

# The Secret Power of Fidgets

How Multitasking Promotes Focus  
— If Done Right



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*From the ADHD Experts at*

**ADDITUDE**

Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

# ADDITUDE

## Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—  
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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### CONTACT INFORMATION

New Hope Media – 646-366-0830  
108 West 39th St, Suite 805  
New York, NY 10018

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# The Secret Power of Fidgets

Research has shown that movement, or fidgeting, improves executive functions, allowing people with ADHD to focus, learn, and remember more. Here are fidgets we love for school and work.

For a child with ADHD, trying to focus intently on a dry math lecture is not unlike stabbing small needles in your eyes. It hurts. Yet that same child may be able to hyperfocus for hours on a video game or comic book that grabs his attention.

“People who think ADHD means having a short attention span misunderstand what ADHD is,” says Kathleen Nadeau, Ph.D., a psychologist in Silver Spring, Maryland, and the author of *ADD-Friendly Ways to Organize Your Life*. “A better way to look at it is that people with ADHD have a *disregulated* attention system.”

“Like distractibility, hyperfocus is thought to result from abnormally low levels of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is particularly active in the brain’s frontal lobes,” says Royce Flippin, co-author of the book *The Diabetes Reset*. “This dopamine deficiency makes it hard to ‘shift gears’ to take up boring-but-necessary tasks.”

When insufficient dopamine hampers focus, there are tools designed to help people with ADHD tune into the things that *aren’t* naturally interesting (read: schoolwork). These tools — also called fidgets — help to balance

Learn more about harnessing hyperfocus at <http://additu.de/hyperfocus>

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levels of dopamine and norepinephrine, both of which regulate attention in the arousal center of the brain.

## What is a Fidget?

According to Sydney Zentall, Ph.D., author of *ADHD and Education*, engaging in an activity that uses a sense not required for the primary task — like listening to music while reading a social studies textbook — can enhance performance in children with ADHD. These secondary tasks, often sensory motor activities, are called fidgets — mindless tasks kids can do while working on an otherwise boring assignment. They are more intentional than just wriggling in a seat, or bobbing a knee up and down.

But wait, doesn't multitasking waste more time than it saves? For adults *without* ADHD, that may be the case. But ADHD minds work differently. They are *only* successful when doing more than one thing at a time.

## How Do Fidgets Work?

Sometimes, the key to honing in on work is setting aside some of your attention for something else. “People with ADHD don't have a shortage of attention,” says Dr. William Dodson, a board-certified adult psychiatrist specializing in ADHD. “They pay too much attention to everything.”

That's why distractions can so easily break a moment of focus, and why that bird outside the window is so enthralling. High distractibility is a key ADHD symptom and diagnostic criterion. Research has shown that movement, or fidgeting, improves executive functions, allowing people with ADHD to focus, learn, and remember more.

Fidgeting must be deliberate to be effective. Intentional fidgets allow your child to self-regulate ADHD symptoms in a controlled, constructive fashion without distracting her from her primary task.

## How Do I Get the School to Let My Child Use Fidgets?

Use of specific fidgets are commonly outlined in the accommodations sections of IEPs and 504 Plans. If your child needs some special help to learn, but you don't have an IEP or 504 Plan in place, you should first write a letter to the school requesting an evaluation. Address it to the chairperson of the Committee on Special Education Services. This person is sometimes referred to as the Director of Special Education Services or the Director of Student Services. It's often a waste of time to send the letter to the child's

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teachers, guidance counselor, or principal.

For a sample letter to use as a template, visit <http://additu.de/dj>.

## What Makes a Good Fidget?

- **Silent:** Your child won't get shushed for disturbing the class.
- **Unobtrusive:** Fidgets should fit in a fist.
- **Tactile (not visual):** Fidgets shouldn't draw restless eyes away from the teacher.
- **Safe:** Kids can choke on small items; some stretchy fidgets sting when they snap.
- **Tools (not toys):** Balls shouldn't bounce, for instance.
- **Inexpensive:** They're likely to be lost (like their lunch bags).
- **Teacher-approved:** Consult the teacher before sending in new items.

## Types of Fidgets

Find the best fidget for your child by first noticing what your child does when she is distracted. Does she stand up at her desk? Does she start chewing her fingernails? Does she tap her fingers?

That can help you tune into what might help during a boring lecture. Or, use a combination of visual, tactile, auditory, and kinesthetic (movement) stimuli to engage all of your child's senses.

## Movement

Occupying busy bodies can help the ADHD brain settle in to focus.

### Walking

When your child gets restless and tunes out, try walking while talking together. Any non-strenuous activity, like playing catch or doing a jigsaw puzzle together, will also work. Try this when discussing your child's day in the late afternoon.

### BOOK REVIEW

Fidget to Focus <http://additu.de/pd>

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At school, ask your child's teacher to send her on errands to the office and keep her moving around the classroom to maintain steady focus.

## Standing

Talk with the teacher about letting your child stand, when appropriate, during the school day. A child can do this discreetly at the back of the room or at his desk. Some teachers use tape to mark a square around a child's desk; he's allowed to stand up and move, and as long as he is within the boundary.

## Keeping Hands Busy

Hand fidgets promote 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, and clothes with interesting textures or doodads. Curling hair around a finger also works.

## Chewing Gum

Oral stimulation may help your child when he has to concentrate for an extended period—doing homework or taking a test. If gum is not an option, sucking on a lemon drop or other hard candy will do the trick.

## **Movement and Sensory Fidgets**

A stress ball, balloon filled with sand, or a small strip of Velcro taped to the bottom of the desk can give your child something to rub his fingers on it while he works, without anyone else being any the wiser!

- **Wiggle chair:** Try Disc'O'Sit, an inflatable cushion that allows seated movement (12" Junior, \$20; [abilitations.com](http://abilitations.com)).
- **Tangle Toys:** They can be held in a child's hand, and twisted without disrupting the class ([tanglecreations.com](http://tanglecreations.com)).
- **Chew Stixx pencil toppers:** Chew Stixx pencil toppers come in fun shapes and colors, and fit any number 2 pencil ([www.therapyshoppe.com](http://www.therapyshoppe.com)).
- **Desk Buddy:** This fidget doubles as a ruler, and has differently textured sections for children to rub or tap to their heart's desire. It's made of FDA-approved material, dishwasher-safe, and bacteria resistant — so don't worry: it's safe for your child to chew, too! ([www.sensoryuniversity.com](http://www.sensoryuniversity.com))

### 9 WAYS TO FOCUS RIGHT NOW

The Power of Fidgeting  
<http://additu.de/h>

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- **FiddleLinks Fidgeter:** Interlocking, rotating links that exercise finger joints while calming ([www.therapyshoppe.com](http://www.therapyshoppe.com)).
- **Fidgeting Foot Band:** A wide stretchy band that loops around chair legs, and lets your child push and kick feet, without disrupting classmates ([www.therapyshoppe.com](http://www.therapyshoppe.com)).

## Visual

Occupying creative hands can help the ADHD brain settle in to focus.

### Drawing

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).

### Using Colored Pencils and Pens

When your child needs to complete an assignment or read for comprehension, he can underline words as he reads or, alternatively, trace over each word at least three different times with colored pencils, crayons, chalk, or markers. If your child is using a computer, have him use different fonts, sizes, and colors.

## Fidgets for Visual Thinkers

- **Tran-Quill Vibrating Pencil Kit:** The pencil vibrates gently as your child writes, increasing focus and subtly improving pencil grip. To top it off (literally!) each Tran-Quill pencil comes with interchangeable Bite-n-Chew pencil tips, allowing chronic pencil chewers to get the oral stimulation they need while they work on improving handwriting skills. (\$39.99; [www.arktherapeutic.com](http://www.arktherapeutic.com))
- **Wikki Stix:** Wax-covered, reusable string can be wrapped around a pencil or formed into shapes, even more crucial, they can be manipulated without making much noise ([wikkistix.com](http://www.wikkistix.com)).

## Auditory

Slipping on headphones 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.

### MUSIC THERAPY

The Benefits of Classical Music <http://additu.de/songs>

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## Auditory Fidgets

- **Binaural app:** Binaural beats are two different sounds transmitted by headphones into each ear, which your brain then combines into one noise. Binaural beat therapy has been used to promote relaxation and sleep. The Binaural app has different preset sounds to bring on tiredness, meditation, concentration, learning, pain relief, and creativity. One reviewer said, “Tried quite a few apps like this but none can compare. This app helped me kiss insomnia goodbye!” (iOS, free)
- **The 8 Best Songs for Growing ADHD Brains:** Make a playlist of these classic tunes that are like music therapy for children with ADHD scientifically proven to help boost brainpower, language skills and even sleep. (<http://additu.de/songs>)

## Parent- and Teacher-Approved Fidgets

Our readers share the real-life fidgets that helped their children get focused.

“I was surprised to find that my bright son, who had been doing poorly in high school, suddenly started getting As. While delighted with his grades, I couldn’t figure out what had changed. The only thing that was different was he wore a hooded sweatshirt to school. I eventually discovered that he was secretly listening to music on his iPod, under that hood. The music focused his brain and made a big difference in his classwork and test scores.” — *Karen*

“I remember that I had trouble sitting still and finishing homework in high school. My mother found a solution: setting up homework stations around the dining-room table. I would stand at each station, working or reading as quickly as I could, until I got restless and moved on to the next station. Every night I raced around the table until my work was done. As an adult, I used fidget strategies to help get through medical school.” — *Mary*

“When my son was in second grade, his teacher created fidget diversions and used Velcro to attach them under my son’s desk. They included a piece of cloth with something sewn inside that made a crackly noise, and a squishy ball. He also had something that hung over the backrest of his chair that was just ‘bumpy’ enough to fo-

### FREE RESOURCE

Study Tips for Serious Wigglers

<http://additu.de/wiggle>

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cus him. These items are all included in his IEP for this year, in third grade. Also, he had a large folding board that he could put on his desk (a three-part presentation board) when he felt distracted by the activity in class.” — *ChrisRD*

“Our twins stay on task when they have something to chew on. We’ve got a big collection of chewy necklaces, bracelets, even teething rings!” — *SixSeconds*

“My middle-school son fidgets in order to focus. At first, his teachers didn’t understand how fidgeting could be helpful, and it was hard to find ways for him to keep his hands busy without bothering classmates. What finally worked? Doodling, bendable pencils, origami — and educating the teachers.” — *Kris, Grand Island, Nebraska*

“We live in Chicago. Last winter my 10-year-old daughter excitedly told me about an accommodation that SHE suggested to her teacher, and the teacher gamely went along with. She asked if she could wear her earmuffs during independent writing time, to drown out classroom chatter! And it works!” — *Suzanne*

“Among other services, my son will be receiving OT. For movement, they have provided a balancing ball to sit on versus a chair, and will permit him to stand up to eat snack or write on an easel, if that suits him better than a flat desk.” — *East Coast Mom*

“I am a special education teacher and one of the coolest things I had in my room last year I called a bouncy ball, It was a peanut-shaped soft block that I got for exercise class one year. My fidgeters loved it.” — *kidswriter*

“I’m working with a little boy who could not sit through story time without distracting others or rocking back and forth. What has worked with him is coloring. At story time he is able to color and listen to the story at the same time. It has made a huge difference! He’s doing something positive now.” — *Havebeenthere*

#### FOR TEACHERS

How to Quiet Noisy Fidgeters [http://additude.fidgetqa](http://additude/fidgetqa)

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“Luckily my daughter’s first grade teacher worked with us and our daughter was allowed to use a squishy ball for her ADHD tendencies during group time. It worked for a while and then we had to move on to another form of fidget toy. We kept changing them up so she didn’t get bored.

Also her teacher and my daughter worked together and found a special place in the classroom where she could work on classwork undisturbed. She would post a sign that said, “Student working please do not disturb.” This helped her keep her concentration and she performed much better. The other kids didn’t think anything of it after a while and the class was fine as she was not the only student that this system was used for.” — *catmom*

## In Conclusion

Managing ADHD involves recognizing our choices and taking action. Understanding what is going on in our children’s brains and proactively choosing an appropriate strategy is the essence of the fidget approach. Experiment with a variety of strategies and encourage your child to try different fidgets. Remember that your favorite fidget may not work for him.

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## **ADDitude Special Reports Available Now**

[www.adhdreports.com](http://www.adhdreports.com)

### **A Parent's Guide to ADHD at School**

**How to manage ADHD symptoms at school, secure accommodations, get organized, tackle homework, and more.**

You're always trying new ways to help your child focus on lessons, adhere to classroom rules, and turn in his homework on time. You want support strategies that will nurture his strengths — and push him to meet the challenges each new school year brings. This eBook has them

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/school-book>

### **The ADHD Homework Survival Guide**

**A plan for getting assignments written down, completed, and handed in on time.**

Use this ADHD-friendly guide to help you (and your child) survive nightly homework without tears, tantrums, or fights. Learn how to establish after-school routines that work, night after night, make sure assignments are written down accurately, help your child study smarter, and more.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/hw-book>

### **The Complete IEP/504 Guide**

**A step-by-step road map to the school accommodations that your child needs to succeed.**

This downloadable eBook is a step-by-step road map to securing school accommodations for your child with ADHD and/or LD. Learn how to: get a correct diagnosis for your child, navigate the IEP/504 process, track your child's progress, and more.

>> Learn more about this special report: <http://additu.de/iep-504-guide>

## **FREE ADDitude Downloadable Booklets**

### **Does Your Child Have a Learning Disability?**

Use this self-test to find out if your child's problems at school may be due to LD

### **Is It Depression?**

Depression is a serious mood disorder, but it's not always easy to recognize.

### **Who Can Treat ADHD?**

Doctor? Psychiatrist? Coach? Learn who can treat your attention deficit.

### **You Know You Have ADHD When...**

Real ADHDers share personal stories highlighting the lighter side of living with attention deficit.

### **Is It Adult ADHD?**

Habitually disorganized? Always running late? It could be ADHD.

### **Smart Comebacks**

Witty responses to ADHD doubters.

### **It's Not ADHD**

Doctors are sometimes too quick to diagnose ADHD. Read up on common misdiagnoses.

### **Find these and many more free ADHD resources online at:**

<http://additu.de/freedownloads>

## **FREE ADHD Webinar Replays from ADDitude:**

### **Download This! Assistive Technology for Tweens and Teens with ADHD**

>> <http://additu.de/assistive>

Young adults today are overbooked. They juggle more academic demands, extracurricular activities, after-school jobs, and social and family responsibilities than any generation had before — and they do it all under the glaring lights of Instagram. Add ADHD to that mix, and it's no wonder our kids benefit so hugely from technology tools and strategies designed to keep them focused, organized, and on-task. Janet DeSenzo explains which ones to choose.

### **How Mindset Impacts Learning**

>> <http://additu.de/mindset>

Perception is reality. According to research, a child's confidence, motivation, and perseverance at school are all hugely impacted by his own personal perceptions of how well he learns. In other words, if you think you're a strong student, you will become one. This presentation by Cindy Goldrich aims to help parents and educators foster self-confidence and improve motivation for kids who struggle with learning challenges. We will explore the best ways to help children see themselves as learners and to help them persevere amid setbacks.

### **Addressing ADHD Behaviors in the Classroom**

>> <http://additu.de/19z>

Sit down. Pay attention. Quit squirming. Be quiet. Keep your hands to yourself. These school 'rules' can be tough for any child, but they can be especially challenging for children with ADHD who lack the brain maturity of their peers. Chris Dendy, M.S., explains how parents and teachers can address behavior issues in the classroom.

### **Where is My Notebook? Teaching Organization Skills That Last**

>> <http://additu.de/notebook>

No more forgotten papers, missed deadlines, or perpetually messy desks! Shari Gent explains how parents can help their children conquer time management and implement a lasting organizational system.

### **Homework Made Simple**

>> <http://additu.de/hwk>

Homework doesn't need to be daily battle between parents and their ADHD children. Expert Ann Dolin, M.Ed., takes the 'work' out of homework with these tips for creating a study sanctuary, combating careless mistakes, and dealing with ADHD distraction.

## **FREE ADHD Newsletters from ADDitude**

Sign up to receive critical news and information about ADHD diagnosis and treatment, plus strategies for school, parenting, and living better with ADHD: <http://additu.de/email>

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Expert advice on managing your household, time, money, career, and relationships

### **Parenting ADHD and LD Children**

Behavior and discipline, time management, disorganization, making friends, and more critical strategies for parents

### **ADHD and LD at School**

How to get classroom accommodations, finish homework, work with teachers, find the right schools, and much more

### **Treating ADHD**

Treatment options including medications, food, supplements, brain training, mindfulness and other alternative therapies