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Shaking Out the Fidgets

By Malia Blom, JD

Young children, especially young boys, are notoriously bad at remaining still and quiet for sustained periods of time. This is one of the many reasons that you so rarely see little boys as mimes or as part of living sculpture displays. Of course, while this is hardly news to anyone who has any experience with children, it's surprising how that knowledge can slip away when it comes to school. Especially when you realize that the school experience (even for youngsters) involves a great deal of sitting still and being quiet.

Take the fine art of finger-painting for example. While still an activity, it is a fairly passive one. One stands in one place and smears paint on paper. Unless one is my 3-year-old son. In which case, one dances in place while painting, comments constantly on one's work, and takes frequent breaks to wave one's messy hands menacingly at passers-by. He's not trying to be difficult or troublesome. He's just compelled to move. And it may well be biological. Some experts theorize that boys' higher metabolism and/or brain chemistry contributes to their general "fidgetiness." It's even possible that such low-level motion while learning is actually helping the thinking process.

And yet, many parents and teachers get frustrated by boys' constant need to move, and I do sympathize. Especially when I see how my niece will sit quietly and draw without jumping up a dozen times a minute. But when you recognize that these fidgets aren't coming from a desire to cause trouble, but rather a natural need for activity, it becomes much easier to respond and redirect that energy. Some teachers will pause lessons for short "motion breaks," while others have had success assigning "active" helping chores (passing out papers, etc.) to the particularly restless students or giving such students a small object (like a soft ball) to manipulate while they work on their lessons. Moreover, scheduled periods of activity, either as part of a lesson or recess and physical education classes, can also be helpful. (Thus, the elimination of recess in many schools is not only bad for students, but also makes the job more difficult for teachers trying to maintain discipline in a group of restless youngsters with no directed outlet for their energy.)

Yes, there is a value to learning to sit still, be quiet and respectful, and pay attention. And I'm not suggesting that boys be absolved from learning to do so. But a better understanding of boys' need to move (and some appropriate ways to respond) can go a long way towards improving the learning experience—not only for the boys, but for their frustrated teachers and parents as well.

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