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# When ADHD Kids Fidget: Better Focus Through Multitasking

ADHD adults and children may actually concentrate, focus and stay on task better with a little foot-tapping, gum-chewing fidgeting.

by Roland Rotz, Ph.D., Sarah D. Wright

"Focus!" "Mind over matter!" "You can do anything if you really want to!" "Just try harder!"

Adults and children with attention deficit disorder (ADHD) have all heard these exhortations, and have probably shared them with others struggling to concentrate at work or focus at school. The ADHD brain is indeed a powerful force for success.

But we know that relying on the brain can be frustrating and, at times, demoralizing. Our ADHD brains aren't our most reliable asset -- allowing distractions to break our focus. But what if there were strategies that could prime our brains beyond "just trying harder"?

There are. Recent research suggests that the body affects the brain as much as the brain affects the body. In his recent book, *Spark*, John Ratey, M.D., shows that physical activity increases levels of the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine in the way ADHD medications do. Both chemicals play a key role in sharpening focus and increasing attention.

Sydney Zentall, Ph.D., of Purdue University, studied the factors that help ADHD children succeed in the classroom. In *ADHD and Education*, she notes that attention "deficit" increases with the length, familiarity, and repetitiveness of a task. In other words, you tune out when tasks get boring!

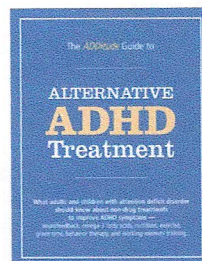
According to Zentall, an activity that uses a sense other than that required for the primary task — listening to music while reading a social studies textbook — can enhance performance in children with ADHD. Doing two things at once, she found, focuses the brain on the primary task.

Zentall calls these sensory-motor activities "distractions." We call them fidgets — mindless activities you can do while working on a primary task. We're not talking about wriggling in your seat. Fidgeting is more intentional. It's pacing or doodling while on the phone or chewing gum while taking a test.

## Multitasking for ADDers

It's true that many people are successful only when they do one thing at a time, but for adults and children with ADHD the opposite is usually true. We need to respect the fact that there is neural diversity, that different people have different ways of doing things — not from preference or contrariness, but from need.

Fidgeting works for many children with ADHD. Karen was surprised to find that her bright son, who had been doing poorly in high school, suddenly started getting As. While delighted with his grades, she couldn't figure out what had changed. The only thing that was different was his wearing a hooded sweatshirt to school. She eventually discovered that her son was secretly listening to music on his iPod, under that hood. The



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music focused his brain and made a big difference in his classwork and test scores.

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Mary, age 25, remembers that she had trouble sitting still and finishing homework in high school. Her mother found a solution: setting up homework stations around the dining-room table. Mary would stand at each station, working or reading as quickly as she could, until she got restless and moved on to the next station. Every night she raced around the table until her work was done. As an adult, Mary is using fidget strategies to help her get through medical school.



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## ADHD Focus Help, Part 2

### Be Deliberate About It

Fidgeting must be deliberate to be effective. Intentional fidgets allow you and your child to self-regulate ADHD symptoms in a controlled, constructive fashion. An effective fidget doesn't distract you from your primary task because it is something you don't have to think about.

Doodling while listening to a lecture or when on a long phone call enables you to better absorb what's being said. Walking while talking helps your mind tune in to a conversation without missing a beat. We encourage respectful fidgeting — something that doesn't bother others.

For example, drumming your fingers or clicking your pen during an office meeting would be distracting to colleagues. Wiggling your toes inside your shoes would not.

To cultivate deliberate, effective fidgeting in your child, give him permission to do it. Never say, "Sit still!" "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" "Don't try to do two things at once!" We must recognize that these sensory-motor activities are a perfectly natural adjustment when an activity can't sustain our attention.

Experiment with a variety of strategies and encourage your child to try different fidgets. Remember that your favorite fidget may not work for him. Listening to music while reading may do wonders for your focus, but your child may prefer keeping his hands busy—squeezing a rubber ball or fiddling with his Little League ring.

Having options means there's always something that can be used to help your child stay on task in school and in life.

Here are eight fidgets worth trying:

#### 1. Walk and talk.

When your child gets restless and tunes out an important conversation you're trying to have with him, try walking and talking. Any non-strenuous activity, like playing catch or doing a jigsaw puzzle together, will also work. This is a powerful strategy for talking over your child's day or having a chat with your ADD partner about an important matter.

#### 2. Doodle.

Encourage your child to draw or write words or numbers when listening to a teacher's lecture (just make sure he doesn't doodle on the desk). Doodling will also help you focus when you're on a long phone call with a client or are in an endless, boring meeting.

### 3. Use multi-colored pens and pencils.

This fidget works well when your child needs to complete an assignment or read for comprehension (he can underline words as he reads). Scented markers may also help.

### 4. Busy your hands.

This facilitates focus when a child is listening, talking, or thinking about how to answer a tough essay question. Fidget toys for school or home include cool-looking pens or pencils, beaded bracelets, paper clips (they bend into interesting shapes and can be linked together), and clothes with interesting textures or doodads. For adults at work, a small, smooth stone—a worry rock—in your pocket will allow you to fiddle without your boss or colleagues knowing. Curling your hair around a finger also works. At home, clients of ours find that either knitting or squeezing a Nerf ball can increase attention.

### 5. Tune in.

Plugging into an MP3 player helps children stay on task when studying, reading, exercising, or even going to sleep. Choose music that is appropriate to the task: a stimulating beat when exercising, calming tunes for sleep, and something in between when studying or reading. At the office, use this strategy on days when you are working at the computer and have little interaction with colleagues.

### 6. Chew gum.

This helps your child when he has to concentrate for an extended period—doing homework or taking a test. Chewing gum in the office is effective when writing a memo or having to slog through a week's worth of e-mail. If gum is not an option, sucking on a lemon drop or other hard candy will also do the trick.

### 7. Beat the clock.

Set a timer for 20 minutes, and race to get as much done as possible before the alarm goes off. An adult can use this to accomplish any dull chore—doing dishes, paying bills, or picking up around the house. Your child can race the clock when doing worksheets, memorizing vocabulary, or cleaning up his room.

### 8. Stand up or move around.

Talk with the teacher about letting your child stand, at appropriate times, during the school day. A child can do this discreetly at the back of the room or at his desk. Some teachers assign a child two desks, so he can move from one to the other when necessary. Other teachers let restless kids be message runners and send them off on real or invented errands.

If you can't focus in a meeting at work, use a coffee break or a visit to the washroom as an excuse to stand. If you're really restless, use a bathroom visit to run up and down a flight of stairs, fast, a few times.

Managing ADD involves recognizing our choices and taking action. Understanding what is going on in our brains and proactively choosing an appropriate strategy is the essence of the fidget approach.



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