover concerns as diverse as a lack of satisfaction, a reaction to the pressures of potential, increasing frustration, overload, or even as a way to deal with fear of failure. If the reasons you see point to a lack of intellectual challenge, then more opportunities for high-level learning would be appropriate. Yet, for a child who uses the phrase as a defense mechanism, providing more academic stimulation would not necessarily alleviate and, in fact, could increase the problem.

How will you know without asking? Gifted children can, and should be, part of the solution. Begin with a weeklong action research project to document the frequency and circumstances when your child verbalizes boredom. Then, for the following week, include your child in taking a wider view. What about his or her peers, classmates, and other family members? Is boredom discussed in popular television shows? How is it portrayed? What about casual conversational comments by the general public? When and where does boredom surface? Explaining the project in its early stages to your child's teacher could be a non-threatening way to eventually work as a team to find possible opportunities for curriculum adjustment.

## Boredom Busters

Calvin, in the *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon strip, once mused that man may create not just for self-expression, but also as something to do when bored. If so, a little boredom might be a good thing – an impetus to encourage creativity and increase curiosity. Who knew that Dr. Seuss' first book

*And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* was written because he was bored on a long sea voyage. The monotonous rhythm of the ship's engine provided the cadence. Curiosity is key: a powerful force that serves as an antidote for boredom. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, researcher in the field of positive psychology, notes the importance of curiosity as a characteristic of high performing individuals. Fortunately, curiosity can be cultivated by learning how to focus attention. If you're interested in the research aspects of his work, look at *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (2000).

Nurture awareness of a wider world. Encourage your child to ask why things are the way they are. Help him or her to build connections between what's being studied in school to what might be current topics of conversation. Many things aren't interesting or relevant on the surface; however, when one delves deeper, all sorts of rich connections can appear. You'll find many ideas to nurture curiosity on the Thinkport website, a partnership between the Johns Hopkins University and Maryland Public Television: <http://www.thinkport.org/FamilyCommunity/educationhome.tp>

Encourage resourcefulness and help your children find more within themselves. Don't try to keep your child constantly busy, but show respect for his or her abilities by giving the freedom of alone, unstructured time to think, dream, and experiment. If we are going to expect great things from our gifted children, we must teach them (as well as model for them) how not to be bored. A child who is used to a diet of entertaining options may have difficulty at first. There are inspiring examples of childhood resourcefulness in the stories of inventors such as Janese Swanson, founder of Girl Tech. Dr. Swanson writes,

"As a young girl, I was interested in technology in many forms. One year, for example, I received a typewriter as a gift. I played around with typing, tried out some of the exercises, and soon decided it was boring. It would be much more interesting, I thought, to take the machine apart and see for myself how it worked. So I did, and I figured it out and changed the keys around so I could type in my own secret code."

You can read more about her and other contemporary inventors on the Smithsonian's website "Innovative Lives" at: <http://invention.smithsonian.org/centerpieces/ilives/>

## Skills For The Future

Antonyms for boredom include engagement, interest, and excitement. It's reasonable to want your child to learn something new each day, but recognize this as a shared responsibility among student, parent, and teacher. Teachers can and should offer options to stimulate cognitive growth, parents can provide times and materials for creative outlets at home; however, the ultimate solution to boredom is active effort and participation on the part of the individual.

*Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind.* (Samuel Johnson)