Everyone needs to take breaks throughout daily activities to help minimise stress and fatigue and boost participation. For students with Autism, the impact of Autism in the school environment often means that those children expend more energy than many other children; they are certainly likely to experience higher levels of anxiety. Due to their difficulties, primarily with social communication, recess and lunch breaks are often stressful times for children with Autism—certainly not times of energy renewal.

A BREAK IS NOT QUITTING

Breaks throughout the day are important for students with Autism to provide them with periods of time away from stressful demands. Without structured breaks they may not naturally receive a break at all during the school day. Structured breaks can take on a variety of forms including: breaks during an activity; at the child's desk when temporarily ceasing the current activity; a break away from the student's desk in the classroom; also, a break away from the classroom. A break should not be regarded as quitting or avoiding because the student will return to the activity following a break.

TEACHING TO TAKE A BREAK

- The student may not be aware of when they are becoming tired or anxious— an inability to understand their own feelings is common to Autism. An adult may need to observe how the student may be feeling and prompt them to have a break. Eventually the child may recognise the signs and feelings and be able to request a break independently.
- Initially, it may be helpful to schedule set times throughout the day for the child to take breaks, enabling them to experience how beneficial a break away can be. A break card could be placed on their visual schedule.
- Visual supports are a useful way of teaching the break system. A set of cards can be used to indicate how many breaks the child may access in a given period. The number of breaks depends, of course, on the child's support needs.
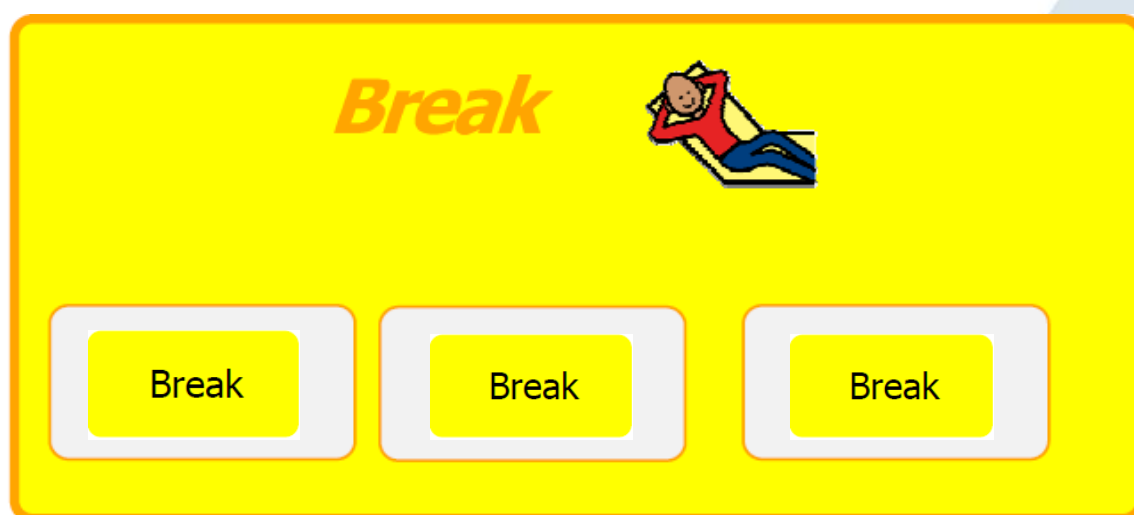
- When the child takes a break, enable them to understand the function of the break, e.g., with words such as "you look tired. A break is a good idea". For the student who needs more support with language a visual could be helpful.
- As a general rule, provide a timed break so that the child knows that they must return to the same activity—to ensure that the break does not become an avoidance strategy. However, if it appears that the child is unsettled or stressed a change of activity would be advisable; present a task that is likely to be undertaken with ease.
- Repeated practice will be necessary for the child to recognise the purpose of a break and how they may feel before a break.
- The ultimate aim is for breaks to be very brief e.g., three minutes for many students. When introducing the break system it is expected we would need to allow for a longer period.
- A social story showing how a break away can make us feel better may help the child to understand the purpose of having breaks.
- Over time, some children with Autism may learn to request a break independently. As this would involve self-monitoring skills—to meet with the prime purpose of the breaks— the skill would probably take time to develop. With the more able child this could entail a conversation about when and how the breaks are to be spent. If the student attempts to request a break appropriately and independently they should be rewarded with praise.
- If they request a break shortly after commencing a task it could be suggested they complete a little more of the work first. This would obviously depend on the adult's perception of how the student is feeling—agitated or otherwise.
- There are many ways that the child can indicate the need for a break. For the student who is concerned about 'standing out' from their peers, a signal can be quite unobtrusive. Taking a particular object, e.g., a small block or a card to the teacher's desk, or placing it on the front of their own desk, could provide a meaningful signal.
- Systems are already in place in some schools enabling not only the child with Autism but other students to take short breaks throughout class time. Hence, the student with Autism is not seen to be given special treatment.

ALL ABOUT THE QUIET SPACE

- When developing break activities, it will be helpful to communicate with the child's parents and to ask the student what helps to calm them.

- Common break activities include time in a quiet corner, looking at books, listening to music (although for some students music may be over-stimulating), going for a walk, deep breathing, getting a drink of water or accessing deep pressure, e.g., squeezing a stress ball.

- The quiet corner may contain beanbags, a tent or could be separated from the rest of the class by the placement of furniture. Adjust the area

according to the child's age and/or available space and class needs.

- Ensure that the break activity is not over-stimulating or too motivating. For example, computer time for some students could increase the desire for the quiet space at the expense of their class activity.
- If a room, away from the class, is available and it could provide a quiet environment, this might be ideal for a student who is sound sensitive.
- To introduce a break system, provide practice sessions when the child is calm. This would involve leaving their desk and moving to the quiet space. This could be helpful for the child, especially if it entails moving into an unfamiliar area.
- Enable the child to gain ownership and meaning of their breaks by offering a visual choice of activities for the time away from their desk.
- Supporting students with Autism—meeting their needs to takes breaks in meaningful ways—can make a very positive difference to their ability to participate throughout the school day.
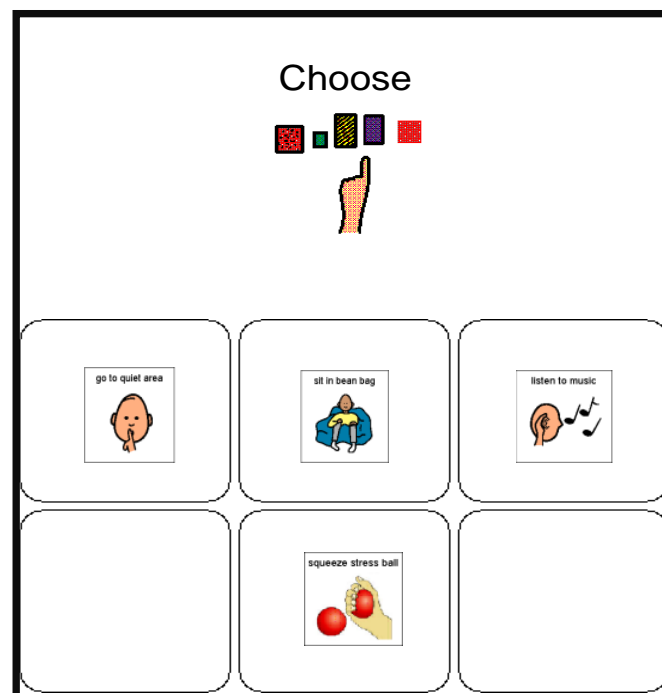
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