Fidget Spinners – Helpful for Attention or Not?

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Along with smartphones and social media, fidget spinners are now somewhat of a punchline when talking about the habits of today's kids. The small trinkets have been a consistent presence both on best-selling toy lists and in classrooms all over the country — to the frustration of many teachers who have banned or confiscated them.

Of course, neither handheld gadgets nor teachers' struggle against them in the classroom are particularly new. What's novel about fidget spinners, however, is that they've been marketed not just as entertainment but as a tool to increase focus or relieve stress for people with autism, anxiety, or attention disorders. So do these toys really have therapeutic value, or are they just another trendy distraction?

The answer is more complicated than you might think. For a long time, fidgeting behaviors like shifting in your seat, tapping your fingers, or twirling a pen were considered a sign of distraction, and children in school were constantly admonished to sit still. But the common wisdom had it backwards: fidgeting can, in fact, help to improve memory and concentration, though scientists still aren't sure exactly how. A recent study by Julie Schweitzer found that children diagnosed with ADHD performed better on a cognitive assignment the more physical movement they exhibited during the test, while another demonstrated a similar correlation between movement and working memory.

These results indicate that fidgeting could be a strategy to compensate for attention deficits by occupying understimulated regions of the brain. Even for those not diagnosed with ADHD, a simple physical activity like doodling may help to keep their focus from straying away from the main task at hand, as an earlier study has shown. Furthermore, better performance by students who take handwritten notes over those who take notes on their laptops suggest that incorporating physical movement into a cognitive task may directly help with thinking and remembering.

But despite measured consensus on the potential benefits of fidgeting in general, there is little evidence that these benefits can be derived from the current toy trend. And while

research has not yet focused specifically on fidget spinners, experts have their doubts. For one thing, the toy doesn't actually require much physical movement, with most of the work being done by the spinner itself. Secondly, the ability to perform tricks with it make it more of a deliberate activity than a passive outlet for excess energy. Add to that the visual nature of the spinner and the whirring sound it makes, and what you have is not a focus aid but a conscious distraction, not just for the user but anyone else nearby. It's no wonder many teachers hate them. Other fidget toys that are less conspicuous and more interactive, such as the fidget cube, or even a simple stress ball, might be more effective – and more acceptable in the classroom.

Still, some parents and educators have expressed support for fidget spinners, with anecdotal evidence of some children being helped by them. And unlike other fidget devices, spinners are a popular item among all types of students, so special needs children don't feel awkward about having and using them. More broadly, the toys' popularity can be seen as helping student integration by normalizing fidgeting and removing the stigma from neuroatypical behaviors.

Ultimately, the question of fidget spinners is part of a larger debate about how to incorporate what we are now learning about how children's brains function into the existing educational system, with factors like the time and length of the school day and classroom management all playing a role. And while fidget spinners may provide benefits to some students, until more peer-reviewed research is available parents and educators would be wise to remain skeptical of their marketing claims. Educators seeking to learn more about improving attention in the classroom can look to programs like Fast ForWord, which has been shown to improve auditory attention in peer-reviewed research.