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Number 490



Fidgets: Tools Or Toys?

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Most of us have been around people who seem to always have the need to move or make noise. Whether they call it "nervous energy," "restlessness," "excess energy," or some other name, the symptoms are similar... These people click their pens, shuffle their feet, jiggle their legs, twist their hair, smack their gum, drum their fingers, chew on their pencils, wiggle, rock, shake, bang, squirm, knock, doodle, tap, and/or fidget. For some individuals, like some students diagnosed with autism, anxiety, or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), these movements are often characteristic of the diagnosis. (For more information about autism, anxiety, or ADHD, check out Handy Handouts #217 "Autism – the Basics," #447 "Childhood Anxiety," or #464 "ADHD – Myths and Facts.")



Search the internet for solutions for "nervous energy" and you'll undoubtedly come across the word "fidget." So, what is a "fidget?" A *fidget* is an object that a person can touch or manipulate to ease anxiety or restlessness. A fidget can be a stress ball, wad of putty, stretchy tube, pencil grip, or anything that can be moved, pinched, spun, stretched, squeezed, pushed, etc. There is plenty of research available to show that fidgets can be helpful for some students with diagnosed attention deficits, but are fidgets helpful for all students? No. We must remember that students are individuals and what might be helpful for one won't necessarily be helpful for another, even if they share the same diagnosis.

You must also evaluate the type of fidget you are thinking about using. Some fidgets are tools which can help the user accomplish something (in this case, focus and attend to a teacher or task) while other fidgets are toys that are played with and entertain the user (thus distracting his/her attention from a teacher or task). So how do you know? Here are some guidelines to think about when considering the use of fidgets

1. A fidget should be felt and not seen. The purpose of a fidget should be to give a student an outlet for his/her excess energy or anxiety so that he/she can focus attention on the teacher or assignment. If a student needs to look at a fidget in order to use it, it's likely that his/her attention will be on the fidget as well.
2. A fidget should be quiet. If a fidget makes noise, not only could it be distracting to the student using it, but there is a good chance the fidget will be disruptive to any student within earshot.

3. Fidgets should not be able to perform tricks or stunts. Performing tricks or stunts with a fidget requires focus and attention – on the fidget. Sometimes simple fidgets are the best solutions. A strip of textured fabric that is taped to the underside of a desk may provide just enough tactile stimulation to help a student focus.
4. A fidget is not appropriate for EVERY student diagnosed with autism, anxiety, ADHD, or other similar diagnoses. One way to know if a fidget would be helpful for a student would be to try one out. Does the fidget seem to improve his/her attention and focus? If not, look for another solution
5. Set up rules in advance that regulate when and where it is appropriate for a student to use a fidget. Parents, teachers, therapists, and the student (if he/she is old enough) should work together to develop the rules. If the student is not involved in developing the rules, make sure the student knows the rules.

The decision to use or not use a fidget shouldn't be taken lightly. Fidgets, when used by the right students in appropriate situations, and when used as tools, can be extremely valuable. But the wrong kind of fidget in the wrong hands can be detrimental – not only to the student using it, but to other students nearby who might be distracted by its use.

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