



FACT SHEET | U of M LEND Program

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS SERIES

Request for a Break

What is request a break?

- A request for a break is a communicative intervention in which the child completes a portion of an activity and then requests a break. Following the break, the child returns to the activity.

Who would benefit from being taught a request a break response?

- Children whose behavior is escape-motivated would benefit from being taught to request a break. Consider a young boy who participates in a structure activity for a brief amount of time and then begins to engage in aggressive behaviors toward his peers when he wishes to leave the activity. Another child at a center or circle time may scream when they have lost interest in the lesson. These children can be taught to request a break using a communicative strategy involving spoken, gestural, and/or graphic symbols.

How do you teach a request for a break?

- The first step is to identify through a functional behavior assessment how long the child can stay engaged with a particular activity or task before engaging in the challenging behavior. This will assist the interventionist to determine when the break should be offered to proactively address the challenging behavior. In other words, you want to teach the request a break strategy before the challenging behavior occurs and not during an episode of challenging behavior.
- To teach this strategy, the interventionist should approach the child while they are still engaged in the activity and ask *Want to take a break?* or approach the child with a sign for break or a graphic symbol. The break should provide a choice of preferred activities for the child. This will provide negative reinforcement (escape from the activity or task) as well as positive reinforcement

(access to preferred activities). The break should last slightly longer than the work period.

- Returning to the activity can be difficult for many children who may resist leaving a preferred activity to return to a nonpreferred activity or task. Here are some suggestions that may help —
 - » Select reinforcers that are available during break time that are consumed or naturally dissipate. Once the reinforcer is gone, it is more of a natural consequence and an easier transition for the child to return to the activity or task. Some examples might be a small number of snack items such as goldfish crackers or pretzels or a small amount of bubble solution that is gone within a few trials of blowing bubbles. The key is to find a reinforcer that is motivating to the student.
 - » When the child does comply and return to the activity or task, a reinforcer should be delivered that

is available only when they return without challenging behavior. This reinforcer should not be available at any other time and should be highly preferred by the student.

- When the child has mastered the request a break routine without engaging in challenging behavior, the interventionist can begin to teach the child to initiate requesting a break independently. The child can raise their hand, verbally ask, use sign or use a graphic symbol to communicate their need to have a break. At first, the interventionist may need to prompt the student to request a break before the challenging behavior occurs. With a graphic symbol, this can be accomplished by placing the symbol in front of the child just prior to release. Allow several seconds for the child to touch the symbol. If he/she does not, deliver the least intrusive prompt that results in him/her quickly touching the symbol. As soon as the symbol is touched, release the child to his/her break. The goal is to fade these prompts to develop the child's ability to self-regulate and request a break independently.
- It is important for the interventionist to avoid prompting the child to perform the request for a break response following the occurrence of the challenging behavior. This could lead to the chaining of the communicative replacement to the challenging behavior. For example, consider this sequence of events: (1) child throws his materials to the floor, (2) teacher prompts the child to produce request a break response, (3) teacher releases child to a break. It is likely that the child will begin to chain the behaviors each time the child engages in this behavior (e.g., throw materials + touch symbol) as a request for a break. Another undesirable possibility is that the child will learn to first engage in throwing

materials and then, if not immediately reinforced, produce the desired request a break response of touching the Break symbol. What do you do if the child engages in challenging behavior before they have requested a break?

- Do not release the child to a break. Wait until the challenging behavior has subsided prior to providing another opportunity to produce a request for a break (the length of time the interventionist waits is determined on an individual basis). A key consideration is that the time between the challenging behavior and the opportunity to request a break must be long enough so that the child does not associate their challenging behavior with the break.

How do I begin to increase the child's time of participation in the desired activity or task?

- Once the child consistently requests a break independently and returns to the activity without engaging in challenging behavior, the interventionist can teach the child to increase their time of participation in the target activity or task. This may be accomplished by altering the consequences associated with a break symbol and increasing reinforcement for continued participation in the activity or task. The goal of this modification is to make the reinforcement value much greater if the child decides to persevere in the activity rather than take a break. A request to take a break will still be honored but the reinforcement will be less than if they stay with the activity for a prespecified amount of time or complete a prespecified amount of a task. The reinforcement offered for staying with the activity has to be highly motivating for the student and they should only have access to it if they continue with the activity for the specified amount of time.

- To begin this, the interventionist should approach the child and explain that a highly preferred reinforcer will be available contingent upon the completion of a prespecified task or staying with an activity for a prespecified amount of time. Using a timer will help define the time for the child and it is important to keep the tasks concrete and developmentally appropriate so that they are easily accomplished by the child. The interventionist should explain that it is okay to take a break but the negotiated reinforcer will not be available if the break is taken. If the child requests a break, honor it but make sure that few reinforcers are available during break time. If instances of challenging behavior occur, it is important not to reinforce it by allowing easy escape.

This Fact Sheet of the Challenging Behaviors Series has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to children with autism spectrum disorders in their home and classroom. This Fact Sheet was originally titled Positive Approaches to Young Children who Engage in Challenging Behavior and was published by the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota. Funding provided via IDEA Part B, sec. 619, Preschool, by a grant to the University of Minnesota from the Minnesota Department of Education. Co-authored by Joe Reichle, Ph.D., Carol Davis, Ph.D., Shelley Neilsen, Ph.D., and Lillian Duran. These materials have been further edited by Joe Reichle, Ph.D. and LeAnne Johnson Ph.D. for use by the University of Minnesota LEND Program (Leadership Training and Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities). The information contained does not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education or the Minnesota Department of Education.

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