



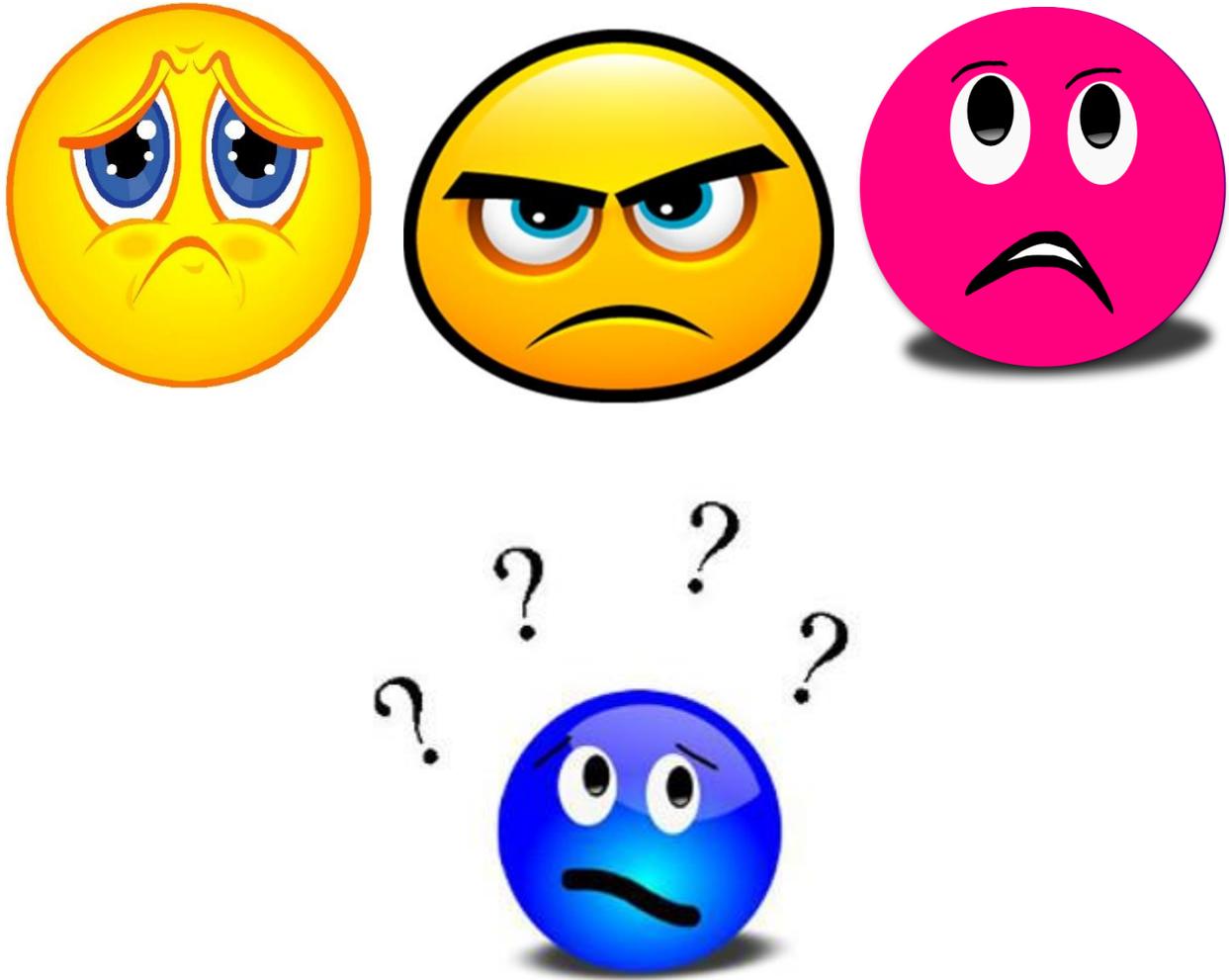
WHAT ARE BREAK CARDS AND HOW DO I USE THEM?

Amelia McClelland's practical product summer 2016

Superheroes social skills training, Rethink Autism internet interventions, parent training, EBP classroom training, functional behavior assessment: An autism spectrum disorder, evidence based (EBP) training track for school psychologists

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Sad? Angry? Overwhelmed?
Confused?

Maybe it's time to take a break!

A quick guide to using break cards with your
child.

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What are break cards and why should I use them?

Break cards are a tool to help when a child becomes overwhelmed with a situation. Breaks provide an opportunity for the child to take a moment to calm down. Break cards can help children remain calm and avoid outbursts or anxiety. By taking a moment to collect themselves, do something to distract themselves, or relax (e.g., deep breathing, taking a walk, talking it out with an adult) children can return to a stressful situation without incident. Being able to take a break when they are overwhelmed, angry, or overstimulated allows children to learn relaxation techniques and appropriate ways to handle stressful or uncomfortable situations.

Using physical cards ensures that the child is doing something productive with their break and not just using it as an escape tool. The cards also provide coping skills, suggestions, and steps for ways to calm down. This can be especially helpful to children who do not have many coping skills or are unable to independently use them when upset. In a classroom setting the break cards can be helpful because they allow the child to choose an appropriate alternative behavior without calling too much attention to themselves.

Break cards can be general or personalized for a specific child. The idea is to provide appropriate alternatives and relaxation techniques. By giving the child a variety of options to choose from it allows them some autonomy in their decisions. Allowing them to choose, as opposed to telling them what they need to do, not only teaches them to make appropriate decisions, it also provides them with an opportunity to learn and try a variety of techniques to find the ones that work best for them. Often children have things that are specifically useful for calming themselves down. These would be good things to add to a more personalized set of break cards. If making a general set for a classroom or an entire household, start with basic relaxation techniques and coping skills as the foundation. Then add more as the classroom or family decides on other items that might be useful to put into the break card pack. It is important to remember that break cards should be created prior to their use. Trying to brainstorm ideas of ways to calm down while upset, anxious, or overwhelmed is unproductive and defeats the purpose of the break cards.

The next few sections will help you make, use, and understand break cards in the home and classroom settings.

How to implement break cards at home:

When starting a break card system in a home setting make sure the whole family is aware of the procedures surrounding break cards. It can be helpful to have a family meeting where these procedures are discussed in an open and nonjudgmental way. When you are creating the physical break cards it is important to get the child's input on what things they want to do for a break. By allowing them some say in the decision making process, the child may develop "buy in" for the break cards.

Once the activities are chosen and the cards are made, make sure you put the cards in an easily accessible place. This might mean having multiple sets for different locations (e.g., the car, the living room, their bedroom). Then practice the break card procedures as a family. Make sure this is done during a time when everyone is calm and able to participate fully. When practicing it can be helpful to come up with scenarios where break cards might be needed (e.g., family outings, fighting with a sibling, difficult routines, etc.). It can also be helpful if parents or other family members practice using the break cards, too. This will help normalize the tool and show children it is ok to need help calming down. During the practice portion it can be helpful to try all the coping skills together so the child has an idea of how each one works when they actually need them. Also make sure that the child knows that the break cards are not a way to get out of doing something, but rather, a way to choose an appropriate coping skill and work through a tough situation. For more information about break cards being used as an escape go to the section titled: *Cautions and Considerations When Using Break Cards*.

How to implement break cards in a classroom:

In a school setting, break cards can be used as an individualized intervention for a specific student or as a general classroom tool. Either way it is important to get the student or students who will be using the cards to help you create them. Giving them some say in what activities are available during their break helps to increase "buy in" and gives them a sense of control. Often when kids are asked to "calm down" or "take a break" it is the adult who is telling them what to do and they can be resistant. Whereas, when they have a hand in creating the cards, it feels more like their decision and are thus more likely to follow through with using them.

Once the cards are created it is important to make sure the procedures on how and when it is appropriate to use the break cards are clearly defined. Sometimes it is important to set a limit on how many break cards a child gets (e.g., one per class period, 3 a day, etc.). This all depends on the individual child. Having a set number they can use and/or procedures surrounding when it is appropriate to use a card and when it is not helps to ensure that the cards are being used appropriately and not as a means of escaping (see the section: *Cautions and Considerations When Using Break Cards* for more information regarding escape behaviors). The cards should be a tool to help increase the child's coping skills and maximize the amount of time they can actively participate.

Once the procedures for how to request a break and when it is appropriate to do so are determined, the next step is to practice them. This is especially important for younger children and those who may function at a lower level. As for older kids, setting clear expectations and answering questions might be enough for them to use the cards appropriately. Practicing gives the child the opportunity to see the appropriate way to ask for a break and allows the adults to provide feedback and teach them how to do the skills on each card.

Break cards often include things like using a calm down object (e.g., stress ball, sparkle bottle, favorite toy) or reading a book. If this is the case, make sure the options on the cards are available to the child before they get the break cards. It can be a good idea to have a clam down bag or box to keep things like stress balls and small toys in for breaks. If the cards are for an individual child, having them create their own individual “calm down bag” can be an easy way to get them involved and make sure they have all the resources needed for each card.

In a classroom it can be hard to take a break at one’s desk without the other kids wondering why they are reading or playing with something while they are working. Therefore, having a designated place to take the break is helpful. This can be a corner of the room, another room (e.g., school psychologists office, counselor’s office, library), or in the hallway depending on what resources are available. If the break cards are being used as a whole class then creating a “break spot” or designated area for taking a break is a good idea. If this is the case, it will also be important that the break card procedures cover how many people can be on a break at the same time and how long the break can be. Having a timer or a specific number of break card sets can help facilitate these procedures.

Cautions and considerations when using break cards:

Although break cards can be a very useful tool there are some important things to take into account. When deciding whether or not to use break cards, it is important to determine beforehand in which situations the child will most likely be using them and the function and goal that these break cards will have for the child. Ideally, the cards are a tool to help them learn coping skills and to allow them to calm down before trying to problem-solve or join an activity. Break cards can, however, become a way for kids to escape expectations that are being put on them. If this happens the break cards are no longer serving their original purpose.

At this point it is important to set a limit of how many break cards the child gets or when they can use them in order to counteract the escape behaviors. *It is important to remember that the child needs to follow through with any demands or requests that they were given prior to the use of the break cards.* For example, if a child is asked to clean up their room and they become overwhelmed because they were playing a game they really liked. This might be a good time to use the break cards to help them calm down before going back to the task of cleaning their room. They should not, however, be allowed to take a break INSTEAD of cleaning their room. That would be allowing the child to escape demands that are being placed on them as opposed to learning coping skills. In school this might mean making sure that after using the break cards, the child returns to the assignment that was overwhelming them prior to the break, as opposed to getting out of the assignment all together.

Break cards are not always appropriate for every child. It is important to make sure you understand the function of, or reason for, the behaviors the child is exhibiting and how the break cards will effect that behavior. It may be helpful to do a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) to determine the function of the behaviors. If the behavior is escape maintained, meaning that they are doing the behavior to escape expectations, tasks, or people, then break cards are not the right intervention. The following is an example of an ABC chart used in a FBA. The A stands for antecedents. This means anything that happened before the behavior occurred (e.g., people present, demands or tasks, location, noise level, activity). The B stands for behaviors that are seen after the antecedents. The C stands for consequences. This includes any reactions to the behaviors from anyone present, punishments or rewards given, what is said to the child, and whether or not they have to complete any tasks given. To use this chart, fill in each section (i.e., ABC) whenever your child exhibits the inappropriate behavior you wish to use break cards to help with. If you notice that their behaviors are allowing them to escape tasks then break cards are not the best choice.

ABC Data Tracking Sheet					
Date	Time/Class period	Antecedents (What happened before the behavior?)	Behavior (Describe what behaviors are being seen)	Consequences (What happened in result of the behavior?)	Possible function of the behavior (Escape, Attention, Sensory, etc.)
08/16/16	Math class (AM)	Asked to complete a math worksheet	Yelling, tearing the paper, throwing items at teacher	Teacher works one-on-one with the student to complete the assignment	Attention (one-on-one help) Too difficult of assignment
08/16/16	3pm After getting home from school	Father asks to clean up room	Tantrum, hitting self and others, slamming doors, screaming	Family negotiates with child and eventually says they can do it tomorrow	Escape (child did not have to clean their room.) *** NOT a good time to use break cards. They could become a means of escape. ***

Suggestions for creating your own break cards:

When making the break cards, personalizing them can be very beneficial. Although having basic coping skills is a key element of break cards, adding a personal touch increases the likelihood that the child will use the cards. This can be anything from putting pictures of the child doing the activities next to their description to having the child help come up with ideas and names for the

different cards. You can even have older kids create their own break cards. Some basic coping skills that are helpful to put in your break card set include:

- Relaxation techniques (e.g., deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation)
- Meditation
- Using a calming object (e.g., stress ball, sparkle bottle)
- Talking to an adult about how you are feeling
- Stretching
- Count to ten
- Drawing
- Reading

The following is an example set of break cards. Feel free to print them out and use these cards or use them as guide when you create your own.

Thanks for taking a break!

While on your break here are a few options for activities that you can do. Once you pick one let an adult know what you chose and if you need help getting supplies. Breaks are usually 1-5 minutes. An adult can help you know when your time is up. If you want a warning, let them know. If you think of something else that might help you calm down on a break, talk to an adult and see if you can add it to this list of break options.

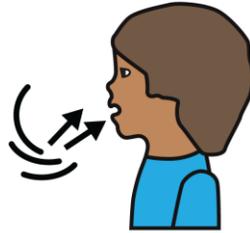
Enjoy your break!

DEEP BREATHING

Circle Breathing:

Breathe in for 4 counts then out for 4 counts, then repeat as many times as needed. Remember to count at a one second per number pace and slow your breathing to match (ex. Breathe in for 1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippi, 3 Mississippi, 4 Mississippi and out for 1 Mississippi...)

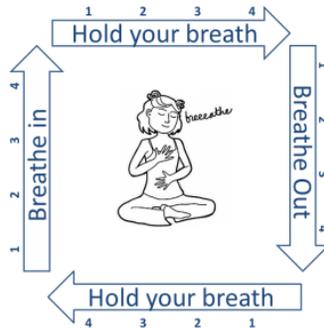
Take deep breath



DEEP BREATHING

Square Breathing:

Breathe in for 4 counts. Then hold it for 4 counts. Then breathe out for 4 counts and hold it for another 4 counts. Repeat as needed. Remember to count at a one second per number pace and slow your breathing to match (ex. Breathe in for 1 Mississippi, 2 Mississippi, 3 Mississippi, 4 Mississippi and hold for 1 Mississippi...)



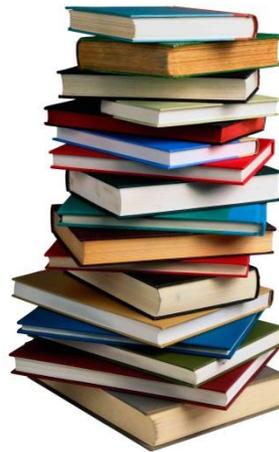
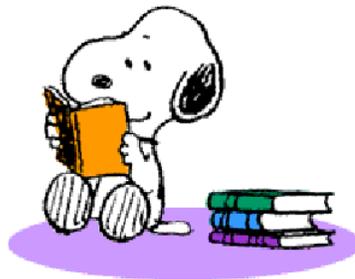
USE A “CALM DOWN” OBJECT

Often when we are upset, squeezing a stress ball or playing with something soothing can help to calm us down. Try it! Calm down objects can be anything from sparkle bottles and stuffed animals to stress balls and playdough.



READ A BOOK

Reading a book can be very calming. Try reading something you enjoy. Even looking at picture books can be calming, too.



DRAW OR COLOR

Drawing can be fun and relaxing. Try using markers, crayons, pencils, or paint to express how you are feeling. Sometimes it is easier to draw our emotions than it is to talk about them. Also art can be really fun.



MEDITATE

Meditating can be really helpful in calming down. Find a comfortable position lying down or sitting in a chair and focus on your breathing. Remember when thoughts other than breathing come into your mind just acknowledge them and bring your mind back to your breathing. Don't judge your thoughts just let them happen.



PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

Find a chair or spot on the floor and concentrate on your body. Start with your head and scrunch up your face to tense your muscles for a few seconds then relax away the stress. Move to your arms then your shoulders, and finish with your legs, tensing your muscles and then relaxing before moving on.



TALK IT OUT

Sometimes it helps to talk about your frustration and other feelings with someone. Ask an adult to “talk it out” by using power talk or just have them help you work out your feelings.



Power Talk:

I feel _____

Because _____

I need to _____.

GET YOUR WIGGLES OUT

All of us get wiggly sometimes. It is ok to need to get your wiggles out. You can do jumping jacks, pushups, dance around, or do a shake out. A shake out is where you shake each hand and each foot ten times each, then nine times, and eight and so on until you only do one shake for each.



GO OUTSIDE

Ask an adult to go with you to the playground or your backyard to run around or swing. Just being outside can help you to calm down or just get your wiggles out. Remember that this is not always an option so ask and be a flexible thinker if it isn't possible.



TAKE A WALK

Exercise and movement can make us feel better. Ask an adult if you can walk around to cool off. This can be around your house, your neighborhood, or even your room. Remember to ask an adult before you choose this option and if they say it isn't possible, be a flexible thinker and choose something different.



VISUALIZATION

Find a comfy spot on the floor or the chair. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Start to imagine a place that makes you feel calm and relaxed. This could be the beach, the forest, some other place you find comforting (e.g., home, room, grandma's house, park, etc.). Try to imagine all the details (e.g., what it looks like, feels like, and smells like).



