

Break Card

A unique, distinctive icon for those using visual communication strategies

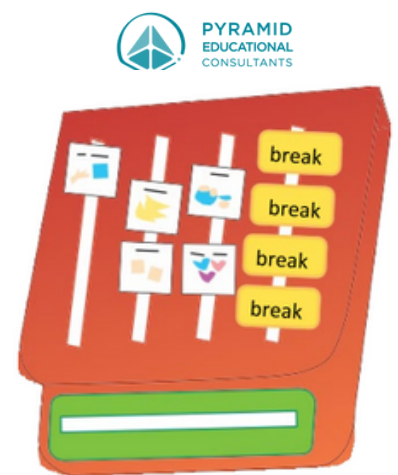


Requesting “break”

Everyone takes breaks. We take breaks to escape from activities that involve high demands or that are boring. A break is different than ‘quitting’ because we know we will return to the activity after a break (like a holiday). Adults have formal and informal breaks at work. School pupils have playtime, while older students have breaks between classes or at lunch. Students with complex communication needs also need to take breaks. If they don’t have a calm, effective strategy for letting us know they need a break, often they engage in inappropriate behaviours as a way of escaping from a task.

Teaching a student to use a “break” card begins only if we know when a break is wanted. Typically, lessons that are boring, demanding, or too difficult are those from which our students want a break. In addition, when reinforcement rates drop too low, students want breaks. Once you have identified these situations, you can begin teaching. Use the 2-Person Prompting Procedure as described in The Picture Exchange Communication System Training Manual, 2nd Edition (Frost & Bondy, 2002) to teach as follows:

- The Communication Partner places a demand on the learner. Just before, or as soon as the learner engages in contextually inappropriate behaviour, a second person will prompt the learner to exchange the break card. The Communication Partner will then help the learner go to the break area, set a timer for two to three minutes and then leave the learner in this demand-free situation. Once the timer rings, the learner must return to the same activity. The Learner may want another break, so repeat the same process.
- Once the student independently asks for breaks, provide him with a visual strategy for predicting how many breaks he can have within an activity or across a specified time period (just as we know how many holiday days we have during the year). For example, give the student several “break” cards. Begin by giving him more cards than he typically uses during the specified time period. As he exchanges a “break” card, the communicative partner does not give him that card back.



Over time, you may want to gradually reduce the number of breaks available for each work period but be sure not to eliminate the opportunity! It is appropriate for your student to take a break, on average, every two to three hours.

Remember, if the student takes or wants too many breaks, you should assess the reinforcement available to him within the lesson and whether he is aware of the potential reinforcer. For information on creating and using powerful reinforcement systems, see The Pyramid Approach to Education, 2nd Edition (Bondy, 2011) For more detailed information on teaching “break,” refer to pages 253 to 257 of The PECS Training Manual, 3rd Edition (Frost & Bondy, 2023).