Foreword
by Roland Rotz, Ph.D.

Sit still and pay attention!

With those words, generations of children were brought up to believe that the best way to learn is by sitting quietly with hands folded, feet on floor and eyes focused forward.

Before the middle of the twentieth century, people relied heavily on newspapers, books and the radio for information and entertainment. Back then, families would gather around the radio to listen to mystery programs like “The Shadow,” along with comedy and news programs. Reading books and listening to radio programs required an active imagination to bring the words to life. We listened, we imagined and we learned!

With the advent of movies and television, we watched and listened as talented writers, directors and actors breathed life into stories. Over the years, we have watched television become rich with vibrant color, bold sound and rapid delivery. Recent innovations have added three-dimensional images and vibrations that mimic motion, thus broadening our multi-sensory experience. Now we can see movies on television. Watching T.V. began to replace reading for pleasure. Indeed, why read when we can watch the movie?

In schools everywhere, children began to lament, “I’m bored!” Over time, reading comprehension scores started to decline while parents responded with greater demands for more interesting and challenging school curriculums. Educators began trying to teach more information in less time to increasingly bored, distracted and restless children.

Unfortunately, our teachers’ efforts to match society’s demand for shorter and shorter sound bites and film clips have not only failed to maintain children’s attention and interest levels, but also failed to engage their imagination. We can no longer assume that children can sit still and pay attention—a behavior that depends on children effectively creating mental images from what they hear when many children struggle to listen and imagine because they have learned
to accept “the director’s cut” as their own. For many children, simply sitting still and listening is not enough to engage their imaginations.

On the contrary, sitting still often engages an alternative visual-motor response that scans for more interesting events in the classroom. Consequently, children appear distracted and restless.

Some believe that the school experience has developed into a passive acceptance of information transfer without question or consideration of an alternative point of view, a concept referred to as mindlessness.

But the news is not all bad. Researchers have begun to discover we can improve our ability to process information and generate novel ideas through movement, which varies and enhances our point of view. Recent research on movement and the brain suggests that small and large motor movements are critical for improved cognitive functions such as focusing, remembering, and critical thinking. Movement also plays an important role in improving emotions like pleasure, joy and contentment.

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By employing our sensory systems as active partners in learning, we can significantly change our own experience, plus that of our children and all of our society. By moving as we listen, watch, touch, smell, and yes, even taste, we can awaken alternatives to the traditional information streams. Children and adults challenged by Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) gain the greatest benefit from these movement-based strategies. Such learning-challenged individuals find the greatest success with “Fidget to Focus” strategies. For example, fidgety students who are allowed to play with Tangles or doodle while listening to an instructor find they are better able to listen and retain information than if expected to keep still.

For over two decades, Tangle Toys have challenged and inspired children and adults to think creatively while imagining something novel and unique. Tangles have turned up in almost every corner of the world, including this therapist’s office.
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My clients often gravitate to the Tangle resting on the coffee table in front of them. While talking, some clients find themselves disconnecting the Tangle segments and reconnecting them based on color or texture patterns. Others seem to use Tangles like worry beads, fingering them with a rhythmic and repetitive motion. No matter how they interact with Tangles, my clients find they provide an important sensory stimulant that helps their ability to focus on the discussion at hand.

And now Tangles are finding their rightful place in the classroom. Inspired by educators' search to locate fidget friendly toys that engage students' brains and imaginations, Tangle Toys have now become Tangle Tools for the classroom.

In this book, Tangle Tools emerge as a creative means for parents and teachers to explore with children everything from numbers and phonics to music and creative writing. Not only do Tangles' shapes, colors, and textures stimulate the brain, they also provide for simple rhythmic movements that do not distract. Finally, there is a tool specifically designed to stimulate brain function in such a way so other sensory processes like listening can take place with ease, inspiration and imagination.

Now, children and adults everywhere can "Sit, Tangle and Pay Attention!"

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