

# TOOLS vs TOYS

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It is important to make the distinction between a TOOL and a TOY to students and school staff:

- **TOOLS** are items used to help meet a need, to help effect change.
- **TOYS** are for pleasure and entertainment. Both require that they be handled with care to have a longer life span.

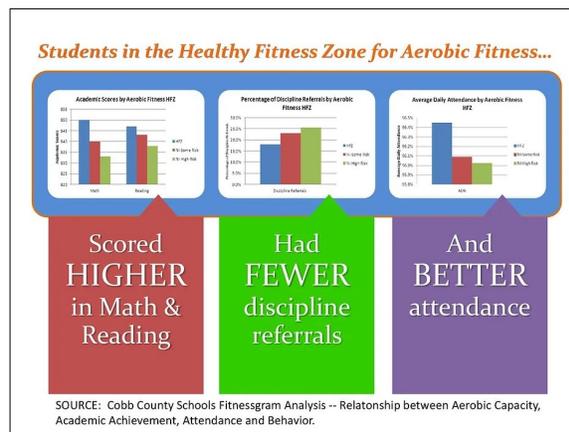
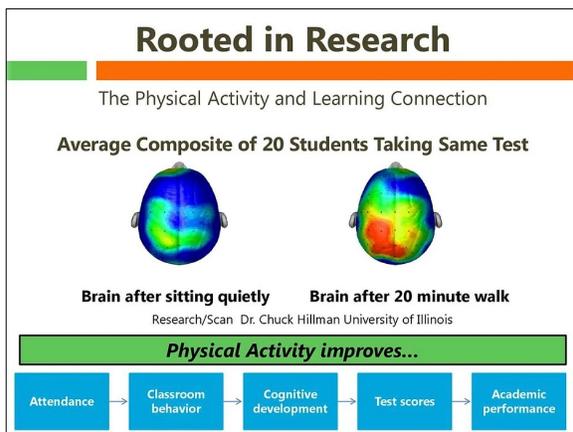
*\* A same item can be used as a tool or a toy depending on the objective. Adults need to be clear and explicit when introducing an item as a tool.*

**Difference between a TOOL and a TOY**

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## Research on Brain Breaks



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## Research on fidgets

**Fidgeting is not a fad that will disappear, nor did it start with the craze of the fidget spinner.**

- Psychology research about sensation seeking tells us that people often seek to adjust their experiences and their environments so that they provide just the right level of stimulation.
- 'Toy-Based Pedagogy is based on the principle that toys are not just for entertainment or recreation but can also be used as a learning resource for the mental, physical, social and emotional development of the child. Toys can open up and ignite the mind of the child.' (NCERT, 2022)
- Fidget tools should not be confused with toys that provide entertainment and take focus away from an important task (Understood, 2019).

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## Fidgets and adults

Fidgeting is natural and adults fidget all the time as well, but they don't realize it. However, their forms of fidgeting are more subtle.

- **Pen used as a fidget**
- **Doodling**
- **Shake/bounce leg while seated**
- **Tapping hand or foot**
- **Twirling hair**

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## LOSS OF PLAY

- **David Elkind, Power of Play:** over the past two decades, children have lost twelve hours of free time a week, including eight hours of unstructured play and outdoor activities. Free unstructured play, spontaneous pickup games, and self-initiated dramatic play, are replaced by digital devices.
- **Stuart Brown, Status of Play:** outdoor play has decreased by 71% in one generation in both the US and the UK.
- **Peter Gray, American Journal of Play 2011:** Escalating diagnoses of childhood anxiety, depression and ADHD has paralleled the loss of play.

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## TRUE PLAY

- Not all types of play are equal.
- True play does not involve work or a focus on outcomes.
- It is not for task mastery or learning.
- True play allows a child to project what is within. Providing opportunities for emotional expression without repercussions.
- One of the most important functions play serves is in the development of a child's emotional system and preserving psychological well-being.



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## PLAY AND EMOTIONAL WELL BEING

- The defense response to a mortal threat and the excitement of play share their roots in the same branch of the autonomic nervous system (Porges & Buczynski, 2011)
- When children are “stirred up” emotionally, their play can reflect themes they are struggling with.
- Play is how they naturally make sense of all the emotions they are experiencing.
- In play, pictures are drawn, structures are made, and games are engaged in to **ALLOW EMOTIONS TO COME OUT** in safety.



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## PLAY AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION

- According to Jaak Panksepp play facilitates the maturation of the frontal lobe inhibitory skills that enable a child to reflect, look, listen, and feel before acting on primary-process emotional urges.
- Play, including rough-and-tumble play, appears to shape the Prefrontal Cortex and have an impact on self-regulation and planning (Bell, Pellis, & Kolb 2010; for reviews also see Pellis & Pellis, 2007; Pellis, Pellis, & Himmler, 2014)
- Research has shown that self-regulation skills were better in those children who were allowed to play without interruption.

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## PLAY AND LEARNING

- Play provides the ideal situation for a child to develop the ability for **sustained engagement** in an activity by staying selectively focused on the situation at present, tuning out distractions, and holding the information in our heads (Diamond, 2013).
- We can observe the effects of active engagement on **Executive Function Skills** in a study comparing children assigned to Montessori and non-Montessori schools, which discovered that the Montessori children, who had fewer interruptions during their self-directed play, performed better at EF tasks than the other group (Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006, as cited in Carlson, Zelazo, & Faja, 2013)



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**OTHER BENEFITS OF PLAY**

Many traditional games support interactive play and social skills such as communication and turn-taking when playing together, children learn to compromise, share, and collaborate as well as develop their language and communication skills.

Tools (games, fidgets, activities, building and creating materials) offer our students time to switch gears and process their emotions.

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### **Importance of introducing, trying, and setting expectations**

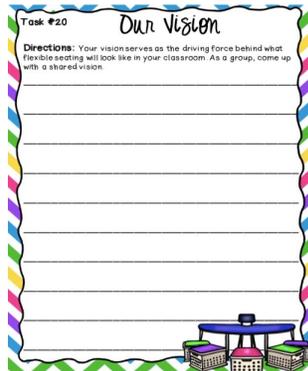
- Do not expect students to know how to use tools (including how NOT to use tools).
- Providing explicit details and modeling will help avoid misuse.
- Explaining the why; the purpose of the tool to them.
- Making an agreement that the tool will be removed (or substituted) if it is distracting and unbeneficial to their learning.
- Use of a visual to remind students of the rules.
- Verify if the tool is answering the student's need/challenge.

*\* When students know what is expected of them, they will use the materials appropriately and demonstrate that you can trust them to use materials well. Structure and routine also go a long way in helping to manage students with challenging behaviors.*

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## Expectations Poster/Activity



### Tool Expectations

1. I will use a tool that an adult has given me permission to use.
2. I will use it properly and safely.
3. I will not disturb others with my tool.
4. I will stop using the tool if it is distracting me from my work.

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- Ensure that materials get used, by having them out/available, organized and at student's disposal. However, it's not a buffet! Using a **Personal Choice Board** can help with structuring choices for students.
- Teach students about when to use tools. Which ones are always available and the ones that require permission.
- These parameters, structures and routines are key in maintaining order. As a community, everyone shares the responsibility to use, care and store the tools.
- Some students may benefit from a **Personal Bin** with items that are 'reserved' just for them.

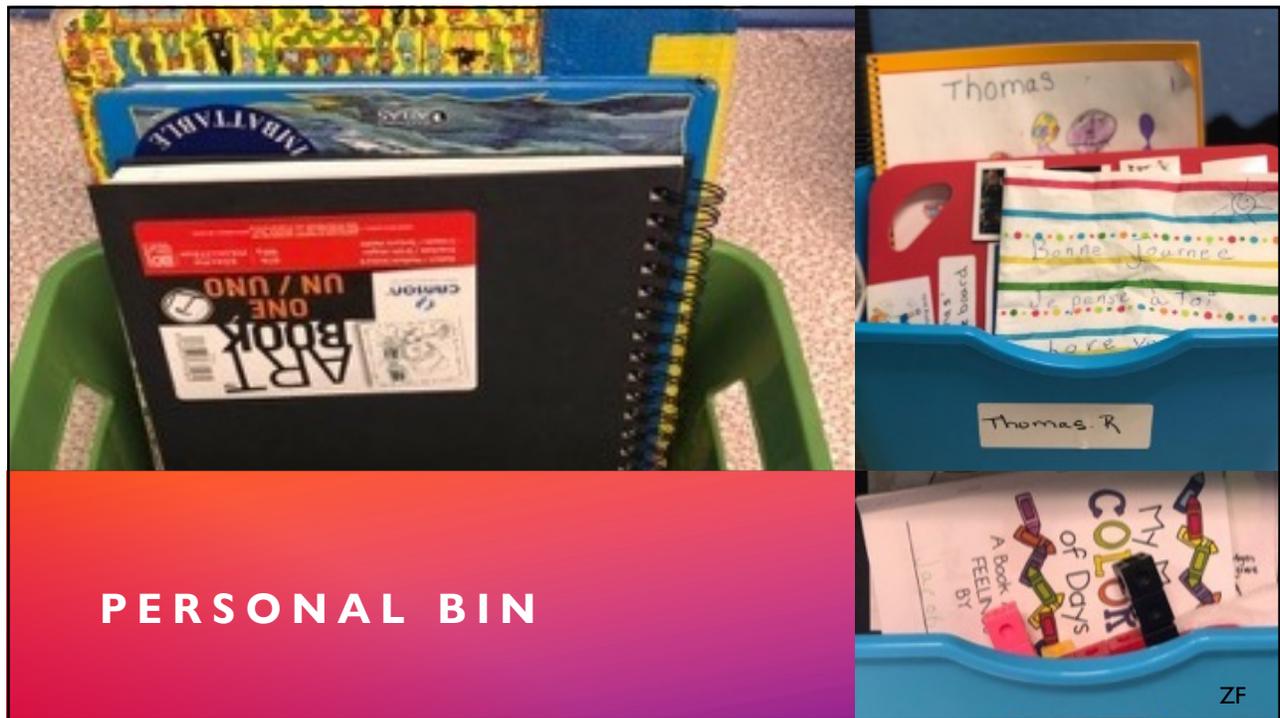
Importance of having materials available

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- Having the opportunity (or not) to have a specific item because it's viewed as a toy.
- Taking away the item because it's being misused by the student rather than accompanying them with it.
- Trial and error will go a long way when it comes to finding the right tool (not one-size fits all).
- The lifespan of a given tool may change but it does not mean that it didn't work or won't work again in the future.

## CONSIDERATIONS

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- Tools are not meant to contain or shut down the need to stim/release
- Parameters around the use of some of these tools
- Consulting the OT

## CONSIDERATIONS

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## Differentiating between REWARDING vs. FULFILLING A NEED

- Too often we get confused about the purpose of a particular tool.
- As many tools can be seen as toys, we need to look harder at how it can be fulfilling a need before judging it has a privilege.
- Tools support and answer a need to; move, concentrate, calm, shift gears, etc.
- Rewarding with toys are for pleasure without purpose.

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## LET'S TALK TOOLS



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## **FLEXIBLE SEATING**

To support our students academically, emotionally, and physically, we need to address comfort, movement, and a sense of security when it comes to classroom seating.

Comfortable students are engaged students!

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## **WHY FLEXIBLE SEATING?**

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Physical health

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Comfort

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Sensory input

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Options

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**EXAMPLES**

**Task #5 Flexible Seating Visual Survey**  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
I prefer .... Circle your 3 favorite flexible seating options.

Standing Desk 	Hakki Stool 	Yoga Ball Chair 	Lap Desk 
Crate Seat 	Traditional desk 	Beanbag Chair 	Bucket Seat 
Camping Chair 	Couch 	Yoga Mat 	Floor Pillow/Desk 
Soft Chair 	Beach Chair 	Scoop Seat 	Bungee Chair 
Rocking Chair 	Director Chair 	Roller Chair 	Butterfly Chair 

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**ALTERNATE WORKSTATIONS**

- Offering a variety of subtle changes in positioning increases alertness.
- Allowing students to stand, stretch out and move increases oxygen flow to the brain, and blood flow.
- Offering clipboards, working on the window ledge, standing stations, dry erase magnetic boards, easels or on the ground will make a huge difference in helping to engage students.



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Why an alternate workstation?

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# Physical Health

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# Engagement

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# Options

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## EXAMPLES

- Standing desk
- Window ledge
- Low table
- Lap tray/desk
- Surf lap desk
- Clipboard/White board
- Cycle-desk
- Easel

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## SENSORY MATERIALS

Many students need sensory systems addressed at different times. This is why a sensory diet is useful for some students. There are different types of input that cause a release of neurochemicals that can last up to two hours, depending on the type of input and intensity.



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Why offer a  
variety of  
sensory  
materials?

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Sensory input

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Engagement

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Options

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# EXAMPLES

Visual Stimulation	Sounds	Weighted Objects
Sents	Tactile Stimulation	Breathing

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# CLASSROOM FAVORITES

- Kinetic Sand
- Scented Play Doh
- Water Beads
- Thera Putty
- Weighted Lap Pad
- Water Timers
- Pin Art



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## SENSORY BREAK AREA IDEAS

**Sensory bin**

**Brush**

**Sensory picture frames**

**Pinwheel**

**Sand tray**

**Stretchy toys**

**Putty**

**Massage rings**

**Spiky massage ball**

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## FIDGETS

A fidget tool is a device that becomes the outlet for this unconscious behavior. They are important in allowing students to fidget in a structured way, helping them to concentrate and learn.

### SENSORY-MOTOR SKILLS WITH A POPPER FIDGET

**FINGER ISOLATION**

**SEPARATION OF THE SIDES OF THE HAND**

**EYE-HAND COORDINATION**

**SELF-REGULATION**

**VISUAL, AUDITORY, TACTILE INPUT**

**WRIST STABILITY**

**BILATERAL COORDINATION**

**THUMB IP JOINT ISOLATION**

**PROPRIOCEPTIVE INPUT TO JOINTS OF FINGERS**

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## EXAMPLES

Bead Pets

Rainbow Loom

Bracelet Making

Worry Dolls

Origami

Stringing Cheerios/Beads

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## PENCIL-PAPER GAMES AND ACTIVITY PAGES

- Coloring pages
- Mandalas
- Doodling
- Sketching
- Color by numbers
- Paper cutting activity
- Dot-to-Dot
- Mazes
- I Spy
- Find the differences
- Crossword puzzles
- Oversize paper (mural)
- Etc.



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### The Benefits of Doodling



- Helps you concentrate
- Can help spur creative insight
- Can help process emotions
- Alleviates stress
- Can be a creative outlet
- Can help you learn better
- Helps with big-picture thinking



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## BUILDING ACTIVITIES

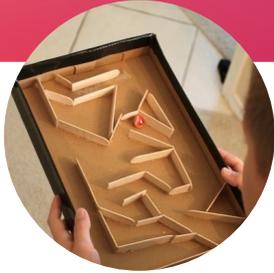
Have an area that offers different types of building games. This offers movement, creativity, physical work of building, taking apart and trying again. It simulates 'real life' where things don't always work out how we would like!



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## EXAMPLES



- Lego
- Peg Board Marble Maze
- Foam Tunnels
- Popsicle Stick Tower Construction

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## CREATIVE OUTLETS

Have materials ready and available for students who gravitate towards creative expression. These outlets offer students another avenue for expressing their emotions.

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**EXAMPLES**

- Yarn Creations
- Drawing
- Painting
- Journaling
- Writing a poem/song
- Scrapbooking
- Sketching
- Photography



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**EMOTIONAL  
RELEASE  
ACTIVITIES**

Activities that help students express their emotional energy and process all that is within them. It is a time for expression without words and to take frustrations or fears into play.



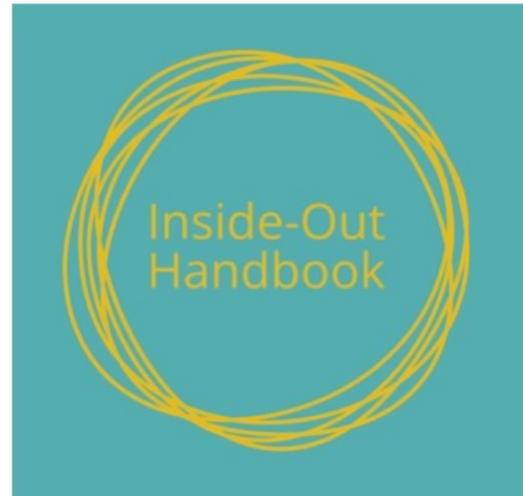
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## EXAMPLES

- **Draw the music**
- **Drumming**
- **Frustration Monster**

Check out [Hannah Beach's blog](#) for  
samples of Emotional Release Activities



You can find numerous ideas in the Inside-Out  
Handbook which is free when you have a copy  
of the book: <https://reclaimingourstudents.com/>

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## Tools for high energy level release

- **Exercise ball**
- **Pool noodle**
- **Target with Velcro darts**
- **Soft foam/plastic balls**
- **Skipping rope**
- **10-sided fitness dice**
- **Bubble wrap**
- **Large stuffed animal**
- **Mini trampoline**



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# GAMES AS TOOLS

- Puzzles
- Board games
- Card games
- Outdoor games



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## Benefits of playing cards and games

- Stress reliever
- Concentration
- Communication/Social skills
- Problem solving
- Memory
- Teamwork
- Fine/Gross motor skills

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## IMAGINATIVE PLAY

- Dress-up
- Masks
- Puppets
- Drama
- Role play



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## Benefits of imaginative play

Imaginative play helps with practicing and developing:

- language skills
- social skills
- problem-solving
- emotion-regulation

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## SENTIMENTAL ITEM

- Also known as a comfort object, a transitional object or an attachment object.
- Provide psychological comfort, especially in unusual or unique situations, or at bedtime.
- Often take the form of a blanket, a stuffed animal, pictures, or a note.
- May be referred to by a nickname.
- Assist children through separation and help them gain independence.
- Research indicates that these items have positive effects on children by reducing anxiety.



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## When and where to use tools

Cocooning Area

Brain Breaks

Designated Area in the classroom

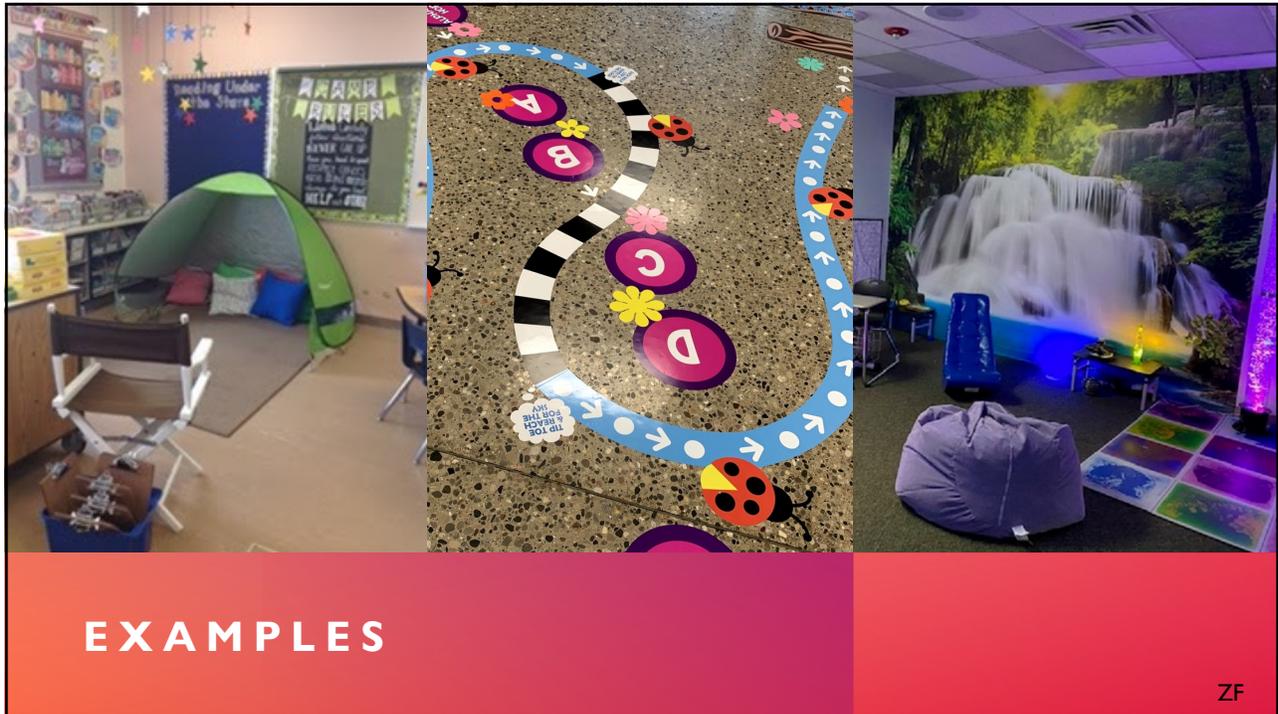
Movement Stations/Kinesthetic Hallways

Oasis/NSC

Emotions Room/Physical Release area

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Should all students be given access to these tools or only those who really seem to need them? How to present the use of tools to parents?
- What to do when a student misuses or refuses to use a tool but they would benefit from it?
- How to evaluate the use of the tool (good fit? Whether still benefits from it?)

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