

How to Make and Use Busy Boxes

Preschoolers are still learning how to structure their time and may occasionally have difficulty during unstructured times. When children are asked to wait quietly, they may not know how to do this and adults may see an increase in challenging behaviors during this time. By using “busy boxes” children can be taught how to occupy themselves while they are waiting and learn what it means to choose a quiet activity.

Busy boxes can be used during:

- Transitions
- Nap/Rest time
- Long car rides/travel
- Any time when the child needs help playing quietly

Things You Will Need:

- Box (shoebox, plastic container, basket, etc.)
- Materials and supplies that promote quiet independent activities such as:
 - Crayons, markers, coloring books
 - Playdough
 - Small Legos
 - Small books
 - Foam stickers and notepads
 - Scissors, glue, paper
 - Puzzles & small games
 - Finger puppets



Creating the Busy Box:

- 1) Talk with your child or the children in your classroom about making a busy box together. Let them know that you see that sometimes it can be hard for them to wait or play quietly on their own and that together, you will find a solution to this problem.
- 2) Engage children in making the busy box with you. In classrooms, each child can make their own busy box (consider labeling these with their names and/or pictures). Give children options of quiet and independent activities to put in their box (see ideas above). Allow children to pick a couple of activities to put into their box, but not too many. The idea is to keep it simple and easy to clean up. Talk with children about why putting too many activities in the box may be overwhelming or may make it difficult for them to clean up when done. Help children think about which activities they can pick that will help them to wait and play quietly.
- 3) Together with the child, pick a place for the busy box to be kept, or provide them with two acceptable places if space is an issue. Remember to pick a place that is easily accessible for you and the child.
- 4) Consider changing the activities in the box periodically with the child during predetermined times that you decide on ahead of time.

Using the Busy Box:

As you first start using the busy box, talk with the child about the activities in the box and how they can use them during times when they need something to do. Taking the time to teach the child how to use the activities is important. Consider allowing the child to practice this new skill by pretending it is a time they need to use the busy box. After a few moments of pretending, invite the child to discuss how they did being quiet with their activities. If the child tried to involve you or another child in playing with the activities, remind the child that the activities are for them to do quietly on their own. Help the child think about times where they may need to use their busy box.



It is often helpful to remind the child to use the busy box before they have a problem. The busy box can be a great strategy for preventing challenging behaviors. If you know waiting during a particular time of day is difficult for the child, encourage them to get their busy box before they need it.

Children can also be redirected to their busy box if they begin to engage in some challenging behaviors when waiting, or other times where the box can help. For example, when you notice the child needs some help waiting quietly encourage the child to go get their busy box and choose one of the activities to do. For example you may say something like, “Sarah I see that you are trying to wait for your friends, but it is really hard to find something to do quietly. I think you could use your busy box now...”

When the period of time is over, remind the child to clean up their box. Give children positive specific praise when they are able to use their box quietly and appropriately. For example, “Sarah, you were able to use your busy box to wait quietly for your friends. That was very helpful!”

Keeping the strategy working for you:

Together with the child, remember to change the activities in the box as you see fit keeping them new and interesting for the child.

If a child is having a hard time using the busy box, they may need more practice in learning how to use it. Consider taking some time with the child to practice. It can be helpful to normalize that while it can be hard to wait at times, it is something that the child will learn to do. Remember, just like any new skill, some children may need more support and teaching to use the strategy successfully than others.



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