

FIDGET TOYS OR FOCUS TOOLS?

Despite recent criticism, these handy gadgets benefit many students on the spectrum

BY LINDSEY BIEL, MA, OTR/L

There have been toy fads for decades. From Rubik's Cubes to Duncan yo-yos, from Slinkys to Tamagotchis, and more recently, app-loaded cell phones and handheld game consoles, these trendy toys are fun, addictive, and increasingly forbidden in most classrooms because they distract students from learning.

Now there's a new craze sweeping the country: fidget spinners. Like their predecessors, they are an entertaining and mesmerizing diversion for most students. To use one, you hold the spinner center between your thumb and a finger and flick the spinner with a finger to start the spinner rotating. Balancing a rotating object requires you to visually monitor it, especially as you figure out tricks like balancing it on just your thumb. They're easy to use, especially for someone like this author, who has never solved a Rubik's Cube puzzle or mastered advanced yo-yo tricks.

There's a meditative, mindfulness quality in watching one of these spin, which is central to its appeal. For kids, teens, and adults on the spectrum, the fidget spinner is likely to be particularly appealing, with its repetitive, constant spinning. It's ironic that the kind of visual stimming people on the spectrum have been told to stop doing for years is so popular among neurotypicals right now!

Like earlier iterations of fad toys, fidget spinners are starting to be

banned from schools, where students are expected to be able to sit with "quiet hands" and use just their eyes and ears to learn. For most neurotypical students that makes sense, because a toy like a

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fidget spinner is so pleasing that it diverts attention away from learning.

THE FOCUS FACTOR

But there are students who actually depend on "fidgets" to tune in. So-called "fidget toys" have long been recommended by occupational therapists, mental health counselors, and some special educators as a means to help kids stay calm and self-regulated in order to focus, attend, listen, and



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participate. These prescribed therapeutic items, such as stress balls and putty, generally do not require visual attention and can simply be manipulated with the hands to provide organizing tactile input and an outlet for non-disruptive small movement.

Correctly used, such items enable students to manage sensory issues, anxiety, and attention challenges by redirecting their physical and emotional energy into an object. This lets them remain calm and tuned in and able to listen to the teacher, read in a more focused way, and participate more productively. This is certainly preferable to having an uncomfortable student disrupt the class by rocking in his chair, getting up frequently to use the restroom, pulling books and supplies off shelves, and so on. It's obviously far better to have a student sitting at his desk or at circle time manipulating an object and participating nicely.

Focusing is the goal rather than fidgeting in itself. When used properly by a child, teen, or adult, these objects become "focus tools," which are quite different from toys. Therefore, it makes sense to start labeling them "focus tools" rather than "fidget toys."

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS SO FAR

There's a ton of anecdotal evidence and an increasing body of research to show that focus tools work. A 2006 pilot study (Stalvey & Brasell) looked at the impact of using stress balls on sixth graders. Students identified as kinesthetic learners used the stress balls most, with a significant increase in attention span and writing skills compared with others. All types of learners self-reported that their attitude, attention, writing

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abilities, and peer interaction improved due to their use of the stress ball. A 2011 study (Allen & Smith) found that chewing gum increases alertness, reduces chronic but not acute stress, and enhances cognitive skills. Clearly more research into such focus tools is needed.

“Fidgeting” is a strategy that we all use. In general, the most effective focus tools don’t require the person to look at what he or she is doing and can generally be done out of view. Think of the last meeting you attended. Did you repeatedly click on your ballpoint pen? Chew on a straw? Sip some coffee or water? Chew gum? Pick at your cuticles? Twirl your hair? Tap or wiggle your foot? This kind of fidgeting is socially acceptable and not perceived as a self-stimulatory activity or “play.”

What works for any one individual depends on that person’s sensory preferences. What you may find calming and organizing may be quite different from what helps your child or another adult. While it’s a truism to say that once you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism, people on the spectrum have a strong tendency to be highly visually oriented. A 2013 study (Foss-Feig, Tadin et al.) found that children with autism spectrum disorders detect motion twice as quickly as same-age neurotypical kids, a contributing factor in sensory overstimulation when engaging in complex tasks like multisensory processing and facial recognition.

Because they are primarily a visually-driven item, fidget spinners are probably not a great choice for a focus tool for kids, teens, and even adults with visual hypersensitivity. Again, the point of a focus tool is to help people tune in, not to contribute to sensory self-stimulation and tuning out. Thus, a

visual fidget may be perfectly fine as a toy or a reinforcer but it’s not particularly appropriate as a therapeutic tool.

It may, however, be helpful to include it in an individualized sensory toolbox for sensory breaks, along with noise-reducing headphones, a weighted lap pad, and other sensory tools determined to be calming and organizing for that person. It is important to differentiate between focus tools that can be used throughout the day and sensory tools that best belong in a toolkit to be used at specified times. Focus tools enable a student to remain tuned in without disturbing others, while sensory tools enable a student to take a much needed self-regulation respite, during which the student is not expected to actively listen or participate in classroom activities.

FOCUS TOOLS AND THE IEP

While many classroom accommodations and task modifications can be worked out informally with an understanding teacher, a student is entitled to these only if they are specified on the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). If it is clear that your child needs the focus tool in order to attend and learn, then it can be a mandated item.

Keep in mind that not all teachers are going to be on board with this, especially if other students are curious about the focus tool and want to handle it themselves. The very best focus tools are designed to help the entire classroom. A bucket of focus tools can be shared at the start of circle time, reading time, and so on. For example, when the class is reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, students can squeeze red “apple” stress balls. Rules for their use (such as no throwing the ball) will need to be explained, and as with any classroom routine, there may be a learning curve for students. ◀

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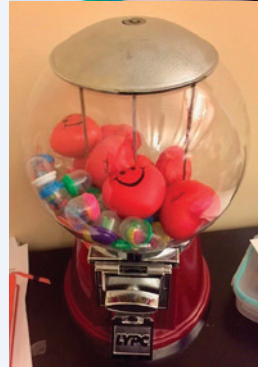
FINDING FOCUS TOOLS

THE BEST FOCUS TOOLS HAVE THE FOLLOWING QUALITIES:

- ▶ Functionally they enhance attention rather than divert it
- ▶ They do not require ongoing visual monitoring
- ▶ They do not disturb other students (preferably small and silent)
- ▶ They are inexpensive so there is little risk of theft or cost to replace

SOME CLASSROOM-FRIENDLY FOCUS TOOLS

- ▶ Fidget Cube
- ▶ Tangle
- ▶ Boinks
- ▶ Pull and stretch figures
- ▶ Koosh balls
- ▶ Small spiky balls
- ▶ What’Zit
- ▶ Wacky Tracks
- ▶ Velcro attached to underside of a desk
- ▶ Small piece of fabric sewn inside of a pocket
- ▶ Crazy Aaron Thinking Putty
- ▶ Silly Putty
- ▶ Kneadable artist eraser
- ▶ Smooth pebbles and stones
- ▶ Oral comforts: chewing gum, chewable jewelry, BPA-free plastic pencil toppers



Resources: You can find focus tools at party supply stores, in dollar bins at big box stores like Target, and online at sensorysmarts.com, amazon.com, pfot.com, specialneedstoys.com/usa/, especialneeds.com, therapysoppe.com, sensorycritters.com, and many others.



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