

Fidgets can enhance concentration, provide calming for special needs students

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SIOUX CITY | The pink putty, rubber bouncy balls and a stretchy purple centipede resting on a wooden table in occupational therapist Kristin Hightree's therapy room at Mercy Medical Center's Pediatric Therapy Clinic look like toys that would certainly be confiscated by teachers or banned from elementary school classrooms, but these "fidgets" can be particularly useful to children with ADHD, ADD, autism or sensory processing disorder.

Moving small objects, or fidgets, in the hand while looking at the teacher, helps some students who have trouble paying attention in class concentrate. Some studies have suggested that using fidgets may increase the level of the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine, which are responsible for attention and activity, just as medication used to treat ADHD does..

Hightree explained that children, and even some adults, will naturally move their hands, doodle or tap their feet in effort to stay engaged and alert while sitting through a class or meeting.

"Children who are constantly moving and have that difficulty with attention, they're not sinking into their chair, they're having trouble attending because they're constantly thinking about what they want to do next," she said.

Hightree said the trendy fidget spinner, a metal and plastic gadget spun on the finger, may be very helpful for some children who have a hard time paying attention in school. The toy, however, has downsides. It's been labeled a potential choking hazard; and Hightree said it may be more of a distraction than a helper because of the visual input that it provides.

Hightree, who evaluates special needs children at Mercy and collaborates with parents and teachers to figure out which fidgets will work best for them, said a good replacement for the fidget spinner is a tangle toy that can be held in a hand and manipulated or a blob of putty that can be squeezed.

"Maybe more appropriate for school is something like a stress ball or a squish ball. It's not going to get messy. It's something that can be hidden," said Hightree, who noted that some children, who need more tactile stimulation, prefer handling a toy with a spiky texture.

Hightree has seated children who like to wiggle on ball chairs or T-stools, to make them use their core muscles, or stretched an exercise band across the front legs of their desk chairs, to allow them to bounce their feet and stretch their legs.

Research conducted by Clemson University's Department of Psychology, which was presented at the Society for Research in Child Development's Biennial Meeting in April, found that children who were less engaged in classroom activities showed fewer off task behaviors when using a Bouncy Band, a heavy-duty rubber band that is attached to the legs of a desk or chair.

For children who always seem to be chewing on their shirts, Hightree recommends "chewelry" or special pencil toppers, which provide an oral motor release. Sometimes, Hightree said children run into problems with sensory overload when they leave school and get into their parents' vehicles. She said keeping a small bag of sour Skittles, breath mints or suckers in the car could provide some comfort.

"Sucking is calming -- think about a child sucking a pacifier or their thumb or the bottle," she said.

Hightree said some children need to feel a "grounding sensation." Wearing a neoprene vest throughout the school day, she said provides deep pressure that's similar to a hug.

Pocketed vests that weights can be placed in and weighted bean bags with faces that snap together, are other calming therapy tools that can benefit children who have autism or sensory processing issues.

Hightree said she has even rolled some young patients in a blanket and pretended they were a burrito or a hot dog to provide deep pressure.

"Sometimes parents have found out that a trampoline was a wonderful purchase to let their child go out and get that 20 minutes of intense movement and deep pressure for their body to help them calm down and focus," she said.