

Kids Stand Up When We Deliver

A sixth grade teacher in Wisconsin got an idea. Instead of watching her students tune out, lay their sleepy heads on their desks, and lose focus, she decided they needed something different. She noticed that a student answering a math question shifted his weight back and forth from one foot to the other as he was concentrating. Another student stood up every chance she got. Still another liked to lean against a stool and swing his foot out in front of him. So instead of getting mad, expecting them to sit still with eyes up front, she designed a stand-up desk with a swinging footrest. Many of the schools in the area began using these adjustable height desks and stools so students can decide whether they stand or sit during class. Now schools across the country are putting in orders for Abby Brown's design constructed by a local ergonomic furniture company.

"Stop squirming and sit still." Have any of us not heard that refrain from a teacher? Most school children no longer have to sit at nailed down desks the way I did, but once the double digit age hits, most children are still required to sit at their desks. And we still think that children must have quiet bodies in order to concentrate. Or is it that teachers need quiet rooms in order to teach?

Ms. Brown's kids can now squirm and wiggle the way their bodies want. And what she is finding out is that they are responding positively. Instead of getting lethargic or slouching uncomfortably in their hard chairs, these kids can actually expend pent up energy by standing and moving so their minds can focus on their work.

Studies are now being conducted at the University of Minnesota on the kids in Ms. Brown's room as well as many other classrooms across Wisconsin and Minnesota to determine the scholastic benefits. But they are already seeing results—less referrals to the principal's office, reduced sick days, and nary a head down at a stand-up desk. It helps them be alert, and teachers don't have to bend down to check a student's work.

Imagine if something as simple as a piece of furniture could result in so many positives. What can we learn from this?

Instead of trying to force our children to fit into the environments we dictate—or that work for us—and criticizing them when they won't, we might be better off using their resistant behavior as a clue to their needs rather than as a reason for indictment. Ms. Brown and the teachers who have followed her lead are willing to see that if the environment is shifted to suit the preadolescent bodies' need to move and exert energy, they are more willing to do what is expected. What children's bodies go through at various stages of development is something we must recon with. Often it's not that they *won't* do what we ask, it's that they *can't*. When we start with this perspective shift, our attitude shifts with it, and all kinds of possibilities come to mind.

Children really do want to be successful. They want to please and get it right—even if it seems that they don't. No child is happy getting it wrong. It's just that when they come to believe they are wrong, they behave accordingly—the self-fulfilling prophesy. That belief becomes an obstacle in their path to success. When we can eliminate as many of the obstacles in their way as we can, their way becomes smoother. This doesn't mean fixing their problems and taking responsibility for what is theirs. No, it means honoring who they are and what they need in order to be comfortable and confident in their own skin.

Sure, there are many times when our children's energy release, both physically and verbally, is anywhere from annoying to ear shattering. But it only becomes rude and disrespectful when they are also combating the messages they get that they are bad, rude, or disrespectful. Parents and teachers who understand the need beneath the behavior instead of blaming the child for that behavior can find ways to vent the underlying need. When that happens, there is no need for children to become resistant and rebellious—or to fall asleep at their desks.

So think about how you can provide “stand-up desks” for your children at home or in your classroom. Can you alter the environments they must be in to support who they are and what they need at this time rather than trying to fit the proverbial square peg into the round hole? It might simply mean being considerate of the fact that when they fidget and can't sit still or are slow and logy in the early a.m. hours when their body clocks are telling them to sleep or are randomly moody due to oncoming hormones, it's not their fault—it's probably their bodies talking. Perhaps it means adjusting schedules,

allowing getting up and down from the dinner table, sitting on a bouncy ball instead of a chair, or sleeping in wrinkle resistant clothes to ease the morning rush. We just need to think outside the box and not fret so much about our children not fitting into the adult world. After all they'll be creating the adult world soon enough.