

What sounds like complaining might really be your child's natural ability to understand the science behind learning.

A brief for families and educators by Metiri Group

So often parents and educators hear kids talk about school or about their schoolwork and it truly sounds like they are complaining. But sometimes the reflective and frustrated words of our kids have meaning well beyond what we give them credit for.

We collected common *kid-speak*, with examples from what parents and teachers have heard their kids say about why they are frustrated with school. We looked at those statements from a perspective of learning science and figured out that *kids are really just sharing what they intuitively know about learning*. In the following we identify what you might hear from kids and share how what may seem like a student complaining is actually some very reflective opinions on learning that just happen to be backed by learning science.

[I like to learn when I can be very happy and enjoying it.](#)

If kids feel safe, happy, and fulfilled (cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally) they will learn better. Emotions like happiness have a positive effect on learning and overall academic success. Happiness is predicted by students' satisfaction with school culture and relationships with peers, classmates, and adults. If school culture is low, learning will be negatively impacted. While there is no definitive evidence of the impact of happiness on test scores, parents and primary caregivers need to understand the connection: kids being *happy* at school equates to learning, positive school culture supports happiness, and there is no evidence that test scores indicate learning or happiness.

[I want to learn through what I am interested in.](#)

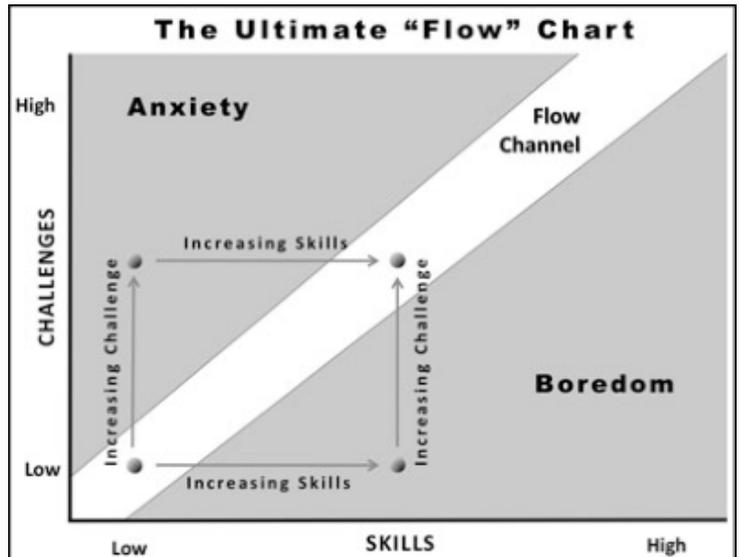
Intrinsic motivation is observed through fascination with a subject, a sense of personal relevance, a drive to master something, and a sense of calling to a topic or skill. In classrooms intrinsic motivation is nurtured by teachers providing choice, initiating student goal setting, and unleashing the natural curiosity of our kids and empowering them to investigate their interests. We can't fake intrinsic motivation, and our kids need it to engage and really learn (as opposed to completing a series of disconnected tasks and/or memorizing) in order for their intrinsic motivation to churn. When student's complete tasks based on fear of not complying or expectations from external sources (both options lacking internal purpose or reason) they don't retain information as well and aren't able to generalize the application of learning into new contexts. Intrinsic motivation supports active engagement in learning, long-term success, mastery of self-direction, and more.

[If I am interested, I like it. If I like it, I will do more and be engaged.](#)

Interest is like a booster for the brains of our kids. Not only that, but our brain actually processes more efficiently when we are interested in what we are learning and/or doing. Interest isn't just about entertainment or giving kids what they want. Rather, designing learning experiences around student interests lays a foundation for greater persistence and self-regulation (which is key to long-term success in life and school). In fact, your child will be more engaged (attentive, determined, etc.) when they are interested in something.

I want things to get harder, but not freak me out. And I don't want it to be too easy.

One of the key theories in learning for the past twenty years has been *Flow Theory*. There are various mental stages of learning, and the goal is to help students achieve a state of *flow*. *Flow* is achieved when humans are concentrating and immersed in a task. Where they are focused on deep learning (mastery, complex problem solving, application, and generalization of skills), not surface learning (isolated skills or facts that have no context or are isolated from meaningful application with limited generalization). *Flow* is achieved when tasks are not too difficult or too easy, and where challenge is appropriate and skill levels are persistently increasing (without being overwhelming). Kids learn best when they are in a sweet spot where they are challenged (but not overwhelmed) and simultaneously have requisite skills (but get to learn and use those skills in increasingly difficult ways).



I like to be involved in the decisions about learning.

We can't talk about student involvement and ownership without talking about engagement. We know that student engagement (involvement in deep learning as opposed to surface) leads to improved academic achievement and increased satisfaction with going to school. Further, we know that when kids are engaged, they will experience greater academic success, earn higher test scores, and persist through academic struggles. When students are active decision makers in their education, they have increased levels of engagement. So yes, kids should be involved in decisions about what, how, and when they learn. *To be fair, our traditional approaches to "school" are not structured for this level of personalization but that is no reason to believe that all K12 schools shouldn't or can't be structured to allow students voice and choice, and purposeful decision making in their learning.*

There will always be something I don't want to do but have to do. I like it when things are a little hard but if it gets too hard, I check out and I get anxious and give up.

In learning theory this sweet spot where things aren't too hard or too easy is referred to as the *Zone of Proximal Development*. When our kids hit that sweet spot in their learning experiences, they develop new skills by building on skills that have already been established. One of the biggest ways which teachers can help our kids hit that sweet spot is through feedback. When feedback from teachers is of quality, it is not just giving a grade but helping students to improve a product, performance, behavior, attitude, or action. *When kids receive quality feedback, they begin to understand that their teachers are scaffolding their work and developing their individual skills and understanding with intention.*



I want to get better at something, but I will always want to get better at those things that matter to me first.

We would consider authentic work to be something that is individually meaningful to our kids. The research on authentic learning has been around for more than twenty years, and it hasn't changed. Authentic learning in essence, engages students with personally and culturally relevant projects. When kids are doing *real* authentic work they typically achieve a state of *flow*, because they are doing work that matters to them personally, are interested in what they are studying, and are both using and developing skills that are practiced, newly introduced, continually mastered, and appropriately challenging. If your kids are engaged in authentic learning experiences they should be experiencing deep learning, where they are thinking critically, connections beyond the walls of the classroom, engagement with peers and experts, and substantive collaboration (meaning that kids — even young kids — are asking great questions, working together, seeking help from their peers that know things, exchanging ideas, and more).

For more information on resources, research, strategies and training please contact [Dr. Jody Britten](#).