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Improve Concentration In The Classroom

The "fidget spinner" and its many knock-offs made big news this year as the device became a must-have trend seemingly overnight. The toy has been touted as a gizmo that can do everything from improve concentration, relieve stress, treat ADHD, reduce nail biting, and even alleviate smartphone addiction.

The growing influence of technology has been a cause for concern in classrooms, prompting the confiscation of gizmos by administrators and compelling teachers to pen reminders to parents about keeping distractions at home. However, in light of the popularity of devices for kids who seem to be natural-born fidgeters, educators must answer tough questions of how to improve concentration and reduce distractions in the classroom — especially for nontraditional learners. These techniques may be equally, if not more, effective than spinners and other toys.

PROVIDE ALTERNATIVE SEATING OPTIONS - Flexible seating fosters an environment that helps students learn based on their needs. Seating can range from the traditional desks and hard chairs to soft cushions, exercise balls and seats with elasticized bands around the legs. Children may also sit on the floor or in camp chairs or use stand-up tables depending on the classroom design. The idea is to avoid pigeonholing children into an environment that is not conducive to learning, especially as many children are prone to moving around and not sitting still for long periods of time.

Although there isn't yet extensive research into alternative seating, a study that had been published in the American Journal of Public Health found that first-graders with standing desks chose to stand about two-thirds of the time and burned 17 percent more calories than classmates in traditional seated classrooms, and teachers noted that students at standing desks were more alert and attentive and demonstrated less disruptive behavior than those using traditional desks.

ALLOW FOR MOVEMENT AND RECESS BREAKS - Allowing children to get up and move around from time to time can reset their alertness and mental focus. Get students up by asking them to do things as simple as handing out papers and supplies or cleaning off the whiteboard.

OFFER VARIED INSTRUCTION - Breaking up the classroom routine is another way to keep kids engaged. Instead of constant lecturing, institute small group work, independent study or cooperative learning.

MINIMIZE NOISE AND OTHER DISTRACTIONS - Some students may work better in quiet environments, while others may need some background noise to concentrate. Improving concentration in school can benefit students' performance. Strategies that work in the classroom may work at home as well.

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The Important Role Of Vision In The Classroom

Parents often go to great lengths to help their children succeed in the classroom. Offering homework help and/or hiring tutors can help kids achieve their academic potential, but parents should not overlook the effects their children's vision can have on their performance in the classroom. The American Optometric Association notes that students perform visual tasks in the classroom throughout a typical school day. Kids rely on their vision when reading, writing or using computers. When that vision is not functioning properly, students' performance may suffer. **WHAT ARE SOME WARNING SIGNS THAT KIDS MAY BE STRUGGLING WITH THEIR VISION?** The AOA notes that undeveloped or poorly developed visual skills can make it difficult or stressful for youngsters to learn. But children may not always inform their parents if they're struggling with their vision. Rather, the AOA says children

with poor visual skills will typically avoid reading or other near visual work as much as possible. Students also may attempt to do their work, but do so with a lowered level of comprehension or efficiency. Discomfort, fatigue and shortened attention spans are other potential indicators of undeveloped or poorly developed visual skills. Children experiencing eye and vision problems also may suffer from frequent headaches, cover one eye, tilt their head to one side, lose their place when reading, see double, and/or hold reading materials close to their face. **ARE POOR VISUAL SKILLS ALWAYS DIAGNOSED?** Because undeveloped or poorly developed visual skills elicit many of the same symptoms associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, some kids struggling with their vision may be misdiagnosed with ADHD. To ensure kids are accurately diagnosed, the AOA recommends that children receive routine eye examinations. This is especially impor-

tant for school-aged children, as vision changes frequently during this period. Visual problems like myopia (nearsightedness) or refractive errors like farsightedness or astigmatism can adversely affect students' academic performance. **WHEN SHOULD KIDS RECEIVE EYE EXAMS?** The AOA recommends children receive annual eye examinations. More frequent examinations are recommended for children experiencing specific vision problems. School screenings are not sufficient, as the AOA notes that such screenings only test for distance visual acuity. Comprehensive optometric examinations are more thorough than school screenings and can reveal issues that can adversely affect students in the classroom. Undeveloped or poorly developed visual skills can adversely affect kids' academic performance. But annual optometric examinations can detect vision problems that may otherwise go undiagnosed.

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Calm The Chaos On Busy School Mornings

Mornings can test the patience and stamina of busy families as adults and children hurry to get out the door on time. Starting off the morning already stressed can lead to feeling tense throughout the rest of the day. There is no magic formula to make mornings less hectic, but the following are some ways families can streamline their morning routines.

- **MAKE USE OF THE NIGHT BEFORE.** Morning madness may come about due to lack of preparation the previous night. The more that can be done the night before, the less there will be to do on weekday mornings. Encourage children to lay out clothes for the next day and take a shower or bath that evening. Make lunches the night before a school day, and gather all supplies from home-work stations, restocking backpacks and gym bags so everything is ready to go come the morning.
- **GET TO BED EARLIER.** Sleep experts say that if you need to rely on an alarm clock to get up in the morning, you may not be getting enough sleep. The National Sleep Foundation says school-aged children should get between 9 and 11 hours of sleep a night. Teenagers require between 8 and 10 hours of sleep per night, while adults need between seven and nine hours. A good night's rest can reduce morning crankiness and get everyone moving more efficiently.
- **INCENTIVIZE TIMELINESS FOR KIDS.** Children who are reluctant to head to school may need extra motivation to get out the door. Offer small rewards to kids when they get ready on their own or finish breakfast in a certain amount of time. Rewards can include a treat like choosing a favorite show to watch after school or a special outing on the weekend.
- **FOLLOW A SCHEDULE.** Make mornings the same each day so everyone knows what to expect. Uniformity can streamline tasks and ensure everyone knows what's expected of them.
- **STAY ORGANIZED.** Racing around trying to find keys or jackets can be very stressful. Make it a point to return items to their proper places so that everyone knows where to look for the items they need. School mornings can be challenging, but with some ingenuity and forethought, the stress can be tamed.

Homework Help: Creating A Helpful Homework Atmosphere For Your Children

Classrooms conducive to learning may go a long way toward helping students understand the subjects they study in school, but the environment kids encounter at home also plays a big role in how well kids do in their studies. A homework-friendly atmosphere at home can facilitate learning, and there are many ways parents can create such an environment for their school-aged children.

- Designate a homework zone in a distraction-free area of your home. Some youngsters are easily distracted, and those distractions come in many forms. A living room where the television is blaring, a noisy kitchen where dinner is being prepared and a room where pets can roam free are not ideal homework areas, as each can take kids' attention away from their assignments. Designate a room in your home that is quiet and well lit so kids can do their homework free from distraction.
- Choose the right location for the homework room. When choosing an area of your home where kids will do their homework, avoid rooms adjacent to the kitchen and living room, as these rooms tend to be popular and subject to heavy foot traffic. But don't choose a room that's too far away from the hustle and bustle, such as the basement, as that may make kids feel as though they are being punished. In addition, you want to be able to periodically check in on kids to see if they need help and make sure they aren't spending their homework time surfing the Internet or procrastinating.
- Keep the homework room brightly lit and clean. A cluttered homework room may be less appealing to children, and such disorganization also can distract kids from the tasks at hand. Encourage kids to keep their homework rooms clean, and help them clean up if need be. Supplies and other items kids need should be easily accessible in the homework room so kids are not wasting time looking for items they need to complete their homework.

- Let kids rest or relax before starting their homework. Another element of a good homework atmosphere is letting kids unwind between getting home from school and cracking open the books. A break between school and homework time can help kids focus better on their studies. In the interim between arriving home from school and starting on their homework, give kids a healthy snack that can provide an extra jolt of energy they can use once they start their homework.
- Evaluate how the homework zone is working. Once an ample amount of time has passed, examine how kids are performing on their homework assignments. If they are doing well, then there is no reason to break up the current routine. If they are struggling, ask them if there is anything about the current setup they dislike and address those issues accordingly. Kids rarely look forward to doing their homework. But the right atmosphere can make homework seem like less of a chore and more of an opportunity for kids to apply themselves.

