Teaching a Request for a Break

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early childhood

What Is It?

Teaching a child to request a break is an individualized strategy that provides the child with an important skill: to safely and calmly communicate their need to get out of a task or activity. Adults use prompting, modeling, and reinforcement to teach the skill.

When to Use It

- When a child uses challenging behaviors to end a task or activity

- During classroom activities where an adult can deliver natural teaching opportunities and honor the child's request for a break

	Steps to Implementation / How to Do It
☐	1. Screen activities and routines for developmental, age, and cultural appropriateness, and modify if needed.
☐	2. Identify the function of the challenging behavior. If the function is to end a task or activity, consider teaching the child how to appropriately request a break.
☐	3. Select the method of communication that is appropriate for the child to use (i.e., verbally requesting, pointing to a symbol, handing a picture communication card to an adult, gesturing). This response should already be a part of the child's skill repertoire and relatively easy for them to do. For example, if a child can easily use one-word phrases to request things, ensure that you only require the child to say "break" or touch a visual break icon, rather than requiring them to say, "I want a break".
☐	4. Remind the child they can ask for a break and model the request before presenting the task or activity that tends to trigger the challenging behavior.
☐	5. Observe the child carefully during these tasks and activities. Prompt the child to ask for a break before the challenging behavior occurs. This can happen in one of two ways: -If the child tends to get frustrated after a certain period of time, observe for the longest period of time the child engages in the activity before a challenging behavior occurs. This is known as the critical time period. Adults can model, provide explicit instruction, or use prompting strategies to teach the child to appropriately request a break before challenging behavior occurs. -If there are no patterns in how long the child engages in an activity, look for signs of frustration (expression changes, sighing, looking away, using materials in ways other than intended, making noises or whining, etc.). When you see the beginning signs of frustration, remind the child they can request a break.

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☐	6. Teach the child how to take a break (i.e., length of the break, available activities/locations for the break) and the expectations for returning to the activity or task after a break.
☐	7. Immediately provide the child with a break after the child correctly requests one (i.e., provide the break regardless of where the class is in the activity).
☐	8. Reduce prompting incrementally only after the child is appropriately requesting breaks over several opportunities.
☐	9. Limit the number of breaks or promote the child's persistence in the activity once the child is consistently and independently requesting breaks.

Example

Amira frequently runs around the room during snack time. The early learning behavior team ensures the snack time activity and expectations are developmentally and culturally appropriate. They then conduct a functional behavior assessment and determine that Amira wanders around the classroom to escape sitting for long periods during snack. The team decides to teach Amira to request a break by tapping a break icon on her AAC device that says "Break." They select this response because Amira can already easily request other preferred items using her AAC device.

After collecting baseline data, the team determines that Amira can stay engaged in the snack time routine for 3 minutes before demonstrating the challenging behavior. Ms. Wooten uses a prompting strategy to teach her. After 2 minutes and 30 seconds, Ms. Wooten says, "When you need to take a break, say 'break,'" and guides Amira's hand to tap the break icon on her device. When Amira taps the break icon, Ms. Wooten immediately provides her with the break.

Over the next few opportunities, Ms. Wooten slowly fades her prompts -- instead of physically prompting, she points to the break icon. When Amira taps the break icon, Ms. Wooten immediately reinforces her by saying, "Yes, Amira. You can sit in the bean bag for three minutes." Eventually, as Amira becomes more independent requesting a break, Ms. Wooten fades out all prompts. If Amira gets out of her seat without requesting a break, Ms. Wooten guides Amira back to the snack table without saying anything. If wandering continues to occur while fading the prompts, Ms. Wooten increases the level of prompting that is necessary to support Amira to request a break.

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How to Increase Effectiveness

- The function of the behavior must be known. That is, teach a child to request a break when the function of the behavior is to end a task or activity. Importantly, do not teach a child to request a break if the function of the challenging behavior is attention.

- If the challenging behavior occurs during teaching, acknowledge the child's emotions or frustration, and wait until the challenging behavior stops before beginning another opportunity to ask for a break. The time between the challenging behavior and the opportunity to request a break must be long enough so the child does not begin to associate the challenging behavior with gaining access to a break. For some students it may be 20 seconds, for others it may be a few minutes.

- Minimize the likelihood the challenging behavior will occur prior to the request for a break. You can do this by ensuring the selected activity is developmentally and culturally appropriate.

- Teach this strategy in combination with antecedent interventions (e.g., visual supports) that prevent challenging behavior from occurring.

- When a child is first learning to ask for a break, honor their request immediately and consistently *every time*.

- If the child has difficulty returning from the break:
    - Determine if the child has the skills to complete the task. Often, children do not have the prerequisite skills to do the activity that is being asked of them. If this is the case, modify the next activity to an appropriate level for the child. Additionally, provide more support or prompting so the child can engage in the expected activity.

    - Choose break activities that are naturally terminating (e.g., a short snack, a drink of water, looking through a picture book). Once the break naturally ends, it is easier for the child to transition back into the activity.

    - The child may require additional reinforcement for leaving the break activity. This reinforcer should only be available when the child returns from the break. For example, if the child leaves a bean bag after a 3-minute break and transitions back to the activity without screaming, the child receives her favorite stuffed animal.

- Once the child requests and returns from a break without challenging behaviors, it is time to limit the number of breaks the child may take. This is done by making completion of the task more reinforcing than taking a break. For example, if the child stays at the table for the duration of circle time, they can have access to a short, preferred video clip instead of accessing the bean bag for a 3-minute break.

ESCAPE

TEACHING STRATEGY

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Resources

Dunlap, G., & Duda, M. (2004). Using functional communication training to replace challenging behavior.

Geiger, K. B., Carr, J. E., & Leblanc, L. A. (2010). Function-based treatments for escape-maintained problem behavior: A treatment-selection model for practicing behavior analysts. *Behavior Analysis in Practice, 3*(1), 22–32.