InSpEd

Brief Research Report

Fidget toys for students with disabilities in school settings

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Support Needed

Some children with disability may have difficulty with maintaining attention and engagement during instruction.

Proposed Intervention?

The use of fidget spinners and similar toys has been promoted commercially and in the media as a way to relieve anxiety and increase the ability to attend to class activities.

Theoretical Rationale

For students with ADHD and those on the autism spectrum, it is claimed by proponents of sensory processing theories that fidgeting can provide additional stimulation and help with self-regulation to maintain optimal levels of arousal and attention. In contrast cognitive load theory suggests that using a fidget toy may increase cognitive load and have negative effects on attention and memory.

Research Evidence

A recent narrative review by Kriescher et al. (2023) found limited research that investigated the effects of use of fidget toys. The quality of the studies was not evaluated. They concluded that there was no evidence that improved attention or behaviour resulted from the use of fidget toys and there may be negative effects on learning and attention. One study (Aspiranti & Hulac, 2022) that targeted three students with ADHD and included specific rules for using fidget spinners showed some positive effects on on-task behaviour but no increase in work completed as reported by the teacher.

Conclusion

There is very limited evidence to support the use of fidget toys and the theory underpinning recommended use is not supported by the evidence.

Verdict

As for many other sensory-based interventions, the use of fidget toys cannot be recommended. If used by students with ADHD, they may reduce disruptive behaviour. The desired effects, including improvement in task engagement and work completion, should be very carefully monitored over a specific time-span to allow for data-based evaluation of effectiveness..

Relevant References

Kriescher, S. L., Hulac, D. M., Ryan, A. M., & King, B. L. (2023). Evaluating the evidence for fidget toys in the classroom. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *59*(1), 66-69. https://doi.org/10.1177/10534512221130070

Aspiranti, K. B., & Hulac, D. M. (2022). Using fidget spinners to improve on-task classroom behavior for students with ADHD. *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, *15*(2), 454-465. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40617-021-00588-2