Boredom: A Surprisingly Interesting Topic

"I hate this – it's so boring!"

When a gifted kid isn't doing well in school, or in any activity, this cry for help is frequently among the first ones we hear. There is an immediate pull to intervene, to get teachers to differentiate, to get them to reduce the demands for the basic skills, to drop the activity entirely, to find some reward to get the kid to do the task anyway, to convince the kid of the importance of the task despite its boringness, to do something, anything, to fix the problem.

However, it's hard to know what kind of intervention is the right one for a kid's specific situation, particularly when the kid is twice-exceptional. The cry of "bored!" often serves as a distraction, a way to get out of the situation, or to make grownups responsible for making it more fun. Ironically, the reason the situation is unpleasant for the kid may be precisely because it is running up against his areas of disability. We don't want to demand things he cannot do, but neither do we want to excuse him from developing what skills he can and expanding his range of adaptive options. In order to make good decisions about how to intervene, we have to get curious about why this specific task is boring for this specific kid in this specific situation.

A Taxonomy of Boredom

When I originally started writing this taxonomy of "boredom," I thought I'd only have about three types. Then I kept thinking of more, and more, and more. It turns out that boredom is actually quite interesting.

A definition, then: Boredom is what happens when perceived skills or the perceived payoff for doing the task are not well-matched to the perceived difficulty or the perceived necessary effort. This concept of boredom can reflect many different underlying realities, such as …

1. The work really is too easy. The child is being asked to perform skills or demonstrate understandings that have long since been mastered.
2. The work is intrinsically boring. You can jazz it up with toys, games, and computers; but some kinds of work just really aren't as much fun as one might hope. (Handwriting and math facts are the two biggest candidates here, with spelling often a close third.)
3. The work does not match with the child's interests in subject matter, people to do it for, or people to do it with, so there is little perceived payoff for doing it.
4. The work is too hard. The child is not ready to learn it. This might seem counterintuitive, but when you aren't being successful, you feel bad. Most kids (and most adults, for that matter) perceive the lack of positive feedback as boring, even though a better word might be frustrating, or perhaps embarrassing, anxiety-provoking, or depressing.

5. The work is just right, but the child has little positive experience of having to work to learn. Any effort feels unpleasant and is characterized as boring. Again, frustrating, embarrassing, anxiety-provoking, or depressing might be better descriptors.
6. The work is at a reasonable level, but the child does not have the knowledge of the domain or the metacognitive (thinking-about-thinking) skills necessary to fully understand the demands of the task. As a result, the task seems easy, but the child is actually missing a lot of it. This one is kind of subtle, so stick with me. In an interesting line of research that began with a paper entitled "Incompetent and Unaware of It," Dunning and colleagues found that people who were doing well at a task tended to judge their own performance relatively harshly, while those who were doing poorly tended to think they were doing pretty well. (Similarly, in the real world, almost all adults believe themselves to be above-average drivers.) The metacognitive and domain-knowledge skills that enable you to perform the task well are the same metacognitive and domain-knowledge skills that enable you to judge your own performance. So, when those skills are not well-developed, you think you're doing well and, thus, that the task is too easy. In fact, you may not be doing well at all.
7. The same effect as in Number 6 is happening, but the child has enough metacognitive and domain-knowledge skills to recognize his own flaws, but not enough perspective to judge himself by appropriate standards. He expects himself to perform at a much higher level than is reasonable. He therefore perceives the work as too hard, with the same results as when the work actually is too hard.
8. The child lacks a clear goal and does not know how to establish one. He may not recognize the diversity of possibilities within the situation. Within those possibilities that he does recognize, everything seems either too easy and, therefore, not worth the effort; or too difficult and, therefore, impossible. Goal-setting is quite a complex subject in itself, a topic for another article.

Of course, it's possible that more than one of these effects can be operating simultaneously, and that the areas of disability may be functioning to make them worse. Some examples: many gifted children with AD/HD have a hard time dealing with less-than-stimulating situations, even when their abilities are matched to the task. Many gifted children with Asperger's have little tolerance for activities outside of a limited range of interest. Many gifted children with anxiety disorders tend to hold themselves up to perfectionistic standards. Many gifted children with dyslexia find that basic skills tasks require much more practice to automatize.

What You Can Do about Boredom

Many twice-exceptional kids are able to get through years of school before hitting a point where their giftedness no longer enables them to compensate for their disabilities. Especially when many things have come very easily to a child for a long time, it can be hard for her to accept it when things are intrinsically boring but necessary. It can also be hard for her to recognize it when the work is actually too hard, or when she does not have the necessary self-regulatory skills. Complaints of "boring" should not be met with the automatic assumption that you're in situation Number 1 – the work is too easy. Most likely, there are learning opportunities to be explored.

Sometimes kids can tell you what's really going on if you are careful in how you ask the question. Get them to be specific about what's not working for them. Asking for examples and then using those to clarify what's frustrating about a situation is often quite helpful. Particularly for kids who have language difficulties, provide them some multiple-choice alternatives. Be careful not to "lead the witness" – kids will often try to avoid your questioning by agreeing with whatever you seem to think the problem is.

More often, it's necessary to do a little experimentation and direct observation. For example, if the work is too hard, or the overall task is overwhelming, then breaking it down into tinier and tinier subtasks will sometimes help a child get moving again. If you think it might be a problem with having appropriate goals, then scaffolding her through the process of goal-setting might be more appropriate – if it works, then that must have been part of the problem. If you suspect that he does not understand what constitutes quality work, then guiding him through the process of defining appropriate standards may be helpful. And so on. This goes to an important principle I work by, which is that we don't have to formally separate analysis and intervention. Yes, we shouldn't just jump in willy-nilly and flail about randomly; but at the same time, trying an intervention and seeing what happens can provide very useful information.

Plus, when we try those interventions, we're modeling some really important skills and habits of mind for the kids. We're not saying, "Oh, you're bored, you poor thing! Let me see if I can entertain you." Nor are we saying, "Go figure it out yourself, you lazy bum." We're creating what a doctor would call a differential diagnosis, and what a scientist would call a set of hypotheses; and we're doing an experiment or creating a structured interaction in order to gain information that will help us distinguish between our different possibilities. This process is iterative: we continue to revisit each situation in light of real changes or increased understandings over time. The goal is not to rescue children from discomfort, nor to flog them through the pain, but to understand the situation more fully and make strategic decisions.