

# Teaching the Fidgety Child Without Losing Your Mind or Using Duct Tape

By Carol Barnier

I harbored in my mind such beautiful images of motherhood . . . long before I was a mother, of course. It involved a calm, fresh-faced child nestled sweetly against my side, looking up with wide-eyed wonder and obvious appreciation for the seventh lovely little story I'd just read to her (or was that our eighth?). Why . . . she might even feel compelled to tell me yet again, "You da bestest mommy in da hoe wood!" She would sleep long and peacefully from the moment I'd lay her down. She'd awaken cheerfully and be eager to please me. My love for my children would so permeate our home that all those problems I'd seen in other children would be just that . . . problems in *other* children. Well, God must have been watching that little picket-fence-fiction movie I'd created in my mind, and He decided to nip that puppy in the bud right off the bat. (That *last* statement, by the way, is a classic mixed metaphor. Feel free to use this in today's grammar lesson on how *not* to write.)

So after God chuckled, my first much-anticipated child came whirling into my life and plunged me into the world of an extremely active, even hyperactive, child who was eventually diagnosed with ADHD. Kathunk. Thus fell my lovely set of motherhood images. They were replaced with a gritty reality. The fresh-faced child of my vision was most often a constantly whirling face covered in something: dirt, charcoal, Daddy's shaving cream, or permanent markers.

But I loved him with a fierceness of a mother lion. And like all of you, I invested—deeply invested—in this child's academic and life successes. So when I began homeschooling, I did what any typical person would do: I taught him with all the traditional methods that had been used in teaching me. The problem, however, was that I had just pulled my son out of a kindergarten that had been *unsuccessful* for him. Then I promptly went home and duplicated in every detail the very same traditional classroom methods that had just failed him.

You would think that it would have been obvious to me that new methods were needed. But I was slow to waken to this truth. After about six dreadful months of trying to force traditional methods into a very untraditional mind, I basically gave up and threw in the towel. I ditched standard methods and adopted a new statement of purpose: "We'll just see what works." And that's exactly what we did. By trying many things, things outside of my expectations, things that would never have been useful in teaching *me*, we began to accumulate a wealth of methods that were successful with the distractible child. We found things that worked. Not only was this child able to learn, but he was able to thrive. And homeschooling began to surge with energy and learning.

I learned many helpful and useful things, such as *a daily to-do list is golden*. This poor kid felt that even if he gathered up all his internal focusing abilities and put them to work with studied intensity on the task I'd given him, it simply wouldn't matter, because I'd happily chirp, "Great job! Here's your *next* task." The day seemed endless. He couldn't mentally prepare himself for the day's tasks because he had no idea just how many tasks he was preparing for. So we created the concrete specific list. With a clear set of objectives, he could gather his resources for the day.

I also learned that if I expected my son to actually learn anything, *he simply must be moving*. When I first began teaching him, I had bought into the idea that a child cannot really absorb what is being said unless he is sitting up straight, arms quiet, face forward, and eyes on the teacher—reverently, respectfully, with great focus and dare I say it . . . admiration. (Cue violins.) And while occasionally I was able to get him to mimic the required components of “the learning stance,” it never seemed to result in actual learning.

What I couldn't see when he was sitting perfectly still was that in his head there are two processing tracks. One is for processing new information, but the other is more of a movement and stimulation track. In fact, it is more like a gerbil wheel, spinning and squeaking away furiously, trying desperately to not be overheard by those around him. The tension would build. His eyes would grow wide at the considerable effort. And, given enough time, he would implode. What I eventually learned was that while he perhaps *looked* like he was focusing on me, he was actually focused on the gerbil wheel spinning wildly and taking his mind to a variety of places, none of which had anything to do with the ancient Roman emperor I was telling him about.

I came to the conclusion that this child simply could not process new information unless he was in motion. Of all the things we learned in our years of homeschooling (he's 20 now), there is simply nothing more valuable than that realization.

So how do you do this? How do you take a math lesson that can drag into three hours and turn it into a fun activity that now takes only twelve minutes? How to you get him to do spelling when he hates writing? How do you get him to mentally “stay with you” when you want to read a long passage of a great book? Luckily, there are many possibilities.

- Hand out the math one problem at a time. While you're working in the kitchen, take a small piece of scrap paper and write a single math problem on it. When he has done it correctly, he wads it up and shoots it into the basketball hoop (made from a hanger that you've hung in the kitchen).
- Go to the park. Have him climb to the top of the slide, but before he can “whee” his way down, he has to spell five words correctly.
- Put the answers to math problems on 3 x 5 cards and spread them out on the floor. Read a problem off to him and let him jump on the answers. If you're doing multiplication, call out the answer and let him jump on the two cards that multiplied together create the answer.
- Do it on the whiteboard. For reasons I still cannot fully explain, problems of any sort done on a whiteboard are far less taxing than sitting at a table and working on paper. We can whip through a math lesson in about eight minutes this way.
- Instead of writing on paper, write spelling words in a tray of wet sand or across a nearly flattened bag filled with a bit of shaving cream.
- If you need for him to sit still and listen, you must give his hands something repetitive and mindless to do. Taking corn off of a cob, one at a time with tweezers, separating puff balls by size and color using chop sticks, putting a large bowl of pennies into the small slot of a bank one at a time. Mindless and repetitive. It will astound you how the child who couldn't stay focused through three sentences will now repeat back to you almost verbatim long passages of a shared story.

- Play WAR with cards, but instead of turning over just one card each per turn, flip over two each and let the highest sum take the hand (or highest product if multiplication is the current area of study).
- Cake Walk your learning. Put cards down on the floor in a way that creates a trail that circles back onto itself. (In other words, it's continuous.) Start playing a fun song on your CD player while your student walks along the trail. When you hit the pause button, to reveal his task he stops and flips over the card he's stepping on. Maybe it's a math problem. Maybe it's a vocabulary question. Maybe it's a symbol for an element from the Periodic Table of Elements. In other words, it's whatever subject you wanted to inject some fun into today. If he gets it right, the card is kept up. But if it's incorrect, it goes back into play for review. Keep playing till all the cards are up. Remember, this is called "Cake Walk." There's supposed to be a prize at the end. Cake still works, but so does a stick of gum.
- Toss a beanbag back and forth. Any information that is linear in nature can be learned this way. How about the books of the Bible? You say "Genesis" and toss the bag to your child. She says "Exodus" and tosses it back. This works for ABC's, skip counting, the spelling of individual words, poems (you say a line, they say the next line), pretty much any information with a beginning and an end.

We've found these little changes and so many more ideas to be the tools we needed to take an agonizing lesson and turn it into one that is filled with fun and enthusiasm. It takes a shift in thinking, but once you get used to it, you'll never go back to the days of the three-hour math lesson.

When I think back to my pre-child images of motherhood, some of them weren't so crazy. I do occasionally have a quiet child nestled beside me reading a book. But more often, I have a noisy, laughing bouncing child reciting his math facts while incessantly jumping on a rebounder. It's all good. Plus, I never have to tell *this* child to get up and get more exercise.

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