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When Your Child Is Bored at School

“I’m bored!” complains your child. How many parents have heard this phrase – and cringed?

But what if your child comes home every day with this complaint, and has nothing good to say about school (or worse yet, nothing at all to say about school)?

Your first step is to rule out the possibility of misinterpretation, says Sally Yahnke.

Walker, Ph.D., a teacher and author of *The Survival Guide for Parents of Gifted Kids*. She tells the story of one of her kindergartners who always complained that she was bored. Frustrated, Walker finally replied, “I don’t understand. There’s all this stuff to do. What does ‘bored’ mean to you?”

The child responded, “It means having to do what *you* want me to do rather than what *I* want to do.”

Walker explains that children need to understand that life isn’t always fun, that everyone gets bored occasionally – or dislikes the task at hand – and we all have to do things that we’d rather not. Bob Chase, a teacher for 25 years, two-term president of the National Education Association and the author of *The New Public School Parent*, agrees. He says that teachers and school psychologists field many complaints from parents that their child is “bored” when, upon further investigation, that doesn’t seem to be true.

Gather Evidence

How can you discover whether or not you’re dealing with a significant problem?

Anne Rambo, Ph.D., a professor of child and family therapy and author of *I Know My Child Can Do Better!*, says parents need to become detectives with the goal of locating evidence to back up their child’s complaints. She recommends that parents begin by talking to their child and also listening to what she says to others. It’s a bad sign if parents hear no conversation about what their child is learning in school, or about the teachers, Rambo says. “Then you know there’s not much of a relationship with a teacher, and no interest there.”

Excessive conversation about the social structure at school could also be an indication that your child is not very involved in her classes.

Continuing the quest for information, you can look for patterns in your child's class work, homework and tests. Most important, you need to talk to your child's teacher. Chase points out that educating a child is a true partnership, between parent and teacher – whatever the reasons for your child's complaint, it's important for you to sit down with her teacher and talk about it.

The Boredom Spectrum

After all your detective work, you are likely to come up with one of three scenarios:

1. The Under-Challenged Child – Experts believe the most common reason for children to complain of boredom at school is that the material is not challenging enough. Rambo explains that children who are academically ahead of schedule tend to describe themselves as bored and frustrated, saying that school drives them crazy. These are youngsters who may be gifted and talented or just have abilities beyond the level of work that is being assigned. Often these children may not do all their homework or may make a lot of careless mistakes in it, but they do better on tests. When the questions are harder, or when it's an exam, they rise to the occasion.

Tell-tale signs that your child is under-challenged include:

- Very little studying, yet average or even good grades.
- Poor performance in areas of strong ability.
- Sloppy and disorganized work, with no interest in improving.
- Avoidance of study in subjects in which he's previously shown strong interest.
- Speeding through projects and assignments.
- Reading extensively during class in a way that is out of synch with classmates.

If this sounds like your child, you can ask to have him or her tested for giftedness, a request with which school districts are legally required to comply.

Education for gifted learners takes several basic forms. Gifted resource or pull-out programs provide a way for advanced learners to spend special time with their peers in an isolated setting. Acceleration is another option, meaning that your child skips a grade. Single-subject acceleration is a partial version of this, geared toward subject areas where a child has exceptional abilities.

Not all schools offer a gifted program, and in this case, Chase proposes investigating the possibility of more flexibility in the classroom to individualize your child's instruction, asking the teacher to provide more challenging kinds of homework, and finding out if the school has before- or after-school enrichment programs.

2. The Overwhelmed Child – At the other extreme, the work may be too challenging for your child, leading her to tune school out because she feels incompetent. If your child does better on repetitive work, on homework and on simpler questions, but stumbles over projects and tests, it may be that she is having trouble grasping the big picture. By meeting with the teacher, you can determine if your child has been behind since the start of the class or if it is a recent development, and then together you can come up with strategies for closing the gap.

Generally, children who need to catch up can be supported within the normal class time and structure, but the teacher may recommend putting a child-study team together if she feels that she needs additional advice and perspective. The team usually consists of classroom teachers, school psychologists, a guidance counselor, resource specialist or any one else who can provide information about your child and come up with specific ways to help her succeed.

3. The Isolated Child – For some children, a personal connection with the teacher is of primary importance and if this is missing they may complain of boredom. If this is your child, he needs encouragement on a personal level, and he fares badly when it is missing.

This often happens with children who have done well in elementary school, but feel lost when they get to a large middle school where they have several different teachers, Rambo says. One option is to switch him to a smaller school. If that's not possible, you can try to identify one special teacher or coach to be a mentor, someone who will take an interest in your child at school.

“It takes commitment for parent and teacher to work together, to meet the needs of the child,” says Chase, adding that while parents need to realize that it can seem very difficult to deal with these issues, they are usually resolvable when the adults in a child's life work together.

RESOURCES

I Know My Child Can Do Better!, by Anne Rambo, Contemporary Books, 2002. Provides insights on primary warning signs that a child is struggling, bored or under- or over-challenged at school, as well as resources and solutions for school-related problems.

The New Public School Parent, by Bob Chase with Bob Katz, Penguin, 2002. Chase, a veteran teacher and two-term president of the National Education Association, provides parents with a detailed road-map for navigating the public school system.

The Survival Guide for Parents of Gifted Kids, by Sally Yahnke Walker, Ph.D., Free Spirit Publishing, 2002. Gives parents encouraging, practical tips for living with a gifted child and handling the endless questions and high energy that often go along with giftedness.

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