

## CAN YOU JUST SIT STILL AND PAY ATTENTION?

This is certainly a comment many children hear all day long. Regrettably, it is often said as a statement or command, rather than a question. For children who have a difficult time managing themselves during class time, or homework time, how we adults intervene can significantly impact the child's success and self-image.

### Brain Differences

It is a recognized fact that some people's brains do not produce enough dopamine to keep them alert during normal day-to-day activities. This is the foundation for the science behind ADHD. The brain actually struggles to make the connections and stay alert, which is why children can experience a true difficulty staying focused when not intrinsically motivated and interested.

### Withhold Judgment

When we see a child struggling to "sit still and pay attention", before we place judgment or expectation upon the child, we might serve them better by truly asking the question, "Can you...". The difficulty they are having may be attributed to several possible explanations – interest level, understanding of the material, competing desires, anger, depression, ADHD, etc. Our explanation guides our intervention.

### Movement Can Help Attention

If indeed the child is having trouble paying attention to the task at hand, sitting still may actually *increase* the difficulty they are experiencing. Movement can help stimulate the networks of the brain that control attention. Here are some helpful tips and strategies that can be implemented both in the classroom and at home:

- Allow your child to hold an item that he can quietly, discretely manipulate. Known as a "fidget", this item can be anything small such as a piece of felt, a rubber toy, a ring, etc. Google "fidget toy" for some great ideas.
- **Important:** Be sure to help your child distinguish between a "fidget" and "play". To "fidget" means the involvement with the object is in the background, secondary to the task at hand, and is passively being manipulated. To "play" means you are focusing primarily on the object and interacting with it.
- Be sure to instruct your child that while fidgeting they must be quiet if there are others around so as not to create a distraction.
- Allow your child to move around within reason. Sitting on an exercise ball chair or rocking chair can allow the right stimulation to help your child stay engaged in their work. Also, allowing your child to stand up while working might help. This can be done in the classroom as well with the teacher's prior knowledge and approval.

- Music is another great form of stimulation. As with fidgets, it is important to distinguish between background music and music that becomes the primary focus.
- Interactive games for learning facts can be stimulation and fun at the same time. Next time your child needs to memorize vocabulary words, for example, have a catch as you say each word and they respond. Or play a game of concentration; Make two sets of flash cards; one with the word, a second with the definition. Lay them all out face down and find the matching pair.

Sometimes a little investigating, open-mindedness, creativity and patience can go a long way in helping children learn how they learn best.

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