

Fidget toys aren't just hype

[Katherine Isbister](#) May 17, 2017 8.54pm EDT

The fidget spinner craze has been [sweeping elementary and middle schools](#). As of May 17 [every one of the top 10 best-selling toys on Amazon](#) was a form of the hand-held toy people can spin and do tricks with. Kids and parents are even making them for themselves using [3D printers](#) and other [more homespun crafting techniques](#).

But some teachers are [banning them from classrooms](#). And [experts challenge the idea](#) that spinners are good for conditions like ADHD and anxiety. Meanwhile, the [Kickstarter online fundraising campaign](#) for the Fidget Cube – another popular fidget toy in 2017 – raised an astounding US\$6.4 million, and can be seen on the desks of hipsters and techies across the globe.

My research group has taken [a deep look at how people use fidget items](#) over the last several years. What we found tells us that these items are not [a fad that will soon disappear](#). Despite sometimes being an [annoying distraction for others](#), fidget items can have some practical uses for adults; our inquiry into their usefulness for children is underway.

Understanding fidgeting

Fidgeting didn't start with the spinner craze. If you've ever clicked a ballpoint pen again and again, you've used a fidget item. As part of our work, we've asked people what items they like to fidget with and how and when they use them. (We're [compiling their answers online](#) and welcome [additional contributions](#).)

One thing people often report is that fidgeting with an object in the hand helps them to stay focused when doing a long task or sitting still and attentive in a long meeting. Many examples people have told us about are ready-to-hand objects like paper clips, USB thumb drives, headphone earbuds and

sticky tape. But people also buy specialized items like a fidget spinner or a Fidget Cube for this purpose.



Another common thread involves people using some fidget objects – like a favorite smooth stone – to calm themselves down, helping them achieve a more relaxed, contemplative, even mindful state.

Fine-tuning for focus

Psychology research about sensation seeking tells us that people often seek to adjust their experiences and their environments so that they provide just the right level of stimulation.

People fidget with everyday items such as paper clips. [Malll Themd via shutterstock.com](#)

Different people function well under different circumstances. Some people like total quiet to help them focus, while others are happiest working in a busy, noisy environment.

The optimal level of stimulation (or lack thereof) not only varies among people but even can change for one person throughout the day depending upon what he or she is trying to do. So people fine-tune their environments to get things just right: for example, putting on headphones in a noisy office environment to substitute less distracting noise.

A person who can't get up and walk around to wake up a bit, or go have a nice cup of tea to calm down, may find it helpful to use a fidget item to get in the right frame of mind to stay focused and calm while staying put.

What researchers say

Our results align with anecdotal accounts about fidget toys helping children with attention or anxiety issues to stay focused and calm in the classroom. In

fact, fidget toys have been [available for kids](#) for quite some time.

There hasn't yet been a definitive study of the impact of these toys in the research world. In one [preliminary study](#) looking at stress ball use, sixth graders who used these fidget toys during instruction independently reported that their “attitude, attention, writing abilities, and peer interaction improved.”

The closest significant research is UC Davis behavioral science professor Julie Schweitzer's study of [letting children with ADHD fidget](#) – wiggling, bouncing or otherwise moving gently in place – while they worked on a lab-based concentration task called the “[flanker paradigm](#).” She found that more overall movement (measured using an accelerometer on the ankle) in children with ADHD did help them perform this cognitively demanding task.

Of course, it's a big step from that finding to a claim that fidgeting with small objects in the hand can work, too. However, therapists tend to focus more on results than theoretical findings. They use what gets results and throw out what doesn't, so practical experience suggests these toys may help kids.

Avoiding distraction

And yet, [schools are banning the spinners](#) and [teachers are taking them away](#). The reason is that not all fidget items are created equal.

The items that therapists recommend are primarily tactile – a user holds it in a hand and can manipulate it without looking. But fidget spinners require hand-eye coordination.

The basics of using a fidget spinner.

To use a fidget spinner, a person holds the center of the spinner with thumb and finger, and then uses the other hand (or other fingers on the same hand) to get the spinner rotating. Once it's spinning, there are tricks to be explored, like balancing the rotating spinner on a thumb.

Balancing a moving object really requires keeping an eye on it, and doing tricks is a lot of what makes the spinners fun. It's also what draws the eyes of the user away from the teacher, and likely also the eyes of nearby students. This is the bane of a teacher trying to keep a classroom focused.

By contrast, putty, stress balls and other therapeutic fidget items don't have this visual attention problem. They can serve the same purpose as the spinners, but are more classroom-ready and less distracting. In the same way, the Kickstarted Fidget Cube, too, is probably also more classroom-friendly.

Fidget items do seem to serve a valuable purpose. There's still science to be done, but they're not just a fad. They embody an enduring phenomenon that nearly everyone uses at some point – just watch your own behavior when doing desk work or sitting in meetings. My research team continues to study fidgeting behavior and design, working to create next-generation smart fidget objects that support managing attention and keeping calm.



Less spinning, more focus? [idan gamliel](#)
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