

# When "I'm Bored!" Doesn't Call for More Challenge

Jean Strop

*Joshua is a 10th grader, always accelerated in mathematics. However, when he was placed in honors geometry in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and in honors trigonometry as a 9th grader, he faltered and received low average grades. Because he said that he was bored, his parents advocated for his continued placement in honors mathematics classes. When pre-calculus concepts eluded him, Joshua met with his math teacher and admitted that math had been difficult throughout high school. After assessment, it was apparent that Joshua needed to be placed in a regular Algebra II class, as he had significant gaps in his math knowledge. In his case, "I'm bored" really meant that math had become too difficult and abstract.*

Often the words *I'm bored* are a call to action for parents of gifted students. They acquaint themselves with the latest research on "the need for challenge" and approach educators with fervor and knowledge. Their advocacy focuses on acceleration for their gifted student in the subject area that is the source of boredom. What many parents and educators fail to realize is that *I'm bored* has a myriad of underlying meanings. By understanding the possible meanings, we are better able to determine the best programming options for each student. Acceleration is not always the appropriate option.

## Definitions of Bored

Educators and parents must observe carefully, have frank discussions with students, and listen to what is not said as well as what is spoken.

***I'm truly bored.*** For some gifted students, the curriculum is too easy and *I'm bored* means just that. When this is the case, there is a definite need for more stimulating and challenging work. At this point educators need to decide whether to provide enrichment materials, to advance the student in a given subject area, or to accelerate the youngster in multiple subject areas. For a few students, the need to accelerate by an entire grade level or more is in order.

***It's too hard.*** Many gifted students, even those with extremely high intellectual abilities, reach a point where academic work is extremely challenging. These students often define themselves by how easy learning comes to them, by how quickly concepts are mastered, and/or by how little work they must do. Often they find it difficult, if not impossible, to admit that the subject matter has become hard, and then they use the words *I'm bored* to save face when they really mean "This is too hard for me, and I don't know how to struggle to attain mastery."

Educators and parents of students in this position need to talk openly about personal limitations, explaining that all people have limits and that it is sometimes necessary for all of us to struggle in order to succeed. Such students must be encouraged to seek extra help from teachers and/or tutors. They also are helped from direct teaching of study skills for that particular subject. These young people may benefit from study groups with other bright students who are also struggling to understand the concepts. Short-term counseling/ therapy should be considered to overcome perfectionism, to increase frustration tolerance, and to rebuild fragile self-esteem.

***I don't like this.*** Some gifted students, especially those who have a history of underachievement, use the words *I'm bored* to really mean they don't like doing what is required of them: homework, outside reading, attending class, studying for tests, and/or completing long-range assignments. For them, doing something they don't like feels very toxic and is often labeled as *boring*.

These students may suffer emotionally and underachieve when accelerated in a subject they don't like. They may feel like outsiders when surrounded by other high achieving students who love the subject and challenge of the class. It is important to allow these gifted youngsters to accelerate in areas of passion and to take age-appropriate classes in areas of less interest to them.

***I'm afraid I'll fail if I try.*** For the students who have a deep fear of failure, the words *I'm bored* really means "I'm afraid to try because I might fail, and that would be embarrassing."

These student need encouragement to try challenging classes while working with the teacher or counselor on strategies for overcoming the deep fear of failure. Pretests and placement tests help assure appropriate class placement. Sometimes taking an easier class to rebuild confidence in a subject area is necessary.

***I have other things I prefer.*** Many gifted students are passionate about their interests to the point of obsession. In a matter of time, all other activities pale by comparison. These young people resent required school assignments because they divert from their passions. For such a student, *I'm bored* really means "There are things I want to do instead of the things you want me to do."

These students need help finding time in the day to pursue their areas of interest. They can learn to reward themselves for doing a non-preferred activity by finding time to pursue a preferred project. By taking non-accelerated classes in areas of minimal interest, extra time is created to spend on topics of deep passion.

***If I do well on this, I'll be expected to do more and harder work.*** Many underachieving gifted students fear success as much or more than failure. Success in non-preferred activities such as homework, tests, and some core classes can lead educators and parents to encourage and sometimes expect placement in advanced classes. In response, these students often deflect that response with *I'm bored* when they really mean "If I do well on this, I'll be expected to exert even more effort. I'm not all willing to do that."

We have all, at times, said one thing when we meant another. So, it is paramount for both educators and parents to investigate further before responding to the literal meaning of the words *I'm bored*. We must hear and interpret the real meaning of those words and plan appropriate programming for *bored* gifted students.

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*Jean Strop, from Colorado, is a long-time psychologist, gifted resource teacher, and counselor, as well as a consultant and writer in affective education and college planning for gifted students.*