

Can chewing gum really help students focus?



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When Carolyne Cybulski tells teachers at other schools that she allows kids to chew gum in her classroom, they often react with shock. "They look at us like our brains have fallen out of our heads," said the teacher and principal at Epic School in Toronto.

Twenty years ago, children caught chewing gum at their desk would probably be sent straight to detention. Even today, gum is mostly banned at schools because of sticky messes and bubble-blowing distractions. But some research suggests the habit may actually be helpful when it comes to important classroom skills such as concentration, alertness and memory.

Cybulski started encouraging her young students to chew on sugar-free gum a few years ago. The benefits have been impressive, she says: less fidgeting during circle time, increased attention, and decreased anxiety.

"Children learn through their senses –" said Cybulski. "Chewing gum also provides constant sensory input to the muscles in the jaw and ears and we find it helps children to concentrate better. It works kind of like a fidget!"

Some recent research backs her up. Earlier this year, a study in the British Journal of Psychology found that participants who chewed gum maintained better concentration during a challenge. The gum chewers also had faster reaction times and more accurate results than the group without gum. Scientists aren't exactly sure why chewing gum improves attention, but have hypothesized it may increase heart rate and blood flow.

"This would result in more oxygen and glucose being delivered to the brain," said study co-author Dr. Andrew Johnson, a psychology professor. "It's also possible that the motion of chewing helped to maintain attention because participants were moving a little, rather than sitting perfectly still." Previous studies have also demonstrated that gum-chewing is associated with reduced stress, enhanced mood, and better grades on tests.

Chewing gum is also a more socially acceptable habit than chewing on shirt sleeves, hair, fingers or pencils – behaviours many young children exhibit when they're anxious or need extra sensory input, says a child psychologist. "To break a habit, you need to replace it with another one," she said.

So why are many teachers still against the idea of allowing kids to chew away? "The day that I found gum smushed into the carpet was probably the last straw," said Jason Riddell, an elementary teacher at Moffat Creek Public School in Cambridge, who recently banned gum in his class. "When the students were already working, they would chew the gum and focus and it wasn't a problem. But if they weren't focused or supervised closely, they would get distracted figuring out how to get more gum from their friends or finding a place to spit it out. Some kids couldn't afford their own gum, and felt left out."

As for Cybulski? She'll continue to allow gum in the classroom as long as the kids respect the rules. "We don't want to see it, and we don't want to hear it," she said. "But the benefits are great in my opinion."