

IN DEPTH

Fidget Spinners: Helpful Tool or One More Way to Annoy Adults?

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POSTED ON
June 5, 2017 (June 5, 2017)

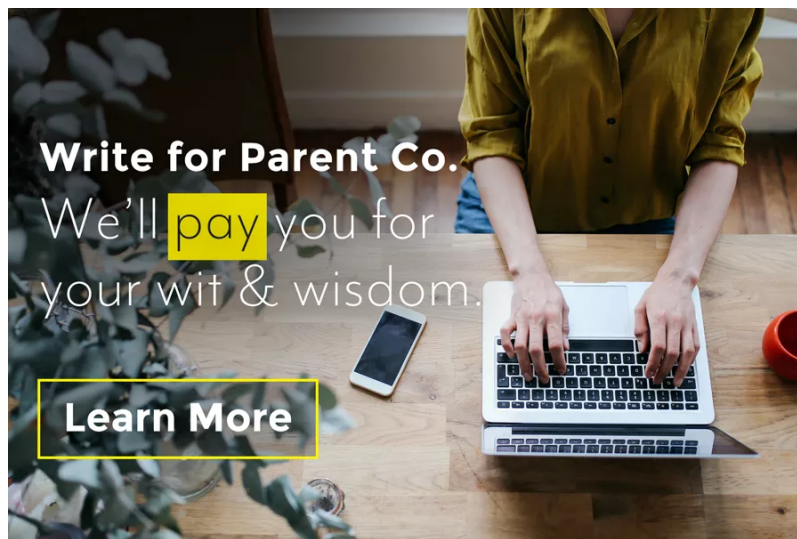


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I just got clued into fidget spinners in the last week or so. First, an email was sent out by our school principal banning them because they were too much of a distraction. (I had no idea what she was talking about when I received that email.) Then there was a hilarious Saturday Night Live skit about a boyfriend buying a gold fidget spinner enhanced with diamonds for his anxious, irritated girlfriend. Finally, my son received one for his birthday from a friend and has been walking around the house with it ever since.

It got me wondering – what's this trend all about? Why are kids so attracted to them, yet schools want them to be kept at home? Are these gadgets helpful or harmful?

As it turns out, fidget spinners claim to help with a number of health issues like autism, ADHD, and anxiety. But is there any proof that they actually work?



What are fidget spinners, anyway?

A fidget spinner is a small, three-pronged device that fits in the palm of your hand. It contains ball bearings inside that allow it to rotate between your fingers. You hold the center of the spinner with your thumb and one finger and then use the other hand or other fingers of the same hand to create momentum to get it to spin quickly. It looks a little like a mini ceiling fan as it spins around and around. They provide a soothing sensory experience that is practically hypnotic if you stare at it. Kids are also doing tricks with them, such as balancing or rotating the spinner on their thumb, which takes quite a bit of concentration.

Fidget spinners were invented by Florida chemical engineer Catherine Hettinger in the early 1990s. Her goal was to help solve world peace by providing a tool that would calm kids down. She was inspired by stories of children throwing rocks at police in Israel. She thought that if the kids had something else to hold in their hands to keep their attention, they would no longer choose violence.

At first, her invention did not take off. Hasbro passed on it and her patent expired in 2005. Recently YouTube videos showing kids playing with the spinners went viral. Although fidget spinners were essentially unheard of until April, they are now one of the top 10 best-selling toys on Amazon and stores are struggling to keep them in stock. Have your kids asked for one yet?

The science of fidgeting

According to Brain Balance Achievement Centers, fidgeting is a common symptom of neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD, processing disorders, learning disabilities, and Asperger's. Children fidget when they're doing tasks that don't interest them enough to keep their focus.

There are a number of theories about the purpose fidgeting serves. Some experts think that fidgeting helps satisfy the brain's need for stimulation, while others believe that our brain is incapable of preventing the urge to fidget. Roland Rotz and Sarah D. Wright explain how fidgeting can prevent the distractions that come from boredom in their book "Fidget To Focus: Outwit Your Boredom: Sensory Strategies For Living With ADHD." Moreover, physical movement may help us think and express ourselves more easily. Finally, fidgeting can serve as a ritual, with the repetitive motions helping to prevent our mind from obsessing over unhealthy thoughts.

Studies show that implementing certain strategies can help manage the need to fidget so that it no longer interferes with a child's school performance. These tactics include taking frequent breaks, using stand-up desks, incorporating movement into lessons, and using fidget objects based on various modalities like visual, auditory, tactile, movement, taste, or smell.

Toys that are designed to allow an autistic child to fidget can be beneficial to them. Occupational therapists often use sensory toys like tactile discs, Koosh balls, and putties or clays to soothe kids who have sensory-processing issues. In addition, research has shown that movement can help kids with ADHD focus. A 2015 study published in the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology looked at

eight to 12-year-old kids with ADHD. Those who participated in gross motor activity, such as moving their arms and legs around, performed better than those who sat still during tasks involving processing new information. Finally, exercise has also been proven to be helpful for kids with ADHD.

Fidgeting with an object in the hand helps kids stay focused when trying to complete a task or sit still for long period of time. For years, people have been using everyday objects like paper clips, USB thumb drives, headphone earbuds, sticky tape, stress balls, or a smooth stone to help them calm down and focus. More recently, specialized items like fidget spinners and fidget cubes have been marketed for this purpose.

Do they work or not?

Fidget spinners may be marketed as a solution to anxiety, autism, and ADHD, but there is no scientific evidence yet to back up this claim. Critics point out that fidget spinners were not created by behavioral scientists with a deep knowledge of intellectual disability.

According to Newsweek, Scott Kollins, a clinical psychologist and professor at Duke University, is concerned about parents using fidget spinners to address ADHD because there is no scientific evidence that they work. He said that there are lots of other games and products marketed toward individuals who have ADHD that have been studied more thoroughly. He's afraid that parents are relying on this new product as a quick fix without knowing if it actually helps.

The biggest criticism about fidget spinners is that they don't require the gross motor activity that experts have proven help children struggling with a variety of learning challenges. Instead of the kids physically moving around, the fidget spinner is the one doing all the work.

There have also been many complaints about their use in the classroom. They're diverting attention away from the teacher and other classroom activities, and have become more of a distraction than a useful tool.

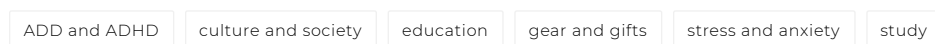
On the other hand, they're so new that there hasn't been time to study them thoroughly. There is some anecdotal evidence about how some special needs kids are benefiting from them.

Additionally, North Carolina-based science educator Beth Harris has appeared in many articles covering this topic because she wrote a blog post about how satisfying it is to hold the spinning, whirring toy between her fingers. Mayra Mendez, Ph.D., a licensed psychotherapist and program coordinator for intellectual and developmental disabilities and mental health services at Providence Saint John's Child and Family Development Center in Santa Monica, California, thinks that fidget spinners may be useful for some children in some situations who need to engage in sensory behaviors.

At this point, there are more questions than answers with regard to whether fidget spinners hold up to their claim. As studies are conducted, we will learn more about their effectiveness in helping with certain health and learning issues. What is certain, however, is that kids love them right now and enjoy playing with them, but they should probably stay out of the classroom since they are such a distraction. I personally tried my son's fidget spinner out and did find it quite calming, so I might buy one and stick it in my purse for those anxious moments on the go.



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**Shari Eberts** • 8 months ago

Thanks for this. I have been wondering about trying one for my daughter who loves to fidget, but I may hold off until more testing is done.

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