

# “Should we be offering ‘fiddle toys’ to a teen who can’t concentrate?”

**RICHARD AIRD HAS SOME ADVICE FOR TEACHERS FACED WITH LEARNERS WHO JUST CAN'T SEEM TO STAY ON TASK...**

**Q** I am head of Y9 at a small, rural secondary school. A young man who joined us in September 2013, whilst not stated, is definitely struggling with his concentration, which is leading to problems with behaviour, and rather more sanctions than we would like. Having called his parents in to discuss the situation, they mentioned that at primary school, he had been allowed ‘fiddle toys’ during lesson time, which he had found really helpful. Given that the most common complaint I hear from his teachers is that he ‘won’t stop fidgeting’, might fiddle toys be a strategy we should be considering? Or, at this stage in his education, would they simply be a distraction, and should we be looking for other ideas?

A Some schools find some pupils difficult to teach and some pupils find some schools difficult to learn in. Very often both these things contribute to school reports about being “easily distracted”, “lacking motivation” and/or “reluctant to join in with group activities”. Sometimes these things are viewed solely as an “in child” problem and characteristic of a slow learner or a deprived home life. They definitely become a shared problem though, the moment data analysis identifies a cohort of pupils failing to reach a secondary school’s target level for literacy and more unlikely to “hit the mark” academically

Having a difficulty in any aspect of communication should never be regarded solely as an “in child” problem, but should instead serve as a prompt for teachers to adapt their teaching so it is more empathetic to pupils with communication difficulties, enabling these pupils to overcome the inevitable self-confidence issues acquired from previous, unpleasant learning experiences; creative, multi-modal activities that have motivating ‘hooks’ are perfect for enabling easily distracted, poorly motivated and solitary learners to develop confidence and competencies.

There are some other difficulties a pupil may have which might contribute to a failure to acquire a good level of literacy, eg, a pupil who is constantly fidgeting and not engaging properly in the learning process. Directing a pupil to “stop fidgeting and pay attention” is unlikely to resolve the situation because the need to fidget is innate within all of us, as those who chew gum, bite their nails, or constantly wobble a knee can testify. Such fidgeting is

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believed to assist the brain keep alert to incoming information, assist with integrating the information being received from different senses and so help extract meaning from incoming information; so it is not always a bad thing when a pupil fidgets during a lesson. In some pupils, however, the need to fidget is ‘over the top’, which may be because the pupil is bored, or it could be because there is an underlying neurological reason, perhaps similar to that which is believed to feature in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Probably because of a chemical imbalance in the brain, pupils affected by AD/HD often have an innate compulsion to constantly seek out new sensory stimuli, but then become so overwhelmed by sensory overload they are unable to integrate information effectively and do not learn as well

as they otherwise could. These pupils ‘butterfly’ and fidget to the extent they are unable to participate properly in the learning process. In response, an occupational therapist might prescribe such a pupil with a ‘twangy’ wrist band, textured cushion, or similar item so s/he can maintain a ‘sensory feedback loop’ that satisfies the compulsive need for sensory stimuli, but without being too intrusive or disabling in the classroom.

Poor concentration, difficulties in making good progress in literacy, and a tendency to fidget all have their roots in how well a pupil is able to carry out sensory integration. Having a difficulty in sensory integration impacts negatively upon a pupil’s ability to interact with others, to learn effectively and even carry out some physical tasks, so it is well worth a teacher reflecting on his/her teaching style and how s/he engages pupils in the process of learning. A simple self-assessment tool might be to consider how well a lesson will:

- Provide hands on experiential learning that requires pupils to investigate, experiment and be curious;
- Include strong elements of multi-modal learning with opportunities for pupils to integrate information being received via different sensory routes;
- Have sufficient ‘wow factor’ to provide lasting, memorable experiences and stimulate pupils to want to engage in other aspects of learning.

