



How to Guide...Desk/Concentration Barriers

What are they?

Desk concentration barriers are physical dividers placed on a pupil's desk to reduce visual distractions and help create a personal workspace. They may be made from lightweight card, plastic, or foldable composite materials and can vary from simple three-sided partitions to multi-feature designs with storage trays and slots for visual reminders. Whatever the style, their shared purpose is to **support focus and self-regulation** by limiting competing visual input and providing a defined, structured space where pupils can work more independently.

Why would they be used?

Modern classrooms are visually rich, socially dynamic, and often noisy. While this energy suits many pupils, others experience it as sensory overload. Every movement, bright display, or peer interaction competes for attention, reducing working memory capacity and increasing stress. The desk barrier introduces calm through structure. It signals "this is my workspace," offering a clear boundary that supports executive functioning, organisation, and emotional regulation. For some pupils, it provides a momentary retreat that lowers anxiety and allows the nervous system to reset. For others, it is simply a practical way to limit distractions and stay on task. The impact is subtle but powerful: fewer off-task behaviours, increased productivity, and greater confidence in managing one's own learning environment.



Who would use them?

These barriers can be useful for a wide range of learners, particularly those who find the constant movement and visual noise of a classroom distracting or overwhelming. Pupils with sensory processing differences, ADHD, or autism may find that a smaller, defined workspace helps them focus on what truly matters, the task in front of them, rather than the peripheral activity of their peers. Some anxious learners also benefit from a private workspace where they can think clearly without feeling observed. Even pupils without additional needs may occasionally find a concentration barrier helpful during independent writing or tests when a quieter visual space promotes deeper focus. The key is flexibility: the barrier is not an intervention for one type of child, but a strategy that can support attention and self-regulation across many profiles.

How are they used?

Set the barrier on a clear, flat surface so that it surrounds the pupil's immediate workspace without cutting off light or airflow. Encourage the pupil to personalise the inner panels appropriately, for example, by adding a task list, visual schedule, or calm image. Explain the purpose clearly:

“This helps give you your own space to concentrate; it's your focus zone.”

Use should be **time-limited and purposeful**, not constant. Prolonged isolation can reduce interaction or increase dependence. The aim is to help pupils practise focus in a supported way and then gradually fade the barrier as attention skills improve. Staff should monitor use to ensure the barrier promotes engagement rather than avoidance. Review its effectiveness regularly and adjust placement, timing or content as needed.

When can they be used?

Concentration barriers are best introduced during activities that demand sustained attention or independence. Writing, reading, maths problem-solving and assessment tasks are common examples. They are equally effective in quieter moments, such as structured reflection or catch-up work, when a pupil benefits from a defined, clutter-free area. Some schools use barriers as part of sensory regulation routines, offering them briefly after transitions or playtimes to help pupils settle before returning to group learning. At home, they can support homework and revision by recreating a familiar “focus space.” However, they should never become a permanent fixture. Over-reliance can isolate a child or limit opportunities for collaboration. The most effective use alternates between focused independent work and shared learning, giving pupils both boundaries and connection.



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