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Chairperson of the Board of Management: Harold Brooks

Policy: 'BLUE BREAKS' or Sensory Breaks

Date of Issue: October 2012

Review Date: Annually

Amendments / Reviews

Sept 2013: Updated
January '16: Chairperson change.
Aug 17: Chairperson Change

Aim of Policy: To provide school staff with guidelines outlining the use of 'Blue Breaks' or Sensory Breaks in the school as devised by Occupational Therapists supporting the school.

Introduction: What is a Blue Break?

Just as our pupils need food throughout the course of the day, their need for sensory input must also be met. A “sensory diet” or ‘Blue Break’ as they are called in OLGC is a carefully designed, personalized activity plan that provides the sensory input a pupil needs to stay focused and organized throughout the day. Just as you may jiggle your knee or chew gum to stay awake or soak in a bath to unwind, children need to engage in stabilizing, focusing or calming activities too. Infants, young children, teens, and adults with mild to severe sensory issues can all benefit from a personalized sensory diet.

Each child has a unique set of sensory needs. Generally, a child whose nervous system is on “high trigger/too wired” needs more calming input, while the child who is more “sluggish/too tired” needs more arousing input.

The effects of a sensory diet are usually immediate AND cumulative. Activities that perk up a child or calm him/her down are not only effective in the moment; they actually help to restructure the child’s nervous system over time so that s/he is better able to:

- tolerate sensations and situations s/he finds challenging,
- regulate his alertness and increase attention span,
- limit sensory seeking and sensory avoiding behaviors,
- handle transitions with less stress.

OLGC uses the following guidelines to implement ‘Blue Breaks’ for our students as recommended by Occupational Therapy.

Available Resources:

- Each class has been provided with recommended ‘Blue Break’ equipment such as Theraputty, Physio Bands, Fidgets’, etc.
- The school has a fully equipped sensory room.
- The school has several small support areas to which pupils can be withdrawn for a ‘Blue Break’ including the library, small trampoline, exercise equipment in the Physio Room, bikes in the yard, swings, see-saw and other playground equipment, the sandplay area in the Junior Courtyard, the Horticultural Courtyard and ‘Pupil Support’ rooms for specified pupils.’ Walks in the corridor, P.E. Hall or yard may also be appropriate or a short visit to the church.
- Some pupils love to be given the responsibility of doing ‘jobs’ so these are arranged where appropriate.

Blue Break Guidelines:

- **Need for structure:** breaks outside the classroom can be as deregulating as breaks inside the class so breaks must be structured and planned to suit the child.
- Blue breaks won’t work if **conditions are not right for the child**; environment, people, mode of communication, use of language, distractions etc. It is not just about the activity.
- Students should have a **menu of activities** that are regulating, not just one or two. We need to target different sensory systems.
- Always build on choices and check in with the child to **monitor their responses**; ‘fast or slow? / round and round? / forwards and back?’
- **Is the child in high alert or low alert?** What sensory input/escape does s/he need?
- **Be consistent**; use the same name/LAMH sign or visual as much as possible.
- **All children** should learn what a blue break is through modelling and normalising breaks within the classroom and school structure. Blue breaks should be naturally built into the daily routine. When starting to learn about the blue break, we need to schedule in blue breaks; they won’t ask for them. Children should learn the blue break symbol and break

activities when they are ‘just right’. Some choices can be given, other times there isn’t a choice.

- If a child asks for a break, **ALWAYS give it to them**, otherwise they will stop asking. You CAN control what break and duration of break it is.
- Blue breaks are a **proactive strategy**; do not wait until the child is in high alert to give him/her a break. Watch for signs of increasing stress/anxiety, etc.
- **Active participation is key**: Is the child willing to participate or do you find yourself constantly offering motivators, rewards etc? Do you offer choices? What is he/she choosing? What does his/her verbal and non-verbal communication tell us about how he/she likes the activity?
- Breaks should be rewarded, **NOT used as a reward**.
- **Calming or alerting?** Each child differs in their threshold and responses. Staff members need to observe reactions and responses to sensory activities. What is the child like after the activity? Remember string sensory input can remain in the nervous system for up to one and a half hours.
- **Sensory seeking**: Some children seek sensory input because they are in ‘low alert’.

Just as a child needs food throughout the course of the day, his need for sensory input must also be met. A “sensory diet” (coined by OT Patricia Wilbarger) is a carefully designed, personalized activity plan that provides the sensory input a person needs to stay focused and organized throughout the day. Just as you may jiggle your knee or chew gum to stay awake or soak in a hot tub to unwind, children need to engage in stabilizing, focusing activities too. Infants, young children, teens, and adults with mild to severe sensory issues can all benefit from a personalized sensory diet.

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Stages of Teaching Blue Breaks

1. Show the blue break symbol and a visual of the activity and model the activity.
2. Facilitate the child to carry out the activity: prompt, physical assistance (can the child tolerate physical assistance?) etc. make the activity easier if the child finds it difficult.
3. Observe the child’s responses: verbal (e.g. no, ow, again, more etc.), facial expressions (remember these can be very subtle), gestures, physical responses, (e.g. curling toes). Check in with the child: ‘do you like it? Do you want more/to finish?’
4. Stop and allow the child to make a choice, ask/gesture for more or to finish etc. build in choices to the level of sensory input and find out what the child needs: gentle/hard (pressure)? Soft or hard (textured fidget) Spider/crab (touch)? Forwards and back or round and round (movement)? Teach the child how to gauge pressure when they are giving themselves and massage, squeezes etc.
5. Teach the children the concepts and visuals so they learn what the activity is.
6. Schedule in blue breaks in the day and tell the child what the blue break is.
7. Schedule in a blue break and give the child two choices. Choices can be built up gradually.
8. Use choice boards, choices on the iPad

Who and why?

- Children who are over-responsive to sensory input (need to escape).
- Children who are under-responsive to sensory input (need more to stay alert).
- Children whose sensory thresholds fluctuate (over- and under-responsive: need to escape some and attain others).
- Children who are anxious, stressed etc.
- Children who trying sit and concentrate.
- ALL OF US.

Note: Some students will NOT seek sensory input if the opportunity is not there; this does not mean they don't need it.

Where and when?

- Breaks at the desk (to help keep on task).
- Breaks outside the classroom: hall, yard, sensory room, quiet rooms, library, fitness rooms etc (to escape some input and attain other input).
- Breaks away from desks in classroom: safe space, sensory corner etc.
- When a child asks.
- Schedule them for some children: at least one every hour.

What?

- Depends on child's sensory needs and preferences (how do we know: willingness to participate).
- A variety of age and socially appropriate activities.
- What the child enjoys (how do we know?: willingness to participate)
- What the child actively participates in (willingness to participate)

How long and how often?

- How long does the child need? When does he/she get to 'just right'?
- How many does he/she need? How do you know he/she is getting anxious/distracted? Children differ: start off with too many, then they can be reduced.
- Put breaks into the schedule. Have natural breaks: between classes (Smart Moves, Stickids, etc.).

What if the child does not carry out the activity?

- Does he/she like the activity? If not, why not? (e.g. not familiar, new person, doesn't like sensory input etc.).
- Is there enough structure? Does s/he know what is expected?
- IS s/he bored? Is it the same activity every day?
- Is s/he getting the sensory stimulation s/he needs from the activity?
- Is s/he distracted?
- Does s/he want to do something else?

What if the sensory break didn't work?

- Was there enough/too little sensory input?
- Look at the conditions: environment, noise, distractions etc.
- Transitioned too soon?
- Was 'just right' but finishing, transitioning, busy corridor etc. put child into high alert again?
- Stressed/upset because break is over and the child has to go back to something he/she does not like.

Types of Sensory Input and Effects on Arousal Levels

- **Tactile:** light touches = alerting, pressure touch = calming (but some children are over-responsive to being touched to receive pressure touch).
- **Vestibular = Movement**
 - Bouncing, rotary, angular (different directions) and fast – alerting.
 - Slow rocking, forward and back rhythmic – calming
- **Proprioception – input to muscles and joints – heavy muscle work:** regulating (calming and alerting)
- **Vibration:** can be calming or alerting
- **Oral sensory:**
 - Crunchy foods (regulating).
 - Chewy foods (regulating).
 - Spicy foods (alerting).
 - Acidic/bitter (alerting).
 - Blowing e.g. through straws (regulating).
 - Sucking e.g. hard boiled sweets (regulating).