

You Say You Want a Revolution

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was in grade school, one of my classmates had a bit of a nervous tick. He would chew on his pencils, sometimes down to the lead. That was kind of gross, but to his credit, no one ever asked to borrow his pencil.

His high-fiber diet wasn't a big deal until we got to high school and we also started using pens. Of course, he chewed on his pen and it exploded in his mouth, causing him to look like blue beard.

Looking back, my classmate may have had Attention Deficit Disorder, had anxiety or was possibly on the autism spectrum. Today, students like my classmate would most likely be given a fidget spinner.

Fidget spinners are handheld gadgets built with wheels and ball bearings. They were designed to be used by children to help them focus. The devices have flown off shelves and it seems like just about every kid in America is playing with one when their faces otherwise aren't buried in their phones.

Fidget spinners were invented in the 1980s by Catherine Hettinger. After a trip to Israel, she was inspired to create a mechanism to distract children and promote peace. Hettinger even obtained a utility patent for her fidget spinner, which is granted by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office to protect a new or improved product from being made by others without the patent holder's authorization.

A utility patent, otherwise known as an invention patent, protects the way a product is used and works. A design patent, however, protects the way a product looks. A utility patent is good for 20 years, while a design patent is good for 14 years.

After obtaining her patent, Hettinger sought out toy manufacturers, such as Hasbro, to manufacture fidget spinners. The toy companies showed no interest, however. In 2005, her patent was set to expire. Because Hettinger couldn't afford the \$400 renewal fee, that's exactly what happened, and just about every toy manufacturer, including Hasbro, has been mass producing fidget spinners. Despite their immense popularity, without the patent, Hettinger has reaped no financial gain.

Now a resident of Florida, Hettinger launched a kickstarter campaign seeking funding to support her own "Classic Spinner" line of fidget toys.

Some people, however, think there are already too many fidget spinners. Many schools have banned them, claiming kids are using them to do tricks, such as flipping them, tossing them, and even spinning them on their noses. As a result, teachers claim they do not help children focus, but rather just the opposite – fidget spinners actually distract them.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, however, is definitely focused on fidget spinners. The agency recently released new fidget spinner safety guidelines for consumers and businesses.

The governmental watchdog group began investigating fidget spinners after several reported instances of battery-operated spinners catching fire and one even melting. There have also been multiple reports of children choking on their components, including a 10-year-old girl who required surgery to remove a piece of her fidget spinner that became lodged in her esophagus.

Ann Marie Buerkle, acting chief of the CPSC, warned parents to "keep them from small children; the plastic and metal spinners can break and release small pieces that can be a choking hazard; and older children should not put fidget spinners in their mouths."

For a device designed to help people cope with anxiety, fidget spinners sure seem to make people anxious.

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