

In Defense of Fidgets and Fidgeting

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines fidget as a verb meaning "to move or act restlessly or nervously, usually while maintaining basically the same posture" or "to be uneasy, to worry". The word is also described as a noun referring to "a person who fidgets", the underlying "bodily uneasiness", or the movements that arise from this uneasiness.

We all fidget sometimes, and this increases when we are stressed or when we have to be still for too long. Fidgeting also provides the brain with movement input to process, and in active learners this can increase attention and language processing, if the person is not distracted by the fidget.



tangle

Fidgeters often start by stroking mom's hair or skin, or rubbing the smooth edge of a blanket, and this promotes self soothing.

Some people need more movement than others, and when required to be still, start to move somewhere or other (fingers, toes, tongue or nose) to satisfy their own nervous system's need for movement. Similarly, with touch, some people seem to need a lot more touch and input to their hands. When people's behaviours lead to the sensory needs of the nervous system being met, then that person is truly his or her most ready to learn.

People who need more movement or touch than others often seek out this input when trying to be focused and available for learning. The basic role of fidgeting is to help the nervous system be both calm and alert. We seek to keep ourselves awake, to soothe ourselves, and to keep our bodies busy so our minds can process auditory information more efficiently. As we learn to calm and focus ourselves, we may need to fidget less, but this is gradual learning that can span a lifetime. For the most part, we are who we are, and most of us fidget to a fairly consistent degree depending on how constrained, agitated or worried we are and how we are feeling.



hand grip



stretchy bugs

Fidgeting is not the same as playing with a toy, though some fidget items can be toys. It is a toy if it engages the imagination or attention of the child. A fidget supports sitting still and listening.

I am most likely to fidget when I am stressed out, forced to be still, lethargic, bored, nervous, angry, upset, or challenged with complex or demanding situations. A person who fidgets may be a genius, a thinker, a worrier, or all of these.

For some people, we fidget when we can't move our bodies or our hands, others fidget more when they want something to keep their mouths busy. Some of us fidget to help us think, others do it to help listen, others do it to feel calm and reduce agitation, anxiety, worry. To fidget is appropriate for one who is over-aroused, frazzled, anxious, worried. To pace in worry or bite our nails in nervousness is easy to understand, and from that premise, all kind of fidgeting and doodling begin to make sense. To fidget is also very appropriate for someone who is under-aroused, who is lethargic, bored, drifting, dreaming. To doodle in the columns, change postures, or tug at hair, eyebrows, mouth are all easy to spot when you sit in a room of people who are too calm and have been sitting too long.



fidget ball

By now you should see that we all fidget at some time or other. Some of us seem to need it more than others. Understanding how our behaviour helps with self regulation can help us to be proactive and use attention enhancing behaviours before our performance is significantly impaired. For example, I learn to take a brief washroom break or pop a mint in my mouth when I begin to drift during a boring afternoon meeting. I might take a brisk walk before a challenging activity. So, I can learn to give myself more of what I need to be ready for life. Hand fidgeting is very common.



stress pucks

When we need to fidget, notice what kinds of things we seek out, and expand on that. For example, if I like rubber bands and squishy things, a soft stretchy lizard might be just the thing for my hands. If I like hard things like paper clips, find little fidgets like rings and worry stones. I might just need an occasional Altoid, Listerine strip, or sip of hot, cold, or bubbly. For people who fidget a lot, help us learn what qualities we seek, and help us to find a greater variety of things to fidget with.

Holding something heavy in the lap, like a weighted lizard, can help to calm and focus the nervous system, and can reduce the need to fidget. These weighted products also have nice tactile qualities that can give the fingers something to do, enhancing attention and listening.



weighted items

If a child engages with a fidget in a way that takes the attention away from circle time (or whatever is going on), then it is not a good fidget item for that person, at that time.

Switch it up for something else less meaningful. Helping a child to use a fidget is an important life skill that can help the child to attend and learn more in a world that requires a lot of sitting, waiting, listening. It is true that any new fidget will be attended to, and so may be distracting. As the person becomes comfortable with the item, it should **not** absorb attention, but make it easier for the person to attend to what is "important".

The day will come when fidget items will be routinely supplied to people when it is time to think, sit still, or listen. The world will know to "**Let them fidget!**" In the meantime, let's help fidgeters fidget safely and understand themselves better and let's allow them to be who they are.