Brain breaks that settle a class: quiet, short, and nobody is out

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A brain break is a few minutes of movement between lessons. What the CDC says it does, how to run one so it settles a room instead of winding it up, and twelve to try.

A brain break is a few minutes of movement in the middle of a lesson. The CDC lists what classroom physical activity can do: improve students' concentration and ability to stay on task, reduce disruptive behaviour such as fidgeting, improve motivation and engagement, and add to the amount they move in a day. The catch is that a badly run one leaves a class louder than it started. The difference is in how it ends. This post is for the teacher who wants the first effect and not the second.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is a free learning site for children, free through the end of 2026, with stories in the library and a Gym of short workouts and games. Everything in our brain breaks for kids page is built from that Gym, so you can put any of them on a board and let a drawn figure show the class what to do.

What the evidence actually says

The CDC's page on classroom physical activity defines it simply as any physical activity done in the classroom, and says it can happen at any time, in one or several brief periods during the school day. The benefits it lists are the ones above, plus helping academic performance. Its longer guide, Strategies for Classroom Physical Activity in Schools (2018), sets out ten strategies for planning it.

Two things are worth noticing in that. It does not prescribe a length, so a two-minute break counts. And nothing in it says the break has to be energetic. Stretching, balancing and slow strength holds are physical activity too, and they are the ones that leave a room calm.

The shape of a break that settles a room

Most brain breaks that go wrong go wrong in the last thirty seconds. The music stops at its loudest, everyone is still bouncing, and the teacher has to spend five minutes getting the room back.

A better shape has three parts:

1. Up. A minute of something that moves the whole body: marching on the spot, squats, a short round of a game.
2. Hold. Something that needs stillness and attention: standing on one leg, a plank, holding a shape. Balance is the useful one here, because nobody can balance and chat at the

same time.

3. Down. Thirty seconds of slow stretching, finishing seated. The last thing the class does should be the thing you want them doing next.

Every workout in Peabody's Gym already ends this way: a cool-down of stretches only, which our own tests insist on.

Two rules that keep it kind

Everybody moves at once. A brain break where children take turns is a queue. Each child stays in their own space beside their own desk, and the whole room moves together.

Nobody is out. Elimination games sit down the children who most need the movement, first, in front of everyone. Every group game in the Gym is written so no child is ever knocked out or ranked against another; in Simon Says Moves, a child who gets caught does three of something silly and stays in.

Twelve short, quiet ones

These are the Gym's workouts that take eight minutes or less from warm-up to cool-down and make no noise a class next door would hear. Most need nothing but a wall or a bit of floor beside a desk.

- Break: Desk Side Three · Ages: 6 to 9 · What it is: Three rounds beside a desk, no furniture moved
- Break: Three Minute Shake-Out · Ages: 6 to 9 · What it is: Squats, jogging on the spot, plank, bridge
- Break: Carpet Three · Ages: 6 to 9 · What it is: All of it on one bit of carpet
- Break: Morning Stretch · Ages: 6 to 9 · What it is: Six slow stretches, nothing counting
- Break: Before Bed Stretch · Ages: 6 to 9 · What it is: The calmest one, for the end of a long afternoon
- Break: After Sitting All Day · Ages: 9 to 12 · What it is: For legs and backs that have been folded under desks
- Break: Long Legs · Ages: 9 to 12 · What it is: Seven stretches with a towel
- Break: Twenty On, Ten Off · Ages: 9 to 12 · What it is: Four quiet minutes that are harder than they look
- Break: Animal Parade · Ages: 4 to 6 · What it is: Be four animals, one after the other
- Break: Waddle and Kick · Ages: 5 to 6 · What it is: Be a duck, then a donkey
- Break: Red Light, Green Light Squats · Ages: 4 to 6 · What it is: Green light, jog; red light, squat and freeze
- Break: Teddy Bear Carry · Ages: 5 to 6 · What it is: Pick a ball up the proper way, over and over

For a game rather than a workout, Freeze Dance, Simon Says Moves, Pass the Pose and Traffic Lights all work with a whole class and no equipment. End any of them with a stretch.

Making it routine

- Same time, same signal. A break that happens after every forty minutes, announced the same way, takes ten seconds to start. One that has to be negotiated takes five minutes.
- Show, don't explain. Put the movement's page on the board; each one has a drawn figure doing it and the common mistake drawn beside it.
- Read the stop signals once. Every workout page lists them: dizzy, chest pain, can't catch your breath, a sharp hurt, feeling sick. Children should know stopping is always the right answer.
- Print a plan. The Gym's printables include a class plan for each whole-class workout, timed in five parts, with the two rules on it.

For longer PE sessions there are PE games for kids, and the Gym for teachers gathers the class workouts and what the PE and recess guidelines ask for.

Sources

- CDC, Classroom Physical Activity (Healthy Schools) — the definition, "one or several brief periods", and the listed benefits: concentration and staying on task, less fidgeting, motivation and engagement, academic performance, more daily activity. Read at archive.cdc.gov, 31 October 2026 (page last reviewed 27 July 2022).
- CDC, Strategies for Classroom Physical Activity in Schools (2018) — ten strategies for planning classroom physical activity.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/brain-breaks-that-settle-a-class