

## ***Brain Breaks Collection for self-regulation in the inclusive classroom***

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### ***Rationale:***

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Self-regulation is one of the most important skills for academic and social success for students. According to the recent article on Dr. Stuart Shanker's work on self-regulation in the BC Ministry of Education magazine<sup>1</sup>, numerous meta-studies indicate that self-regulation is more important than IQ in predicting ability to do well in school, make healthy friendships and work towards personal goals. Brain-based learning research by Bender<sup>2</sup>, Shanker and others suggest that incorporating frequent physical activity into learning supports cognitive processing, appropriate levels of arousal, self-regulation, neuronal activity necessary for literacy and attention and many other processes and skills that our students need.

While frequent physical activity is helpful for all students, it is a common thread through the strategies identified for many special needs that incorporating physical activity is particularly useful for specific exceptionalities. A repertoire of "brainbreak" activities that can be introduced during learning activities to help students energise, calm, or refocus can be a valuable tool for any teacher in teaching self regulation, regardless of the special needs in the class. At the same time, they can provide an 'invisible' strategy for supporting exceptional students who benefit most from them. Teaching students strategies that they can use themselves to energise, calm or refocus, without requiring whole class participation supports students in developing further skill in self-regulation, empowerment and strategies for managing their exceptionality.

In "The Kinaesthetic Classroom"<sup>3</sup> a chapter is devoted to using movement to prepare and support the brain. The authors identify the five key times for using physical activities to support brain function as when you are:

- Introducing new material
- Making transitions
- When students are restless
- Before tests
- When reviewing

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<sup>1</sup> "The Self-Regulating Student", learn, Issue 2, Summer-Fall 2012

<sup>2</sup> Bender, W. (2008) Differentiating instruction for students with learning disabilities: Best teaching practices for general and special educators. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin and council for Exceptional Children (cited in "40 Active Learning Strategies for the Inclusive Classroom", Schwartz Green & Casale-Giannola, Corwin Publishers, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> "The Kinaesthetic Classroom: Teaching and Learning through Movement" Mike Kuczala and Traci Lengel, Corwin Publishers, 2010"

The focus of brainbreak activities is to stimulate the vestibular system through spinning, balancing and jumping activities or to improve cross-hemispheric activity, including visual tracking through activities that cross the mid-line of the body.

For these reasons, we have assembled a collection of “brainbreaks” in two categories: those that are teacher-led, whole class activities and those that are to be used when needed by individual students. As always, one size will never fit all. Even within exceptionalities, physical activities may be described as supportive and counter-indicated. In cases of autism, for example, where there is hypersensitivity to movement, the student may be overwhelmed by a whole-class activity. On the other hand, it is often recommended that learning activities incorporate frequent physical movement activities for the student in the autism spectrum. “Know your students” is the underlying requirement for these and all teaching strategies.

Each is organised by:

- Category: Teacher-led whole class/Individual student as needed
- Description of Activity
- Applications/when to use
- Considerations

It could be easiest to write your favourite Brain Breaks on popsicle sticks or index cards to keep them accessible in your classroom. The more you do the Brain Break activities, the more students become independent with them. When students know the activities by heart, you can then select students to draw from the pile and lead that day’s Brain Break.

### *Teacher-led*

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1.

#### **Deer in the Headlights**

Directions: Agree on a signal and an object in the classroom of a certain colour to be used throughout the day/class. When the signal is given, every student turns and stares at the object. Time how long it takes for everyone to be looking at the object and aim to reduce the time.

Application: Grades K-1 Sequencing, balance, following directions, general coordination, self-control. Helps with visual acuity, focus.

Considerations: Ensure the signal is equally accessible to all students.

Source: <http://www.emc.cmich.edu/BrainBreaks/2005/TOC.htm>

2.

#### **Toe-tap 1-3-2**

Directions: Stand facing a partner. Touch opposite feet (e.g. right feet) once. Switch feet (e.g. left feet) and touch 3 times. Switch feet (e.g. back to right feet) and touch twice. Repeat. Speed up as able.

Application: All grades. To provide cross-body coordination, stimulate both hemispheres, stimulate vestibular system, provide a break from mental activity, activate balance, develop self-control.

Considerations: For students with social control issues, choose partners carefully and explicitly teach control of how hard to touch; for students with balance issues ensure they hold onto a desk or chair.

Source: David Sladkey, practising teacher

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0uiA6UITDw>

3.

### **The waiter**

Directions: lay a sheet of paper on the top of your right hand and imagine yourself carrying a tray of dishes. Balancing the sheet on your hand, bring it, from above your shoulder, down between your right arm and waist and back to its original position in a spiral motion.

Application: Upper primary and up. Develop balance, general coordination and self-control. Provide a break from mental activity.

Considerations: For students with balance and coordination issues, try the exercise with a smaller/heavier object.

Source: Randy Smith

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4HLjT1xw3M&feature=player\\_embedded#!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4HLjT1xw3M&feature=player_embedded#!)

4.

### **Hand Clapping Game “Bim-Bum”**

Directions: Bim = hands together; Bum = clap fingers; Bidy = clap hands on laps

Find the tutorial for the song online @

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=hz0dSnaTs2g&feature=endscreen>

Application: All grades. Develop sense of rhythm and focus, provides a physical and musical pause for the brain. Stimulate the mind and body, increase oxygen flow.

Considerations: The sequence should be taught by small sections. Reduce or augment the speed to adjust the level of difficulty.

Sources: various sources

5.

### **Four Corners**

Directions: Label each corner with a number 1, 2, 3, or 4. Have one person be “it.” This person sits blindfolded in the middle of the classroom. The rest of the class picks one of the corners to stand in. The “it” person says a number and the people in that corner are out.

People move to new corners and “it” keeps saying numbers until there is just 1 person left.

Application: Grades 2-7 Can use North, South, East, and West instead of numbers. Help students with following direction, provide a break from mental activity.

Considerations: Make accommodations for students with physical challenges. Consider placing a visual of the number in each corner.

Source: I Want to Teach Forever (<http://www.teachforever.com/2010/04/teachers-share-their-best-brain-breaks.html>)

6.

### **Would You Rather**

Directions: The teacher asks a question, usually silly, and designates a spot in the room for each option (for example, “Would you rather be a big foot or be a loch ness monster? Big

foot stands by the door, Loch Ness stands by the windows”). Have students volunteer to explain their choice.

Application: All grade levels. Help with creative and critical thinking, decision making and reasoning.

Considerations: Allow additional time for students who may need longer to process their decision. Consider placing a visual in each designated spot (for example, place a picture of Bigfoot in one spot and a picture of a Lochness monster in the other spot)

Source: Minds in Bloom: Strategies and Activities to Promote Creative and Critical Thinking (<http://www.minds-in-bloom.com/2012/04/20-three-minute-brain-breaks.html>)

7.

### **Touch the Poles**

Directions: Students go outside to run around the basketball court and “touch the poles” that are the basketball hoops. It is basically like running around the blacktop to get out some energy and wake the kids up if needed. Some kids do one touch, some do two or three (rounds). The kids decide what they feel they need.

Application: All grade levels. Get kids up, moving helps when students are getting antsy.

Considerations: Students with a physical disability or students that are susceptible to flee may need to be watched during this. Students with visual impairments may also have difficulties, adjust accordingly.

Source: Previous Sponsor Teacher

8.

### **Stand up, stretch it out**

Directions: Get all students to stand up and stretch high, stretch low, side to side, run on the spot for count to twenty, get a few students to say what to do, then sit down and back to lesson.

Applications: All grades. Get students up and out of their seats, help with daily physical activity.

Considerations: Students with a physical disability will have to have an adjusted task.

Source: Various sources

9.

### **Vocabulary Hot Potato**

Directions: You will need a bean bag. Get the students to sit on or stand by their desks. The bean bag will be randomly given to one of the students. That student will then be given one word from the spelling list or a recent lesson. The student with the bean bag will state the first letter of the word. Then that child will gently pass the bean bag to another child who will add the next letter to the preceding one. This will continue until the word is spelled correctly. Make sure students are passing to each student.

Application: Grades 2 or up, could alter for younger grades. Helps students with memory, uses multiple learning styles to repeat vocabulary.

Considerations: If there are students with visual impairments, hearing impairments, physical disability, speech problems or a lower development (spelling etc) adjust accordingly.

Source: <http://www.emc.cmich.edu/BrainBreaks/TOC.htm>

10.

### **Are You For Real?**

Directions: Assign everyone in the room an unfamiliar word (with a definition on the card). The student will give two definitions, one correct and one incorrect. The other students must determine which one is correct. This can be used with unfamiliar words from any curriculum.

Application: Grade 4/5 and up. Encourage critical thinking and inquiry into further knowledge.

Considerations: Students with Hearing impairments, Visual Impairments or speech impairments may need assistance in this activity.

Source: <http://www.emc.cmich.edu/BrainBreaks/2005/TOC.htm>

11.

### **Chinese Jump Rope**

Directions: Students get into groups of 3 and grab one Chinese jump rope. Two students stand with the jump rope wrapped around their legs. The third student will jump over and in the rope in certain patterns, until they complete the sequence. Common sequences are American, Skinny American, Chinese, Diamonds, Sail Boat

Application: Grades 1-12. Get the blood flowing. Stimulate the mind.

Considerations: The lower the jump rope, the easier the difficulty; the higher the jump rope, the higher the difficulty. Can teach the different patterns in PE first and then introduce in the classroom so it is quick and easy.

Source: Action Schools BC

12.

### **Mirror Image**

Directions: Students get in partners. They face one another and mimic everything that their partner does for 1 minute. Partners then switch and follow the other partner for 1 minute. Partners can do things like stand on one foot, touch opposite feet, lean forward, lean backward, jump, crouch, hop.

Applications: Grades 1-12. Works on balance, and coordination. Gets the blood flowing.

Considerations: Pair students of equal abilities if it is a cause for concern. Increase or decrease time depending on how much stimulation the students need.

Source: Action Schools BC

13.

### **Figure Eight Flagging**

Directions: Using long, brightly coloured streamers on a thin dowel rod, students draw figure eights moving in a cross-body motion. Students may do this standing still, moving slowly, dancing or sitting. Students follow the streamers with their eyes.

Application: Grades k-6. The activity has proven success in improving reading, writing, number and lowercase letter recognition, eye tracking and integration of right- and left-brain thinking skills.

Considerations: make sure to ensure students have enough space to move freely without fear of injury

Source: ehow

14.

### **Dancing in the Aisles**

Directions: At the beginning of the school day and for 10 to 15 minutes every two to three hours, the teacher gets the students up out of their chairs and dancing in the aisle. Students enjoy the chance to move and find the activity fun. Students can recite the alphabet, number facts, spelling words or any other set of facts

Application: Grades k-6. The stimulation wakes up the brain and makes it more receptive to learning new concepts. Dancing also improves coordination, involves cross-body motion and lets students get the fidgets out so they can focus more clearly on the lessons. The activity benefits children who learn kinaesthetically and those who may exhibit ADD and ADHD symptoms.

Considerations: Students may become very excited. Make sure you have a signal for the dancing to end as well as a wind down/ transition planned

Source: ehow

## *Student choice*

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1.

### **Ear/Nose Touch**

Directions: Touch the nose with the right hand, the right ear with the left hand. Switch positions (touch the nose with the left hand, the left ear with the right hand). Repeat. Increase speed as it becomes easier.

Application: All grades. Use to provide cross-body co-ordination, stimulate both hemispheres, provide a break from mental activity. To prepare for a difficult/challenging mental activity or test.

Considerations: Students with physical disabilities may not be able to perform this activity; adapt to similar cross-body coordination as appropriate. Provide oral directions for students with visual impairment.

Source: Multiple sources

2.

### **Blink-Snap BrainBreak**

Directions: Student blinks one eye and snaps the fingers of the opposite hand, then switches.

Application: Intermediate +. Use to prepare for a challenging mental activity; when frustrated; when experiencing mental fatigue. Provides cross-body coordination, cross-hemispheric activity.

Considerations: Adapt for physical challenges.

Source: David Sladkey, practising teacher

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N022pt0lTk>

3.

### **At your finger tips**

Directions: Make an X with your arms out in front of you. Move your palms to face you with your fingers up in the air. Lock your thumbs together. With your right index finger, try to touch each of the fingertips of your left hand, one by one. Do the same thing with your middle finger, ring finger and pinkie. Do the same process with your left hand.

Application: Upper elementary +. To wake up and engage both sides of the brain, increase concentration and attention.

Considerations:

Source: Dave Sladkey, practising teacher

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=t-H8fYWQDUE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=t-H8fYWQDUE)

4.

### **Deep Breathing**

Directions: Sit comfortably, put one hand on your chest and one on your stomach and slowly inhale through your nose pushing your belly out and then expanding the rib cage. With your hands, feel your stomach and your lungs expand. Exhale through your nose emptying your lungs and then collapsing your belly.

Application: All grades. This relaxing exercise can relief or prevent stress, high blood pressure, headaches, stomach conditions, anxiety, and others.

Considerations:

Sources: various sources

5.

### **Thumb and Pinkie Brain Break**

Directions: Student takes their left hand and has his/her fingers in and thumb up (like a fist expect for the thumb being out/up). Student takes his/her right hand, has all fingers in, and has pinkie out (like a fist expect for the pinkie being out/up). Now the student switches the role of each hand so that the left hand has the pinkie out, and the right hand has the thumb out. Repeat. Increase speed as able.

Application: Grades 3-12 Helps students with "thinking" about their movement, following directions, focus, coordination, self-control.

Considerations: Consider providing students with pictures or visuals of the sequence and what this looks like. The sequence should be taught in small sections. Reduce or augment the speed to adjust the level of difficulty.

Source: Energizing Brain Breaks: <http://brainbreaks.blogspot.ca/>

6.

### **Elbow to Knee Tap Patterns**

Directions: This is a stretching activity where you will be tapping your elbow to your knee in different patterns. Hold your ears with your hands. Tap your right elbow to your left knee. Tap your left elbow to your right knee. You will be tapping each knee alternately using this pattern: 1, 1, 2, 2. For example, 1 tap (right elbow to left knee), 1 tap (left elbow to right knee), 2 taps (right elbow to left knee), and then 2 taps (left elbow to right knee). Repeat. Increase speed as able.

Application: All grades. Helps students with cross-body coordination, sequencing, focus, patterns.

Considerations: Consider providing students with pictures or visuals of the sequence and what this looks like. The sequence should be taught in small sections. Reduce or augment the speed to adjust the level of difficulty.

Source: Energizing Brain Breaks: <http://brainbreaks.blogspot.ca/>

7.

### **Hook Ups**

Directions: Sit or stand with the right leg crossed over the left at the ankles.

- Take your right wrist and cross it over the left wrist and link up the fingers so that the right wrist is on top.
- Bend the elbows out and gently turn the fingers in towards the body until they rest on the sternum (breast bone) in the center of the chest. Stay in this position.
- Keep the ankles crossed and the wrists crossed and then breathe evenly in this position for a few minutes. You should feel noticeably calmer after that time.

Application: Any grades. This is an example of how effects of exercise include improvement of mood, lessening of anxiety.

Considerations: Students with physical disabilities may have trouble with this.

Source: <http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pdf/sascevanshandouts.pdf>

8.

### **Thinking Caps**

Directions: Perform this brain training exercise by using your thumb and index finger to gently pull and unroll the outer part of the ear, starting from the top and slowly moving to the lobe. Pull the lobe gently. Repeat three times each ear.

Application: Any grade. This helps with spelling, short-term memory, listening ability and abstract thinking.

Considerations:

Source: <http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pdf/sascevanshandouts.pdf>

9.

### **Rub Tummy, Pat Head**

Directions: Sitting or standing. Student can try to rub their stomach, and pat their head at the same time.

Applications: Any grade. Stimulate the mind. Get the blood flowing.

Considerations: To increase difficulty level, use opposite hands, rub head and pat stomach, try hopping while doing it.

Sources: Various

10.

### **Feet X's**

Directions: While sitting, student can cross the feet in front, and then cross the feet in behind.

Application: All grades. Help kinaesthetic learners. Get blood flowing. Help focus some learners



Considerations: Student can try to do it faster, or more controlled. They can interchange with small feet kicks, or feet swings.

Sources: various

11.

### **Stability Ball Seats**

Directions: Students can complete regular seatwork while sitting on the balls and still remain active by moving. The balls also allow the students to bounce, sway and move during lessons without being a distraction to other students.

Application: All grades. Physical therapists use stability balls to help with balance and improve spatial awareness, which also benefits the students

Considerations: Make sure students are careful with sharp objects around stability balls as they will pop. If funding is limited you may purchase one or two of these for students who have extra difficulty being immobile.

Sources: various

12.

### **Rubber Bands**

Directions: Students have rubber bands tied together and looped around the front two legs of their chairs they can continue to work on regular seatwork, group work or class discussion while pushing against the bands with their legs.

Application: All grades. The rubber bands allow the students to engage their leg muscles and move during lessons without being a distraction to other students.

Considerations: Especially good for kinaesthetic learners who may have difficulty staying still. This break can also be excellent for musical learners as they may develop rhythms that they play on the bands with their feet.

Sources: various