

ACTIVE PLAY- ACTIVE LEARNING

Brain Breaks Guide



Active Play–Active Learning Brain Breaks Overview

The Active Play-Active Learning Project (APAL) aims to incorporate more physical activity into the school day via fun, low-cost and practical strategies. APAL is based at the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living at the University of Texas School of Public Health-Austin Regional Campus and was developed with input from classroom teachers, PE specialists, students, and physical activity researchers.

In this guide, we present a range of easy-to-implement “Brain Breaks”- short activity dynamics that can be implemented by the teacher in the classroom setting. The guide is structured in two sections: 1.) General Brain Breaks that can be applied across classes and academic topic areas during any part of the day; and 2.) Academic-specific Brain Breaks that directly correlate to subjects.

While we present just a selected number of Brain Breaks here, we encourage classroom teachers to seek out additional Brain Breaks on our APAL website, explore other resources such as video-based Brain Breaks, and/or create their own Brain Breaks. As a classroom teacher, you are in a unique position to shape the physical and cognitive health as well as the learning experience of your students. Thank you for helping to enhance the healthy development and academic achievement of your students! Please feel free to share with us your ideas for Brain Breaks via our Facebook page or directly with the emails below.

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Creating a Physically Active Classroom through Brain Breaks

What?

Energizing Brain Breaks, also known as energizers, brain boosters, and activity breaks, are quick activities for the classroom that aim to both engage children in physical activity while enhancing their learning experience. They take virtually no preparation and no extra materials to perform. Students and teachers love them because they are fun and make people laugh. They also challenge the brain. Brain Breaks have been found to improve students' time-on-task^{1,2} and may have the greatest effect on those students with the most difficulty remaining on task.³ Brain breaks can also improve students' concentration and performance on standardized tests,⁴⁻⁷ Consider using Brain Breaks periodically throughout the day with your class. The more students are active throughout the day, the more focused they will be. Movement also helps to anchor the information students are learning.

How?

Children seem to have an endless source of energy that carries them through their day. They run rather than walk, jump rather than step over, and drop down rather than sit. Brain Breaks are designed to help channel that energy into the academic activities of the day. In this guide, we present a variety of easy-to-implement Brain Breaks that include step by step instructions. Variations are provided to easily change an activity to a different academic focus. These activities take into account the busy academic day and are meant to only provide bursts of activity to satisfy even the squirmiest of students as well as provide transition time to refocus to a new topic. Teachers can choose one activity for the day or choose several activities for an extended break. Consider conducting Brain Breaks with your students:

- ✓ ...to begin the day or an activity. (e.g., a test!)
- ✓ ...whenever students need a break from an extended learning period.
- ✓ ...whenever students are transitioning from one subject/activity to another.
- ✓ ...whenever students are waiting in line to go to specials, lunch, library, etc.
- ✓ ...whenever the teacher sees the need.

Ready, Set, GO!

Getting started is easy. The teacher should set very clear expectation for student behaviors during the activities. Students will stay so busy with the activity that conflicts should be minimal. Stopping an activity can be a bit more challenging. A stop signal is vital and should be included in the clear expectations set at the beginning of the activity. Specific stop signal examples can be found in the **Ideas for Signals** section on the next page. Most of the time students are ready to refocus after an activity. If your students are having trouble calming down you can play soft, calming music or take students through a series of deep breathing exercises.

Helpful Hints:

- Create a positive atmosphere that enhances the self-esteem for all students. Each student should feel respected and valued. All students do not move alike or at the same speed.
- Have a signal or sign that can refocus students quickly so that they can “freeze” and listen to you when you need to speak or end the activity.
- Make certain each student understands the teacher’s expectations prior to the start of the activity.
- Model enthusiasm for physical activity. Be aware that students (at first) may seem apathetic or silly. These are common expressions of being self-conscious about trying something new in front of their peers. With practice, this discomfort can be minimized and students will be more relaxed and willing to participate.
- Give instructions before and after arranging the room to get ready for participation. Remind students of the rules for the activity and the “freeze” signals.
- Take time to make sure that objects are out of the way for safe movement.
- Set a time limit for the activity before beginning movement. Be sure to share that time with students.
- Compliment groups or individuals so that all groups or individuals feel as though their participation was valued.

Ideas for Signals:

1. “Give me a hand” - Tell the kids, “give me a hand” and students raise one hand in the air. “Give me a clap” and students clap. “Give me a stomp” and students stomp one foot. You can then ask any combination such as “Give me three claps and a stomp” and the attention is focused on you.
2. Have live music you can play and stop when you want students to start/stop and activity.
3. Prompt students to follow the command, “If you can hear my voice, clap once. If you can hear my voice, clap twice.” Continue the sequence until you have the full attention of the entire class.

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3 Minutes Fitness Count Down ¹

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: Students act out the following routine in descending order, pausing momentarily between each task:

- 12 Jumping Jacks
- 11 Raise the Roofs
- 10 Knee Lifts
- 9 Side Stretches
- 8 Side Twists
- 7 Giant Punches
- 6 Kicks to the Front
- 5 Air Squats
- 4 Jumps
- 3 Muscle Arm Curls
- 2 Scissors (Feet apart and crisscross in front and back)
- 1 High-five a neighbor

10-Second Fitness Jumps ²

Academic Focus: General Activity

Activity: Students are scattered in their own self-space. Using a line on the floor, or a linear object like a pencil placed on the floor, students will complete a jumping task over the mark for 10-seconds on command. Students are encouraged to count their own jumps. Upon a start signal, cue students to jump side-to-side over the line for 10-seconds. Students record their jumps and prepare to repeat the task, encouraging them to beat their previous score. Other jumps include, but not limited to, forward and back jumps, scissor jumps, and one-foot hops.

This also works well if student are in pairs and alternate turns being the jumper while the non-jumper is the counter. Easily incorporate math into the game by having pairs add, subtract, multiply and/or divide their total jumps to eliminate the distracting competition amongst pairs.

Chill Break

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: Before a test or quiz have a 5-minute walking break or stretching break to help students relax.

Estimation Destination

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: Have students guess how many steps it will take to reach an assigned destination. Have students write down their estimation prior to walking and their actual steps taken after returning. As a class everybody walks together, silently counting their own steps.

The destination can be, but not limited to, a landmark outside of the classroom (e.g. the school flag pole or a playground marking) or a series of destinations inside the classroom (e.g. from their desk, to one wall, to something blue, to something oval, to a window, and back to their desk).

Find the Fitness Coach

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: The entire class sits in a circle. One student is selected and will be assigned to be the Detective. The detective will leave the classroom, or face a wall with his/her eyes closed, so they don't see what is going on in the circle. While the detective is gone, the teacher designates one person in the circle to be the Fitness Coach. The Fitness Coach will be responsible for discreetly winking (or some other non-verbal/limited movement cue) at random students in the circle. Whomever the Fitness Coach winks at, that student must stand up and begin a pre-assigned exercise (see below for exercise recommendations). Remind participants that it's okay to look at the coach, but be subtle as to not give away his/her identity too easily. The Fitness Coach is trying to get as many students active before the Detective guesses the identity of him/her. The game is over if the detective guesses incorrectly three times or is successful finding the coach. Repeat the game, choosing a new detective and coach each round.

Exercise Recommendations: assign two exercises per round. If the coach selects students, they choose one, or both, exercises to participant in.

- Jumping Jacks
- Air Squats
- Kneel Lifts
- Jumps
- Side Twists
- Sit Ups
- Side Stretches
- Make up your own stationary exercise

Freeze Dance

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: Have students spread out across the room and play one school-appropriate song. Let kids dance along until the music stops. Encourage students to hold their position until the music restarts. Repeat sequence as desired.

Quiz Me ⁵

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: While reviewing a topic/subject, prepare a number of true-or-false questions. Dedicate one wall of the room as the “true” area and the other wall the “false” area. Ask the review question, and permit students to stand near the wall that corresponds to the correct answer. After all students are at their wall, provide the answer. Students stay put and wait for the next question.

Try using quadrants in the classroom, respectively assigning the corners as option A, B, C, or D, and now you have a multiple choice review activity.

Trading Places ³

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: Have students stand behind their pushed-in chairs. Call out a trait. Everyone who has that trait must change places with someone else (students who do not have the trait stay where they are). Examples: "Everyone with curly hair." "Everyone who ate cereal for breakfast." "Everyone who is wearing stripes."

Yoga ²

Academic Focus: General Activity

Activity: Students are scattered in their own self-space facing the teacher. Moving slowly and quietly, with emphasis on slow, steady breathing, students go through a variety of poses:

- Acorn Pose – kneel down, sit on your heels, bend at the waist bringing your chest to your thighs trying to place your forehead on the floor. Place arms along your legs with palms facing up.
- Superman – lie on your stomach with arms out in front of you. On an exhale breath, raise your head, arms, and legs, leaving only your stomach on the floor. Hold pose for two full breathes and relax in starting position. Repeat as desired.
- Lizard – lie on your stomach with your hands under your shoulders (similar to preparing to do push-ups). Push up, extending arms fully, while leaving your waist, hips and legs on the floor. Hold pose for two full breathes and lower your chest back to the floor and relax in starting position. Repeat as desired.
- Camel – kneel down with your legs shoulder-width apart, slowly grab your heels, and slowly arch your back while allowing your head to fall back towards your heels. Hold pose for two full breathes relax in starting position. Repeat as desired.
- Half Moon – with your feet together, hold your hands together above your head. While keeping your hands together, stretch your arms to one side as you stretch your hips to the other. Hold pose for two full breathes and relax in starting position. Stretch to the opposite side. Repeat as desired.
- Triangle – stand with a wide base. Stretch your arms parallel to the floor. Stretch your left hand down to your left shin and reach your right arm towards the sky. Hold pose for two full breathes and relax in starting position. Stretch to the opposite side. Repeat as desired.

Zero In

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: One student is selected to stand in front of the room while facing the class. The class is given direction that they are going to help the student (a.k.a the guesser) guess a secret number without talking or using hand gestures. A secret number is held up behind the student. The guesser will call out a number. If the guesser needs to guess higher, the class will cue him/her by jumping up and down. If the guesser needs to guess lower, the class will cue him/her by squatting up and down. The class continues to give active, silent, cues until the guesser guesses the secret number.

Instead of using a number, hold up a math problem that the class has to solve before the guesser begins guessing. The guesser must guess the answer to the problem (of course, without seeing the math problem).

As If... 4

Academic Focus: Storytelling, Vocabulary practice, Language Comprehension.

Activity: Teacher reads sentences to class. Have students act out each sentence for 30 seconds.

- Jog in place AS IF a big scary bear is chasing you.
- Walk forwards AS IF you're walking through chocolate pudding.
- Jump in place AS IF you are popcorn popping.
- Reach up AS IF you are grabbing balloons out of the air.
- March in place AS IF you are in a marching band.
- Shake your body AS IF you are a wet dog.

Frozen Vocabulary 4

Academic Focus: Practicing new vocabulary words.

Activity: Begin by having students do an activity standing at their desks for at least 30 seconds:

- Jumping
- Twisting
- Jogging
- Jumping Jacks
- Hopping
- Knee Lifts
- Playing air guitar

Students continue activity until teacher calls out a vocabulary word at which point the students freeze. Teacher calls on a volunteer to use the vocabulary word properly in a sentence. Resume activity or begin new activity when a student uses the vocabulary word properly.

Letter Toss 1

Academic Focus: Practicing new vocabulary words.

Equipment: One yarn ball

Activity: Teacher places a letter for the day on the board and hands a yarn ball to one student. Students stand around the room in a circle. One student will state a word that begins with that letter and then toss the yarn ball to another student who will then say another word. Students continue passing the ball, without passing it to a student that has already had the ball.

Over-Under-Around-Through ⁶

Academic Focus: Vocabulary.

Activity: In groups of three, have two players face each other and hold both hands or hold a scarf between them. The teacher will call out a specific sequence for the third player to accomplish as quickly as possible. For instance, over, under, around, through. The player will go over the joined hands, under the joined hands, circle around both hand holders, and through the middle of the joined arms. Mix the sequence up and do some several in a row. Time each attempt as an incentive to go faster. Switch positions frequently.

The teacher can have each group compete with the other groups to see which group can finish the pattern first.

Pass it On-Card Style⁴

Academic Focus: Spelling/Vocabulary

Equipment: Standard deck of cards.

Set Up: Students form a circle around the perimeter of the room. Teacher hands out one card to each student.

Activity: Students identify suit of card and perform activity that corresponds to that color for 10-15 seconds:

- Diamond- jump to the sky
- Heart- squats
- Club-twist
- Spade- swim

When teacher says "Pass it On," students then pass their cards to the student to their right and perform the activity that corresponds to their new card.

Spelling Mix- Up ¹

Academic Focus: Students practice spelling new words with team members.

Equipment: One piece of paper with a letter of the alphabet for each student.

Activity: Divide the students into two teams. Give each student a piece of paper containing a letter of the alphabet. Call out a spelling or vocabulary word. Each team will arrange themselves to spell the word. The team that spells the word the quickest and correctly receives a point.

Spelling Words Relay¹

Academic Focus: Spelling/Reading

Activity: Students practice spelling new words with team members.

- The teacher will divide the class into four teams of equal number.
- The students stand in a line and the first student of each group will be given the spelling word and they will use the dry erase marker / chalk and write the first letter on the board.
- The student will then move quickly to the next person on their team, pass the chalk / marker off and the next student will come to the board and write the next letter.
- This procedure will continue until one of the teams has completed the spelling word.
- The team must say and spell the word to the class. If the word is correct they get a point. If it is incorrect the other teams have a chance. If all four teams spell the word incorrectly, then the teams get 30 seconds to fix their word.

Stand Up for Vocabulary⁵

Academic Focus: Spelling/Reading

Activity: Create a poem or song using vocabulary words that all start with the same letter. Every time a word starting with that letter is said or sung have students stand up or sit down.

Stop and Scribble ⁴

Academic Focus: Spelling/practicing new vocabulary words

Activity: Students stand at desks with partners. Need a piece of paper and pencil for every 2 students. Teacher calls out physical activity:

- Jumping
- Twisting
- Jogging
- Jumping Jacks
- Hopping
- Knee Lifts
- Playing air guitar
- Marching

Students begin activity and continue until the teacher calls out a spelling word. Students freeze and partners work together to try to spell the word correctly on a piece of paper. After 10-15 seconds, teacher calls out new activity. Continue until all spelling words are used. As students cool down, teacher will write correct spelling on board and students will check their work.

That Sounds Like ¹

Academic Focus: Practice with grammar/parts of speech.

Activity: Teacher will write the following on the board:

- Period: STOP
- Exclamation Point: EXCITED/ STOP
- Question Mark: SHRUG SHOULDERS
- Comma: PAUSE and CONTINUE

Teacher then gives students a movement to do (ex: jumping jacks, run in place, march, etc.). Teacher then calls out a word phrase (Period) and students will STOP. Or (Exclamation Point) and students will go faster and then return to a normal speed.

Vocabulary Scramble ¹

Academic Focus: Recognize level appropriate sight words and content vocabulary, identify level appropriate vocabulary, use conventions of spelling in written composition.

Equipment: Letters of the vocabulary words written on separate sheets of paper; paper and pencil (for the records)

Activity:

1. Divide the students into two groups of two.
2. Give each group letters, written on separate sheets of paper, that make up a vocabulary word. Example vocabulary word: friendship
3. Ten students will each receive one letter, one student will be the checker, and one student will be the recorder.
4. The students with the letters will scramble to arrange themselves to make as many different words as possible with the letters they have. for example: Friendship- ship, friend, dip, end, red, sip, etc.
5. The checker will make sure that the words are spelled correctly and the recorder will write the words down on a sheet of paper.
6. The group to spell the most words in 10 minutes is the winner.

Wiggles ⁴

Academic Focus: General activity

Activity: Students stand at their desks and jog in place while doing the following activities:

On teacher's command, the students begin to wiggle their fingers.

- Then fingers and wrists.
- The students wiggle their fingers, wrists, forearms.
- Then fingers, wrists, forearms, and elbows.
- Then fingers, wrists, forearms, elbows, and shoulders.
- Then fingers, wrists, forearms, elbows, shoulders, and rib cage.
- Then fingers, wrists, forearms, elbows, shoulders, rib cage and hips.
- Then fingers, wrists, forearms, elbows, shoulders, rib cage, hips, and knees.
- Then fingers, wrists, forearms, elbows, shoulders, rib cage, hips, knees, and head.

Chair Aerobics ⁵

Academic Focus: Math

Activity: Have students pull their chairs out from their desk. Students should sit up straight, keeping their ankles together to do leg lifts by extending their legs to a 180-degree angle for 20 repetitions. Then have students stand behind the chair and while holding the back for balance, extend their right leg out to the side to a 45-degree angle for 20 repetitions. Then repeat with the left leg.

Feel the Beat ⁵

Academic Focus: Math

Location: This activity is best in an area with more space than the classroom.

Activity: Have every student get a partner and sit cross legged on the floor facing their partner 2-3 feet away. Place a hacky-sac or other object between them. Have students perform the following actions:

- tap knees
- tap shoulders
- clap
- tap knees, shoulders, clap
- clap partners hands (both, right-right, left-left)

When the teacher calls out a math question, students try to be the first to grab the hacky-sac. Repeat 5 times.

Fitness Math¹

Academic Focus: Review of math concepts; even and odd numbers.

Equipment: One die for each group of four students.

Set Up: Teacher divides students in groups of four and gives each team a die.

Activity: Teacher instructs the students to take turns rolling the dice, and with each number rolled, students identify it as either an even or an odd number and perform the physical activity associated with the number rolled.

- 1=Push Up
- 2=Jump & Stretch
- 3=Toe Touch
- 4=Curl Up
- 5=Arm Circles
- 6=Jumping Jacks

Variations: This game can be used with more advanced math concepts by instructing students to multiply even numbers by 2 and odd numbers by 3. For example, if a student rolls a 2, then students would perform $2*2=4$ jump and stretches; if a student rolled a 3, then students in that group would perform $3*3=9$ toe touches, etc.

Pac Man Chomps Again¹

Academic Focus: Review of “greater than” and “less than” concepts.

Equipment: Fraction flashcards

Activity: Teacher will choose two students to come to the front of the class to represent different fractions. The teacher will give each of the two students a fraction flashcard. Next, the teacher will choose a “PACMAN” from the remaining students to represent “greater than” or “less than.” The student will then correctly arrange himself/herself between the two students to correctly solve the equation. Once the equation has been correctly solved, the “PACMAN” will choose an exercise for the class to do (jumping jacks, jog in place, jump up and down, etc.). Game continues with new students representing fractions and a new “PACMAN.”

Shoot 11

Academic Focus: Counting

Activity: Divide the class into groups of 4-5 students, each group standing in a circle. The object of the game is for the groups to try and total 11 fingers displayed – without telling anyone what number they are going to show. Students do this by, standing in a circle with their left hand behind their back. Instruct the groups to say out loud, “1, 2, 3...Shoot!” On “Shoot”, each student will display either: o(closed fist), 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 fingers on their right hand. Once all the fingers are displayed, the students in the group quickly add up the total of all the fingers shown. If the group’s total equals 11, the group gets a point (students high-five each other). If the group’s total is less than 11, then everyone in the group does that number of jumping jacks (e.g., if the group total was 7, each student in the group would do 7 jumping jacks). If the group’s total is greater than 11, the group must subtract 11 from their total and do that many squats (e.g., if the group total was 16, each student in the group would do $16-11=5$ squats). Groups immediately play another round once they complete their physical activity or high-fiving. Groups try to get as many points as they can (1 point each time they total 11) during the game.

Sports Galore ⁴

Academic Focus: Math

Activity: Teacher calls out the following sports skills to mimic for 10-15 seconds:

- Shooting a jump shot
- Running through tires
- Batting a baseball
- Serving a tennis ball
- Downhill skiing
- Spiking a volleyball
- Swinging a golf club
- Throwing a football
- Juggling a soccer ball
- Shooting an arrow
- Shooting a hockey puck
- Swimming underwater
- Fielding a ground ball and throwing it to first base
- Dunking a basketball

Variations: Teacher can integrate skills into word problems and have students repeat the number he or she calls out: If Juan took 5 jump shots (students act out) and 2 went in the basket, how many did he miss? 3.

Task Master 5

Academic Focus: Math

Activity: Have students stand up and push in their chairs. Teacher explains that he/she is going to give them a series of tasks and the goal is to complete them as quickly as possible. Direct students that once they have completed the task, they should stop where they are and raise their hand. For the first task have students touch 10 chairs not in a row. For the next task have students touch elbows with 8 classmates. For the last task, touch toes with 6 classmates wearing 6 different colored shirts.

Take a Tour ⁵

Academic Focus: Social Studies

Activity: Lead students on an imaginary tour of a different country or state in a charades-like game. For example, take a tour of Colorado: fly to Colorado Springs, hike through San Isabel Forest, swim the Arkansas River, climb the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Create other simulations that point out various landmarks within any state.

Train Like a Pro ⁵

Academic Focus: Social Studies

Activity: Have students act out various sports for 10-15 seconds each:

- kick a field goal
- shoot a jump shot
- run through tires
- swing a bat
- serve a tennis ball
- downhill skiing
- spike a volleyball
- swing a golf club
- throw a football
- shoot an arrow
- shoot a hockey puck
- swim

Variations: Discuss the origins of the sports acted out by students. Additionally, talk about the countries that are known for each sport.

U.S. Walk and Talk ⁵

Academic Focus: Social Studies

Activity: Break students into groups of 2 or 3, and assign a topic related to a current social studies lesson that students need to discuss while taking a 5-minute walk. They should report their discussion back to the class.

Animal Instincts

Academic Focus: Science

Activity: Pick one student to call out an animal and have everyone mimic how that animal moves. Go around the room until every student has an opportunity to call out an animal and the class has mimicked that animal.

Calm Down ⁵

Academic Focus: Science

Activity: Lead students in stretches to help loosen up tension. Have students each hold for 15-20 seconds each: reach for the sky, touch toes, arm circles, neck circles, knee to chest, etc.

Variations: Review science concepts while students stretch.

- Reach for the sky—review concepts relating to weather (cloud formations, rain, etc.)
- Touch toes—review concepts relating to the layers of the Earth.
- Arm circles—review concepts relating to waves and wind.
- Neck circles—review concepts relating to the solar system
- Knee to chest—review concepts relating to pulleys/levers.

Rainstorm ⁵

Academic Focus: Science

Activity: Have a rainstorm in your classroom. Have students follow your lead; begin by having students very lightly rubbing their hands together, then lightly snap, slap their thighs, slap their thighs and stomp their feet (the rainstorm is at its peak!). Then stop stomping their feet, just slap their thighs, return to lightly snapping, rubbing their hands and stop. Do each action for 20 seconds.

Shake It ⁵

Academic Focus: Science

Activity: Students remain seated and raise their hands in the air. Have them start by shaking their right hand 10 times, left hand 10 times, left foot 10 times and right foot 10 times. Repeat counting down the number of shakes from 9-1. Speed up or slow down the counting to keep it interesting.

Variations: Tailor this to science concepts by reviewing the skeletal/muscular system while students complete the activity.

Take a Seat! ⁵

Academic Focus: Science

Activity: Have students stand up and pull their chairs away from their desks. They should stand in front of their chair (seat facing out). Have students quickly sit, then stand, sit then stand 8-10 times. Next, quickly repeat sitting halfway down and standing, repeating 8-10 times. Last, have students barely sit (just touching the chair) and stand quickly repeating 8-10 times.

Variations: Call out a fruit/vegetable/ dairy product. If it's a "GO" food, students should sit, stand, sit then stand 8-10 times. If it's a "SLOW" food, students should sit halfway down and stand, repeating 8-10 times. Finally, if it's a "WOAH" food, students should barely sit and stand quickly repeating 8-10 times. Repeat by calling out different foods.

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