

Tips for Homeschooling Active Learners Helping Your Fidgety Child by Melinda Boring

Do you have a child who has difficulty sitting still? If you are like me, that may have been one of the factors in your decision to homeschool. When I was growing up, I remember the students in my classes who were wiggly and had trouble staying put at their desks. They were in trouble a lot and were not favorites with the teachers because they were not seen as compliant or easy to teach. In fact, they were viewed as disruptive, and those of us who were their classmates picked up on the fact that they were thought of as the troublemakers in the room. Even as a child and young student myself, I felt empathy for those classmates along with relief that I wasn't numbered among them and could easily remain in my teachers' good graces because I was able to sit still and be quiet. Little did I know that years later I would be a parent to not one, but two children who are highly active and distractible and very much non-traditional learners. I am so grateful that homeschooling is an option for children like mine who learn differently.

Knowing that your child is a fidgeter does not automatically equip you with the knowledge of how to work within that child's natural tendency. When I began homeschooling, I tried to eliminate fidgeting entirely, believing that my son's constant manipulation of objects in his hands and tapping small toys on the top of his desk were distractions that had to be eliminated in order for him to focus on his schoolwork. Fortunately, my son was both patient and persistent in showing me over and over again what he needed until I finally understood that having something in his hands actually helped him to pay attention for longer periods of time than he could when I took everything away and left him empty-handed. By the time his wiggly sister officially started school, he had paved the way for her and had taught me a few things that were helpful to know about fidgety kids and how they learn best.

Over time and through many experiences I learned that my son's ability to focus was enhanced by the tactile sensation of handling an object, even though that object typically had absolutely nothing to do with the lesson I was teaching. It was the physical sensation of holding and manipulating something that helped him internally organize his thoughts as he saw and heard what I was presenting to him. When that tactile experience was lacking, he was more distracted and fidgety as he looked for something—anything—to meet that need, even if it was just a rubber band to stretch or a paper clip to bend and unbend. Sitting still and being passive was not compatible with the way he learned. The boy needed to move, and that showed up in the form of fidgeting.

Once I realized and accepted that fidgeting was actually part of the learning style for my son and daughter, I still had to find a way to make it work for our family. I found that if the fidgeting actions made noise, I became distracted, and that wasn't beneficial for anyone. I also learned that I was sensitive to certain types of noises so that, if I heard repetitive noises such as clicks and thumps at certain frequencies, it was difficult for me to concentrate, and I would feel

increasingly irritated. Again, that type of situation was not good for anyone. Each family will need to decide what works or does not work well within their set of circumstances. If every member has a high tolerance for noise, then it will be easier to accommodate those who need to fidget because the sounds created by the fidgeting won't be such an issue.

For my family, due to my aversion to loud or continual noises that distract me, I learned that my rules for fidget items had to meet my children's need to move and get tactile input while meeting my own need for them to be quiet enough not to become distracting or auditory irritants. With that in mind, my children were allowed to fidget with things that were small enough to be portable since we did schoolwork in several different locations throughout the day, and the fidget items had to be quiet enough that they did not detract from the lessons being taught. I kept a basket of fidget toys available, with items like pieces of fabric scraps of various texture, squishy toys, stress balls to squeeze, stretchy bands that are used for exercising, pipe cleaners, hex nuts on a screw that can be twisted around to tighten and loosen, small stuffed toys with soft fur to pet, and so on. I provided a variety of fidget items, and if my children wanted to fidget with something else, I let them as long as it met the criteria of being quiet and portable.

Some of your children may not need a fidget item, so it might seem to them like those who do are getting special treatment. The easy solution here is to allow all the children to use fidget items if they would like to, since it won't hurt anything for everyone to have one. What I noticed in our homeschool was the students who really needed to fidget rarely put down the fidget object during times they needed to sit still and listen, while the one who didn't have the tendency to fidget often set the object aside and forgot about it. She got to try out the fidget toys, but she wasn't a wiggly kid and had no difficulty sitting still and sustaining her attention for long periods of time. She was wired differently and didn't need the tactile input to help her focus. Allowing her to have a fidget toy helped her not to feel left out and enabled her to see that for her it really wasn't significant to have something in her hand while she learned.

If you were comfortable as a traditional learner who could sit and listen without difficulty for extended periods of time, the thought of giving a child something to fidget with seems counterintuitive. Won't that make a child even more distracted? I would suggest giving fidget toys a try. You've probably tried eliminating the wiggles and fidgeting already. Chances are that has not been completely successful. Your child may be showing you that he or she needs some movement and tactile input in order to focus and pay attention for longer periods of time. Try the controlled fidgeting I've described and see if it doesn't help make your school day go a bit smoother. Some fidgeting can truly be a good thing. When I was a new homeschooler, there was an intense battle over fidgeting going on at my house, but when that battle ended in a tie I had to admit my children and I were all better off.