

Break Cards

The purpose of the break card is for the child to communicate the message that he/she needs a break or some down time. The child is taught to use an appropriate communicative mode (visual representation system) rather than having to verbalize his/her needs. Difficulty to verbalize his/her needs may cause the child anxiety and frustration, which may result in the occurrence of challenging behaviors.

1. Break cards should be easily accessible to the child and should be located in a consistent spot in the classroom, such as on the child's communication board, on the child's desk, etc.
2. Designate a break area or appropriate activities for break; establish the amount of time a break will last. Set a timer for a visual cue for the student.
3. Model for the student what a break might look like
4. Practice taking a break with the child
5. When you see a child becoming agitated or frustrated hand the child a break card and instruct the child to take a break.
6. Teach the child that he/she can also show the teacher a card indicating that he/she needs a break
7. "Break card" is not universal – the student may need a picture of a rocking chair to understand that the rocking chair is his/her break.

As the child becomes familiar with the "break" system, he/she may rely less on the visual representation and more on the verbal request for a break.

Here are some examples on how to implement breaks at the elementary and secondary levels.

Example: Joshua is supposed to be writing on a worksheet. Joshua is making noises, rocking his body, whining and being a disruption to other students. After much prompting Joshua is asked if he needs a "break". His break consists of a sensory activity (jumping on the trampoline, taking laps around the school, playing with the medicine ball, wall push-ups, or errand to the office). After this activity Joshua is again redirected to try writing on his worksheet.

Example: Joshua is again becoming frustrated when writing on his worksheet. Joshua has been instructed to use his break card when he is feeling frustrated. Joshua's break card is located on his visual schedule in which he can pull from when he feels that he needs a break.

Joshua does not always recognize when he needs a break. Sometimes Joshua requires prompting from his teacher. "Joshua it looks like you need a break, I'll set the timer for 3 minutes and you can jump on the trampoline."

As Joshua gets to the secondary level, he is better at recognizing when he needs a break and will flash his break card to the teacher. It has already been set up that when Joshua flashes his break card he can take two laps around the school hallways.



How to Teach an Elementary Student to Use a “Break” Card

This activity is to instruct students how to use an appropriate mode of communication to express frustration, anxiety or agitation.

First develop a list of ‘break’ activities specific to your student and specific duration of time.

Place only a specific amount of break activities onto a visual choice board.

Place ‘break’ card in a consistent place that is easily accessible to your student such as; communication book, desk, work area, etc.

When student is becoming frustrated or shows specific signs of agitation, staff may use hand-over-hand assistance to take the ‘break’ card and move to a ‘break’ activity area/choice board.

When student appears to be less frustrated or begins to show specific signs of relaxation and readiness to continue, staff should move student back to previous activity. If the activity they requested a break from has completed, continue on to the next scheduled activity.

This cycle should be taught/role played and practiced in varied environments and within different activities.



How to Teach a Middle School/High School Student to Use a “Break” Card

This activity is to instruct students how to use an appropriate mode of communication to express frustration, anxiety or agitation.

First develop a list of ‘break’ activities specific to your student and duration of time.

Place the specific break activities onto a visual choice board.

Place ‘break’ card in a consistent place that is easily accessible to your student such as; communication book, desk, work area, etc.

When student is becoming frustrated or shows specific signs of emerging agitation, staff should model taking the ‘break’ card and moving it to a ‘break’ activity area/choice board.

When student appears to be less frustrated or begins to show specific signs of relaxation and readiness to reengage in the academic activity, staff should move student back to previous activity. If the activity they requested a break from is completed, continue on to the next scheduled activity.

This cycle should be practiced in varied environments and within different activities.

