



Photo source: CDC

# Calm spaces in elementary schools: a resource guide

Fall 2022



## BREATHING BREAKS

9 calming strategies students can use quietly in the classroom

- 1 ROLLER COASTER**  
Roll your shoulders up and down 10 times. Then roll your head and neck from side to side 10 times.
- 2 CANDLES**  
Hold up your arms. Breathe in and hold for 4 counts. Breathe out and hold for 4 counts. Repeat 10 times.
- 3 HOT SOUP**  
Place your hands on your knees. Breathe in and hold for 4 counts. Breathe out and hold for 4 counts. Repeat 10 times.
- 4 TUMBLE DRYER**  
Roll your neck from side to side 10 times. Then roll your head and neck from side to side 10 times.
- 5 HOBBERMAN SPHERE**  
Place your hands on your knees. Breathe in and hold for 4 counts. Breathe out and hold for 4 counts. Repeat 10 times.
- 6 PINWHEEL**  
Place your hands on your knees. Breathe in and hold for 4 counts. Breathe out and hold for 4 counts. Repeat 10 times.
- 7 TRIANGLE**  
Place your hands on your knees. Breathe in and hold for 4 counts. Breathe out and hold for 4 counts. Repeat 10 times.
- 8 BOX BREATHING**  
Place your hands on your knees. Breathe in and hold for 4 counts. Breathe out and hold for 4 counts. Repeat 10 times.
- 9 LAZY EIGHT**  
Place your hands on your knees. Breathe in and hold for 4 counts. Breathe out and hold for 4 counts. Repeat 10 times.



Source: [Lisa Academy](https://www.lisaacademy.com/)

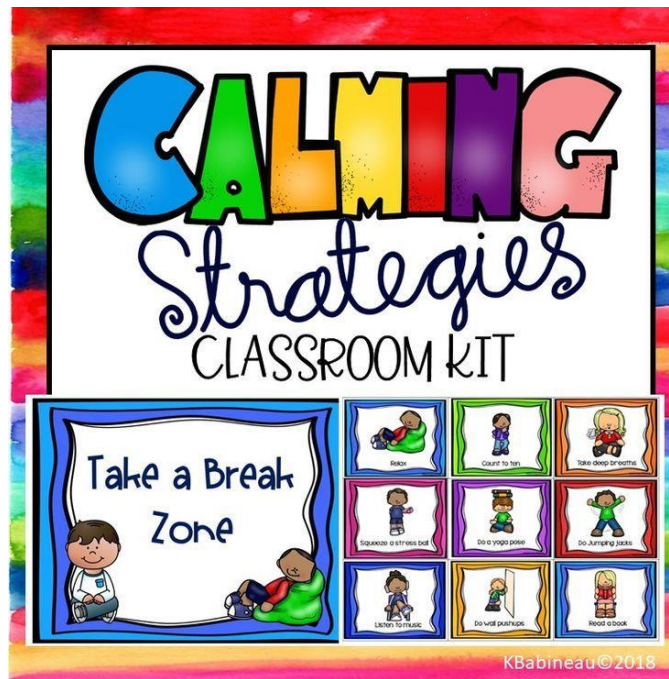


## Introduction

All children can benefit from safe and calming spaces in the school setting. There are a variety of calming options to consider based on space available, supervision options, the desired outcomes, and your school climate.

Calming spaces have been growing in popularity due to the increase in student mental health struggles. In the past, a break room might have been created for special needs students with sensory issues. Today, with mental health and stress levels at an all-time high due to a multitude of issues, all students can benefit from calming resources when emotions are running high, or energy levels are depleted. There are many benefits of utilizing calming resources and spaces, including students learning to self-regulate, keeping behavior issues from escalating, and minimizing the amount of time scholars are not engaged in learning. The ideas and strategies can be low cost and require minimal time to design and set up. Often older students can share a leadership role in planning and maintaining the calming spaces.

This free guide provides four differing strategies for calm spaces, a resource list of ideas on what to put in the space, examples of expectations for use of the space, and other helpful tips for success.



Credit: Kbabineau

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## I. Calm room

### What is a calm or reset room?

A calm room is a designated space intentionally structured to help students pause and re-center physically and emotionally outside of the classroom. It can be used for prevention to deescalate emotions or anxiety before one gets too overwhelmed. A calm room within the school setting can allow children the opportunity to access a variety of tools and techniques to combat strong emotions and stress that prevent them from focusing on learning. In this space, children can gain a sense of safety, quiet, and grounding to regulate their emotions and mood. The goal is to allow a scholar to return to class sooner, ready to learn and engage in relationships in a healthier way.

### The purpose of a calm room is to:

- Provide a safe space to teach and help a student lower stress or anxiety with calming options before getting too overwhelmed
- Allow a student to reset before interacting with staff about the student's behavior
- Regulate students to faster return to learning and their class activities, lowering the need for a scholar to leave the learning environment altogether

### Benefits of a calm room:

- Privacy and safety for an emotionally charged children
- Mood and behavior regulation; teaching healthy stress management skills
- Time savings for staff by having to deal with less intensive behavior management

### Potential downsides

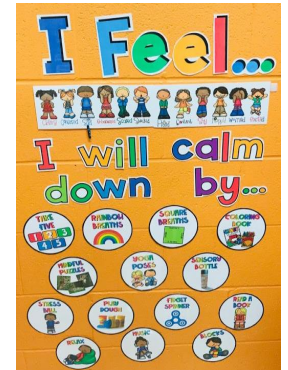
- Lack of space in the school
- Supervision challenges
- Students misusing the space or breaking equipment
- Sanitation

### Where are calm rooms best situated in the school building?

A calm room can be anywhere in the building, but supervision should be taken into consideration — perhaps in or adjacent to the nursing/counseling office or near the social worker. It can be a separate room, or even a corner of an existing space — work with what you have and be creative.

### What to put in a calm room?

- Comfortable seating, special lighting, soft music, nature images, soothing wall colors, and/or a rug to create a calming environment
- Posters or signs with uplifting messages
- Signs at the entrance stating allowable activity options and guidelines for use of the space
- Fidgets and sensory items (glitter jars, stress balls, drawing options, etc.)
- Calming activity options: coloring, guides for deep breathing, mindfulness, journaling
- Yoga mat, poster with guided yoga moves or stretches
- Virtual calm room link
- A check in / check out reflection tool to gauge student mood and/or to ask for follow-up help



Source: The social emotional teacher

Most important, be resourceful and creative. Design a space that resonates with the age of your students and your school culture.

Here are some images of existing spaces to help envision what your space could look like:



Source: [Wells Middle School](#), Wichita



Source: [Source](#)



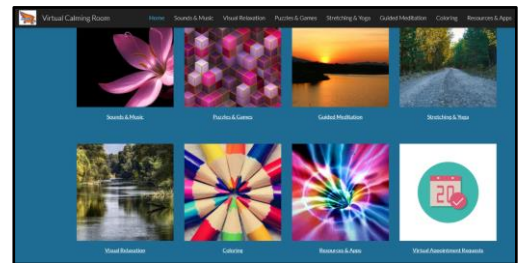
Source: [mindpeace](#)

### Activities to provide:

- Quiet breathing exercises
- Fidget items
- Stretching or gentle yoga to reenergize
- Soothing music
- Drawing or journaling, naming one's emotions, creating a gratitude list
- Virtual calm room



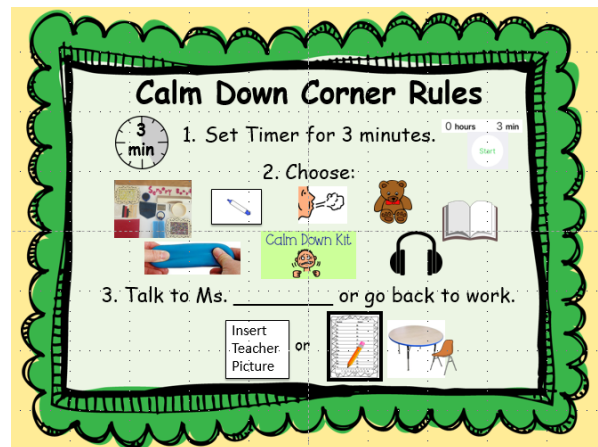
Coping ideas [poster](#)



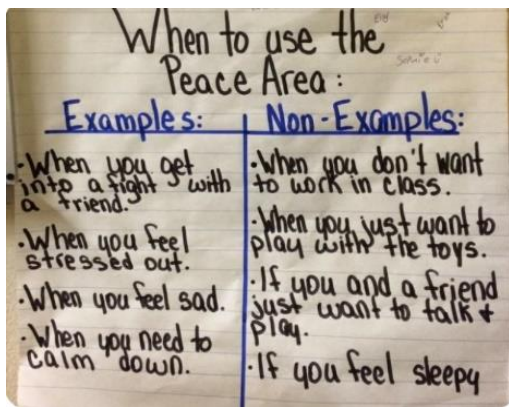
Example of a virtual calming room (Robbinsdale Area Schools)

### Calm room expectations

Creating expectations and guidelines for the use of the room is very important. Expectations allow the room to be used for its intended purpose and minimize behavior issues, clutter, or misuse of the space. Here are some expectations to consider for greater success. First, provide examples when one might use the calm room (anxious, angry, sad, or overwhelmed). Explain the times when it's not appropriate to use the space. For example, without any notice to staff, to meet up with a friend, or to avoid an important class activity or test. Share with students and post allowable activities in the space. Design a check in/check out process, set time limits and space capacity. It can be important to have youth complete a reflection slip and leave it in a designated place to allow staff to follow up if a student needs more assistance. Finally, school staff will need to agree upon supervision and monitoring. You can google from more examples.







Guideline examples  
Source: [Ms. Sepp's Counselor Corner](#)

Once you have your area set up, guidelines on the purpose of the room and expectations should be created with youth input. It is very important to design a plan on how to communicate and teach the expectations, perhaps by creating a short video.

See the appendix for example signs and guidelines

### Helpful tips:

- Pull the right team together for planning; engage youth for their ideas and leadership.
- Make sure the space has a welcoming name and is inclusive and accessible to all students. Although there may be students that utilize the space more than others, it's important to focus on inclusion of all.
- Keep health equity in all decisions to ensure that those with the greatest needs have the appropriate support.
- Define what success will look like. Design use, monitoring, and supervision around your goals.
- Consider training "student ambassadors" to assist in peer-to-peer promotion, teach peers how to use the space, and oversee room organization and sanitation.
- All school employees should know the purpose and guidelines of the calm room. Be clear on how staff can provide feedback or concerns.
- Highlight the project with parents; share examples of student techniques for managing stress with parents.
- Have an evaluation plan to know if the space is meeting your goals. Celebrate success.

### Other resources:

- How to Create a School Calming Room (Demco)- [link](#)
- The calm down corner: 7 tips and why you need one - [Link](#)

## II. Classroom calm corner



Source: [MURPHY MORONEY](#)

### What is a calm corner?

A calm corner is space within the classroom set up to help students take a break, calm emotions, and reset. It is different from a calm room in that students stay in the classroom but move to an area designed with tools to regulate emotions under the supervision of the teacher. The purpose of this space is to keep the student in class but allow a break to calm emotions and then return to focused learning and activities with classmates.

### The benefits of a calm corner:

- To provide a space in the classroom for students to take an emotional break and reset for learning
- To teach students how to use techniques and calming activities to self-regulate
- To give a cooling off period to a student and teacher before interacting about a behavior issue

### What are the disadvantages of calm classroom corner vs. a calm room?

- Staying in the classroom can be disruptive to the teacher and other scholars
- There is a lack of privacy for a struggling student

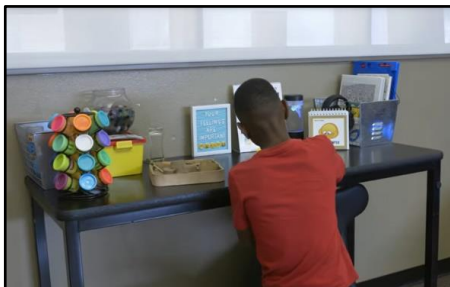
### How to set up a calm area in your classroom

Find an area in your classroom that is a little bit away from the main area. If possible, you can set up a desk, table, or corner. With a small classroom, that can be tricky, so it might be as simple as putting a bin on the floor in the corner. Whatever your restrictions, work with the space in your classroom. It's better to have a small, simple area for students to go take a few breaths than nothing at all.

### Ideas for what to put into a calm corner or reset space:

- A special table, desk, or comfortable seating. The areas may be defined by a rug or room divider.
- Signs posting activity options and the guidelines in the space:
  - expectations
  - guidance for deep breathing, defining emotions, problem-solving strategies
- Fidgets and sensory items (glitter jars, stress balls, doodling, coloring, etc.)
- Calming images, uplifting messages
- Timer, a process for check out and a reflection form
- Ask your students for ideas (especially the ones that might use it more than others)

Most important, be resourceful and creative. Design a space that resonates with the age of your students and your classroom culture. Here are some images of existing spaces to help envision what your space could look like:



Source



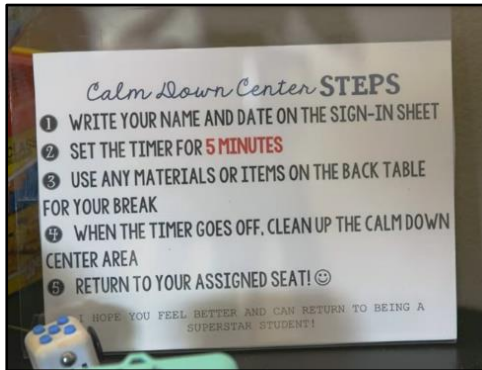
Source: [Teaching with Jillian Starr](#)



Source: Via: [@nic.ole.day](#)

## Calm down corner expectations

Once you have your area set up, take some class time to explain to students what the area is for and how you expect it to be used. Setting clear expectations and boundaries will go a long way to make the space successful for the intended student use. Engage your students to design the rules for use of the space; set a class agreement.



Set the expectation early. Students may use the space, but then come back to work as soon as they are able. Set a time limit (4 or 5 minutes). This area should not be a play area or abused to avoid schoolwork. Explain the times students may use the calm corner. For example, when they're anxious, angry, sad, or overwhelmed. Explain the times they can't. For example, when another student is using it or to avoid taking a test or presenting a group project. It's important to stress that students who aren't using it correctly may lose the privilege. In the beginning, students may overuse the space but in time will likely regulate their use of the space.

It is also important to teach youth how to effectively calm down their mind and body. It can be as simple as modeling and then having students practice some deep breathing or journal about their emotions. Staff can show students some simple sitting and standing yoga poses and to self-reflect using a reflection tool. Lastly, show students how each item in your calm corner can be used as a tool to help them relax their mind and body. Show how to clean up before they leave the space. Be sure to talk about how to transition to and from the space back to their desk.

### Video Highlight

Teaching youth how to use the calm space

***Watch this 5-minute video on teaching youth how to use the calm space in the classroom - [link](#)***

An additional video for ways to use a calm corner - [link](#)

### Helpful tips:

- Center health equity in all decisions to ensure those with the greatest challenges have their needs met.
- Engage youth to design the space and set expectations.
- Create and laminate a "Calm corner request card" for each student. Students can place the card on their desk to signal their request to use the calm corner. This can decrease class interruptions.
- Teach the class about each item in the space and how you expect them to use it. Explain how each tool can help calm their bodies and minds. Take time for practice.
- Rotate the duty to clean and organization the space weekly.
- Think about how you will define success with the space, monitor use, and consider a quarterly check in with students on how the space is working.
- Communicate the purpose and guidelines of the space to parents. Share success stories.

### More ideas and resources:

- Calm Corners – Action For Health Kids - [Link](#)
- More ideas for "manipulatives" for calm corners: [Link](#)
- [Classroom cool down spots](#)



### III. Calm cart



Source: [The responsive counselor](#)

#### What is a calm cart?

A calm cart places tools and resources on a moveable cart for team sharing and to access the tools within a variety of locations.

#### The purpose of using a calm cart:

- To provide classroom activity breaks and teach stress management skills
- To allow calm tools to be moved and shared between staff

#### Considerations for when to use a calm cart:

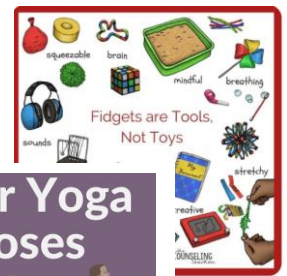
- To schedule weekly brain-break activities or use consistently during an advisory meeting time
- Before a test with the class
- When the class, in general, seems agitated or disengaged from learning
- Before or after transition times, such as after lunch, an outside break, or PE when students return and need to settle for structured learning
- When your emotions as a teacher have been elevated during a stressful interaction
- As part of class instruction such as health, journaling in English, or a nervous system science lesson

#### Ideas for what to offer on the cart:

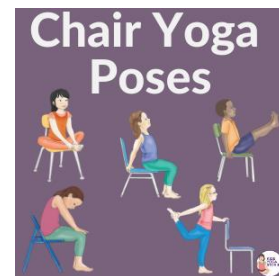
- Breathing sphere or chime
- Small activity items: stretch bands, [pool noodles for drumming](#), mindful movement or yoga cards
- Fidgets and sensory items
- Calming activity guide for teachers: deep breathing, guided mindfulness, journaling prompts, imagery practice
- Doodling boards or coloring pencils/pens
- Lamp with dim light to use for quieting the mind and body



Source



Source



Source

#### Helpful tips and how to create expectations for use of the cart:

- Pull the right team together for planning; engage youth to determine the best cart supplies and activities.
- Consider a pilot with a small group of interested staff; set a goal to expand the cart option to more staff.
- Decide what to offer on the cart, how many carts are needed, clear written guidance for use of the cart, a sign up or check out process, a storage location, and cleaning process.
- Discuss what success will look like. How will staff track use and provide feedback? Design a monitoring and evaluation plan.
- Train and model with staff how to use the cart and explore a variety of activity options. Provide an opportunity for team check ins to monitor and adjust.
- Consider training student champions to play a role in leading calming activities from the cart tools.
- Highlight the great work with administrators and co-workers.
- Share success stories with parents; provide examples of techniques to manage stress.

## IV. Calm kit or box



Hennepin County photo

### What is a calm kit?

A calm kit can be created for an individual teacher to use with their class or with a small group of students to provide brain breaks with calming or mindful movement activities.

### The purpose of a calm box in the classroom:

- To provide breaks to reset the body and mind for learning
- To teach techniques to build lifelong skills on stress management

### Considerations for when to use the calm kit:

- Use intentionally during advisory or morning meeting times
- Before a test with the class
- When many scholars seem agitated or disengaged
- During transition times such as after lunch, an outside break, or PE when students return and need to reset for structured learning
- When your emotions as a teacher have been elevated during a stressful interaction

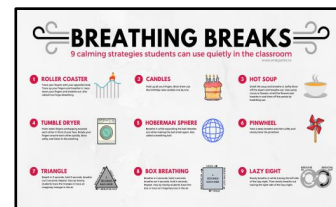
### Ideas for what to offer in a calm kit:

- Breathing sphere or chime
- Small activity items: stretch bands, [pool noodles for drumming](#), guided movement or yoga cards
- Books, guides, cards with examples and activities to use with a class. Tools might be for deep breathing, guided meditations, journaling prompts, imagery practice, etc.
- A list with links to a virtual calm room, soothing music, or guided meditation, etc.

Breathe finger tracing cards



Source



Source: [Lisa Academy](#)

### Helpful tips:



Source

- Consider a pilot with a small group of interested staff; create kits together.
- Brainstorm what success will look like. Decide when and how to use the kit.
- Engage youth to determine what to offer in the kit.
- Consider training student champions to lead activities from the tools in the kit.
- Highlight the great work with other staff, parents, and administrators.

Great resources with multiple ideas and links to learn more:

- [Web site](#)
- [Calm down box](#)

## Bring calm and movement activities into your classroom

### Teacher guided activities

**Mind-body skills:** Activities for emotional regulation from the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children

- *Breathing:* deep belly breathing (use a breathing sphere), guided progressive muscle relaxation
- *Mindfulness exercises:* Focus on and repeat a calming word (peace, love, calm), quietly listen for 5 sounds, use a chime with breathing and active listening, ask students to look for 5 colors in the room.
- *Stretch or yoga movements:* Use a guide to move through poses to breathe and stretch while next to a desk
- *Guided imagery and relaxation:* Go to your favorite place, take a walk in the woods, or sit at the beach
- *Drawing and coloring:* Provide drawing prompts (create a flower) or provide printed images or [Zentangles](#)

[Learn more and go deeper](#)

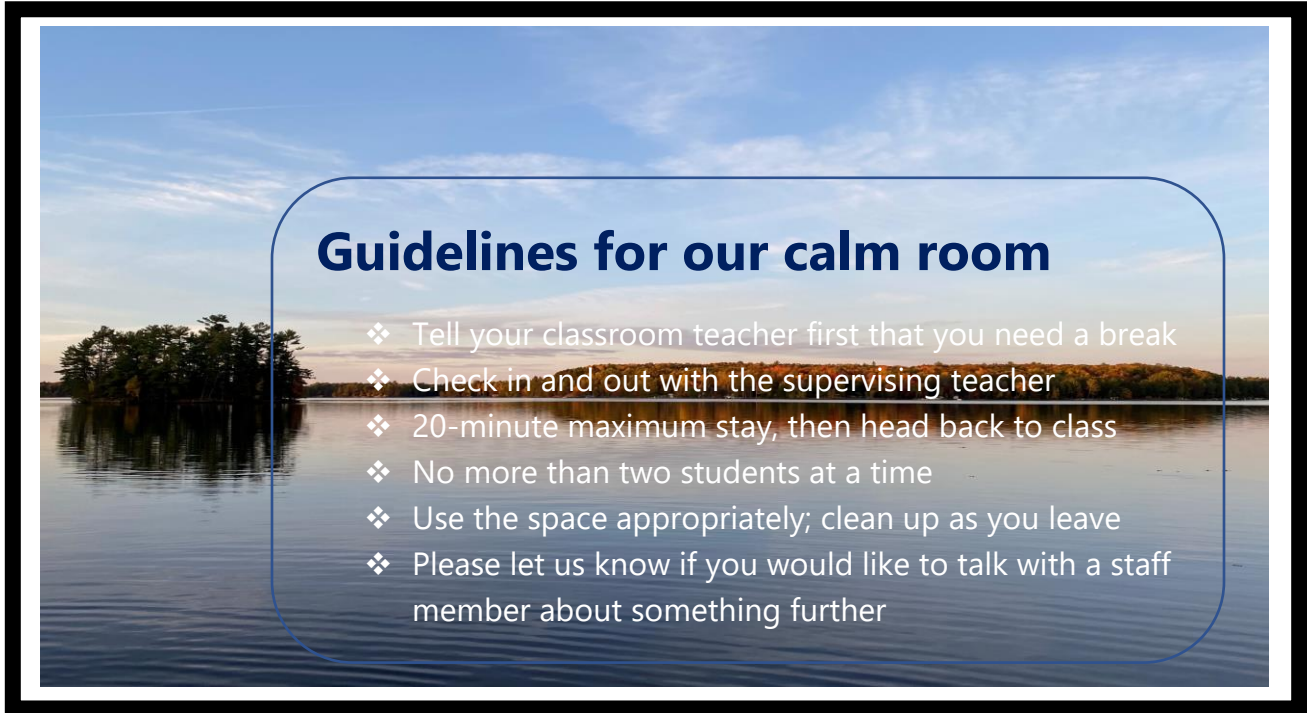
### Online resources

- ❖ Health Powered Kids - [Link](#)
- ❖ MoveMindfully - [Link](#)
- ❖ Sanford Fit Health (elementary) - [Link](#)
- ❖ Calming strategies for the classroom by Miracle Recreation - [Link](#)
- ❖ [Relaxing music for the classroom](#) and [Apple Music playlists by topic](#) from We are Teachers.com - [Link](#)

## Appendix

Hennepin County acknowledges permission to use and modify the signs and graphics below for use in creating calm spaces.

### A. Example guideline signs





B. Sample sign for using the calm area

## Calm down area action steps

1. Write your name and date on the sign-in sheet
2. Set the timer for 5 minutes
3. Use any things in the calm space for your break
4. When the time is up, clean up the calm space
5. Sign out. Check the box if you need more help or want to talk
6. Rejoin the class activities

C. Sample of suggested activity sign for a calm room or space. Modify for grade level.

## Suggested activities in the calm space



The sign is a vertical poster with a yellow background. At the top, it says "I Feel..." in large, colorful letters. Below this is a row of ten small cartoon characters representing different emotions. Underneath the characters, it says "I will calm down by..." in large, colorful letters. Below this are several circular icons, each with a different activity: "Take Five" (a hand with five fingers), "Rainbow Breaths" (a rainbow), "Squeeze Bubbles" (a bubble), "Coloring Book" (a book), "Puzzle Pieces" (puzzle pieces), "Squish Pops" (a pop), "Sensory Bottle" (a bottle), "Stress Ball" (a ball), "Play Dough" (dough), "Fidget Spinner" (a spinner), "Read a Book" (a book), "Rock" (a rock), "Play" (a child playing), and "Blocks" (blocks).



D. Sample of calm space request cards to individually print for each scholar

