Planning for AUTISM

Fidgets and Stimming: OK or No Way?

Hi everyone, today we'll be talking about Fidgets and Stimming, what those two things are, and how they're used by autistic people. After reading this brief, you should be able to,

- Differentiate between fidgets and stimming
- Discuss current thinking on stimming
- Offer considerations for fidget use

When you think about autism trends, one of the first things that might pop into your mind are those fidget spinners that somehow managed to find their way into everybody's pockets. People seemed to need one and trying to buy them started to feel like the Beanie Baby hype of the 1990s. While the spinner fad probably drove many teachers nuts, the good news is that it contributed to helping some people see some aspects of autism as pretty typical. Lots of people have repetitive behaviors like twirling hair, biting fingernails, and popping knuckles; some habits involve an object, like running a charm back and forth across its chain, twirling a pencil, and cracking sunflower seeds.

So, let's take a look at two things – the need to self-stimulate or seek sensory input to stay focused, calm, and make easier transitions from one activity to another, often referred to as *stimming*, and the need to use an object to do so, as in the case of people who furtively rub a charm or trinket when stressed. In this case, they are using what many now refer to as a *fidget.*

First of all, we need to tackle some background discussions surrounding the topic of stimming. For a long time, autistic people engaged in all kinds of *physical* behaviors that have long been known as stimming. There are actually research articles that describe the science of stimming by using the following categories and descriptions: *subtle behaviors* (the little stims

you might not even notice), varying intensity and continuity, *spatial variance* (certain types of stimming being associated with certain places), *social cues*, *mixing behaviors* (such as moving from spinning to arm flapping), *object influence* (that's the fidget part we are going to get to next), *person anxiety* (such as when the stimming increases in response to someone else's anxiety about it), and *context stimming* (as in during certain TV shows or games).

Afraid you won't remember all that? You can safely summarize it by saying a person's stimming might or might not be dependent on place and activities and is influenced by what is going on around them, including the presence of others. We've added a research link to the end of this presentation for those of you who are interested, and trust us, you will be able to find many Internet blogs on the subjects without much trouble.

The research we just discussed happened in 2013. At about that time, the influential trend against stimming became very popular, and those who advocated for an autism "cure" hauled the old theory of behaviorism into the picture. Operating under the theory that a behavior, in this case stimming, can be changed without it requiring conscious thought, autistic people could be made to appear less autistic and more socially acceptable. Most commonly this approach has been known as *applied behavioral analysis* or *ABA.* Fans of ABA say it can nearly cure or remove autistic behaviors from very young people. Detractors say that by suppressing a person's natural tendencies, they have fewer opportunities for self-expression and communication. ABA detractors sometimes liken it to torture or abuse.

As a result of the stimming and ABA controversies, there has been a reemergence of the "live and let live" school of thought that holds we should change our views of stimming when we see it in others and reframe what it might mean – having a way to be self-expressive and communicate rather than having a bad and disruptive set of habits. In other words, our negative reaction to someone's stimming is *our* problem, not theirs.

Slide 5:

Since fidgets often accompany stimming, you might have already guessed that people are becoming more relaxed about the use of fidgets to calm anxiety, increase staying power in situations that aren't always pleasant (think a nice long math class, for example), and, in occupational therapy lingo, increase a person's ability to self-regulate. In fact, some people advocate for renaming fidgets and calling them focus tools. Upon hearing this new moniker, some researchers again turned to science to determine the real value of fidgets or focus tools. Here is what they found:

A team of researchers headed up by Ledford in 2020 investigated whether or not allowing autistic students to use small fidgets during group activities with the intention of encouraging attendance and engagement actually proved to be unhelpful, and as some experienced teachers might have predicted, they created a distraction for the students and their classmates. This study echoed a 2017 report by a team lead by Schecter who acknowledged the popularity of fidgets but found little evidence to support their use – and even cautioned that some fidgets can be choking hazards!

While this may seem discouraging, program descriptions, such as work by occupational therapist Biel, also in 2017, reported teacher satisfaction with some fidgets. Internet blogs continue to report their effective use and note that neurotypical people are emulating the habits of autistic people when they stim or use fidgets. Interestingly, some sites even mention the old classroom chewing gum controversy as a form of fidget use.

It's safe to say that given the wide range of opinions about stimming, and more specifically, using fidgets, conflicting information is not going away any time soon. If you find yourself in a lively conversation about fidgets, remember these things: fidgets can include sensory mats, chew toys, gooshy things like slime, rainmaker toys, spinners, and vibrating cushions, amongst other things. Some of them can be choking hazards, create a mess, transmit germs from one user to another, and may not be easy to store. At the same time, some are clever, addicting, and have a high *cool index*.

Make an informed decision when you think about using fidgets – and factor in considerations of place, people, and activities when you do. Keeping people safe and happy is the name of the game. Fidgets might contribute to that – or not.

Want to know more?

Biel, L. (2017). Fidget toys or focus tools. *Autism File*, *74*, 12-13.

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Rajagopalan, S., Dhall, A., & Goecke, R. (2013). Self-stimulatory behaviours in the wild for autism diagnosis. In *Proceedings of the IEEE International Conference on Computer Vision Workshops* (pp. 755-761).

Schecter, R. A., Shah, J., Fruitman, K., & Milanaik, R. L. (2017). Fidget spinners: Purported benefits, adverse effects and accepted alternatives. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*, *29*(5), 616-618.