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“Johnny can’t stop fidgeting and won’t stay in his seat!” Helpful Strategies for the Active Learner

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Sound familiar? It does if you’re a classroom teacher! Teachers must accommodate the learning differences and individual needs of all students in the classroom while maintaining a positive learning environment. With the inclusion of students with learning disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder, sensory processing disorders, etc. in the general education setting, keeping students sitting in one place for long periods of time or keeping them from fidgeting is nearly impossible.

Johnny’s parents can empathize with you. They watch his nonstop movements at home and may have discovered ways to “calm” or “redirect” this energy. Consulting Johnny’s parents as to how they deal with his fidgeting and constant moving around in places like restaurants, theaters, church, etc. may help you adapt their behavior modifications to use with Johnny in the classroom.

More often than not, there is more than one Johnny in a classroom; however, most students find that sitting for long periods of time is simply uncomfortable and boring. Adults do! Children are no different! Do you have students that get up and move around the classroom dozens of times per day to get water, take one tiny piece of trash after another to the garbage can, put their coat on or take it off, sharpen a pencil over and over, randomly visit their cubby, always need to go to the restroom, take their pen apart (and put it back together), etc.? These students don’t mean for their movements to be a distraction, but they are. Students

must move around in some way, or they may completely disengage and become even more disruptive – on purpose!

The following suggestions may help teachers redirect a fidgety student’s energy by providing alternate, constructive tasks to complete while, at the same time, having the freedom to move. Including movement activities in lessons throughout the school day gives all students an opportunity to refocus and re-engage their brain.

For Fidgeting Students



- Move the student to the end of an aisle or row where he/she is least distracting. Do not isolate him or her from others.
- Allow the student to stand at his/her desk while working on an assignment. Standing keeps the body more alert to receive information.
- Give the student a fidget toy like a squeeze ball, “widget” (plastic links that twist, lock, and click), or textured cloth squares.
- Give short breaks for moving around that include a goal-directed activity.





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(cont.)

For Out-of-Seat Students



- Ask the student to take a “message” to another person in the school. Ask a staff person to accept these bogus notes and messages without the need for a reply. Let the student know he or she may get water or use the restroom on the way to or from their destination.
- Assign tasks requiring more strenuous physical movement: moving books to another shelf across the room or to the library; rearranging desks; storing/sorting playground equipment; stacking chairs; washing paint brushes, etc. Students love to feel needed and enjoy helping the teacher.
- Ask for help stapling/hole punching papers; sorting homework/important papers into file boxes, sharpening pencils; etc. Tasks that make students feel important may also provide the needed sensory input that the student requires.
- Allow the student to use a weighted vest or lap weight under the recommendation, suggestion, or supervision of an occupational therapist – OT. Weighted items may help the student feel “grounded”. Allow the student to keep vest/lap weight at his or her desk and use it when he or she feels the need.
- Allow the student to go outside with the PE teacher, playground supervisor, or another teacher’s class and “workout” for five minutes. If the student has an OT, ask him or her to suggest outdoor activities that address the student’s sensory needs.

For Everyone



- Include movement activities in every lesson. For example: find five people with blue eyes and write their names; have five students ask five other students questions (pertaining to the lesson) and record their answers; stand if the statement I (teacher) say is true/false; let’s clap/stomp out syllables in words, etc.
- Ask a question and toss a small ball to a student. Student must catch the ball, stand, and answer the question. Then, teacher asks the next question, and student tosses the ball to someone else to answer.
- Send students on a scavenger hunt to collect items for the day’s lesson.
- Have students go out into the school and interview other students or staff members about a topic pertaining to the lesson.
- Put students in pairs or small groups. Assign tasks the students must complete together: a drawing, filling in a web, reading aloud to each other, making a flipbook, etc. Include opportunities to cut, paste, paint, draw, etc.

Helping fidgety learners or students with disabilities focus on the lesson by meeting their sensory needs is one way to help “active” students. Accommodating students’ sensory needs allow them to engage in classroom activities with minimal distractions to others. Not addressing the fidgets and movement in constructive ways may disturb others and could disrupt progress of the entire class.

Resources:

Aune, Beth; Burt, Beth; Gennaro, Peter. 2010. Behavior Solutions for the Inclusive Classroom. Pp. 1-25.

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