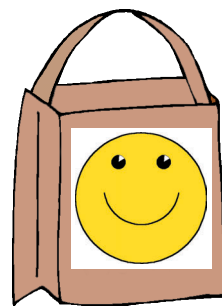


# Weekend Study Buddies: Using Portable Learning Centers



Harristina Stephens • Veda Jairrels

- Do you want to extend children's daily learning into the long weekend hours?
- Would you like to encourage parent involvement?

This article shows how to accomplish these objectives by using portable learning centers, designed for elementary schoolchildren. These portable learning centers are called "Study Buddies."

## What Is a Learning Center?

Learning centers are educational environments that help students acquire knowledge and enable them to be involved in "self-directed learning based on strength, ability, and interest" (Genisio & Drecktrah, 1999, p. 225). Learning centers allow students to practice and enhance academic skills in a variety of areas, including reading, mathematics, science, and social studies (Davis, 2000). These centers can also be focused on specific areas such as logic, problem-solving, or measurement (Pagliaro & Roudybush, 1998) and can enable teachers to vary and individualize instruction (Salend, 2001).

There are two types of learning centers. One type occupies a specific area of a classroom. Another type of learning center is a portable individual packet of

activities (Genisio & Drecktrah, 1999). Area learning centers can be used by one or more students simultaneously. According to Salend (2001), area learning centers can enhance socialization skills as students work cooperatively. In contrast, students can work with individual packet-type learning centers at their desks, without having to relocate to another classroom area. The individual learning center could also be designed to target only the objectives for a particular student.

Some educators have suggested that teachers create take-home learning centers. Patton and Jones (1997) designed take-home learning centers for toddlers. These learning centers provided for improved parent-child interaction during routine home activities.

Elementary classrooms often have learning centers that occupy an area of the classroom. Therefore, portable learning centers can also be created for elementary age students to take home to assist with academic remediation.

## What Is a Study Buddy?

Stephens, the first author of this article, designed the weekend study buddy as a portable learning center for students with mild disabilities, ages 5 to 9. The study buddy is a colorful cloth or paper bag that the student can take home over

the weekend. It is approximately 17 inches wide and 17 inches deep.

Just as classroom learning centers are devised for particular academic areas, weekend study buddies can be created and individualized to target particular areas of academic need for a specific student. Many activities in a specific classroom learning center can be duplicated, placed in the study buddy, and taken home by the student. To have an adequate and appropriate supply of instructional materials to place in a study buddy, teachers may elect to rotate which students take their study buddies home for the weekend.

After using the study buddy for several weeks, Stephens found that her students' reading and writing skills improved. Written reports regarding the students' classroom performance were sent home each week in the study buddy. Parents had to sign the report

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## Learning centers allow students to practice and enhance academic skills in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies (Davis, 2000).

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and there was space for written comments from the parents, or they could call Stephens. Parents indicated how pleased they were with their children's performance and some of the parents indicated that they assisted their children with their study buddy homework.

### How Do I Design a Study Buddy?

#### Cloth Bag

There are several methods that can be used to construct a study buddy. One method of constructing the study buddy is to sew two pieces of cloth together on three sides to form a bag. To give the bag a friendly look, make a decorative head by stuffing a sock and sewing it to the top center of the study buddy. Students can help in the construction of the study buddy by selecting the colors of the bag, making the decorative head, and naming their study buddy. The advantage of using this method is that the study buddy will be durable. The disadvantages of the cloth bag are that there are costs associated with purchasing the materials, and that a sewing machine will need to be procured. Student participation in creating the study buddy may also be rather limited.

#### Paper Bag

An alternative method of constructing the study buddy is to use large paper shopping bags with cord handles that can be obtained from major department stores. The students can then draw and color designs on their individual study buddies. Advantages of this method are that it is cost effective and student participation in creating the study buddy is maximized. The study buddy is also simpler and quicker to construct with this method. A disadvantage is that the

study buddy may not be as durable as one that is made from cloth.

### What Is in a Study Buddy?

The contents of a study buddy can be based on a student's individualized education program (IEP). For example, a student's IEP objective might state: "Given 10 one-digit basic addition problems, Jamal will be able to write the correct answer with 100% accuracy." Jamal could then take home (for several weekends) a study buddy that contained such items as a rap tape of basic math facts and flashcards (see box, "Addition Facts Study Buddy"). Of course, the study buddy should be viewed as a supplement to activities that have been given throughout the week to promote Jamal's acquisition of basic addition math facts.

The amount of time that a student would spend using the study buddy would vary, depending on the academic activity and the child. In the example above, if Jamal likes rap, he might listen to the rap tape for an extended time period. He might, however, spend only a few minutes completing a worksheet that is in the study buddy.

Other content areas for study buddies might include reading comprehension, reading and writing, phonics, and measurement (see boxes for suggested contents for study buddies targeting different academic skills).

### How Can I Encourage Parental Involvement?

School and home partnerships may be important components for enhancing students' educational achievement. Some parents, however, may have had limited success with school themselves (Gonder, 1998) and may feel incompetent when assisting their children with academic

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**Portable learning-centers provide for improved parent-child interaction during routine home activities (Patton & Jones, 1997).**

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tasks and perhaps even uncomfortable in school settings. Although the study buddy is designed for students to use independently, the activities are simple enough that most parents could feel comfortable working with their child.

During parent-teacher conferences, teachers can explain to parents that the purpose of the study buddy is to enhance academic skills and that learn-

#### Addition Facts Study Buddy

- A study buddy focusing on basic addition math facts might include a rap tape of basic math facts. These tapes are available from commercial publishers, or perhaps the student could make his or her own rap tape in class for use at home. The student could listen to the tape at home. The student could later be allowed to rap the addition facts in class.
- The study buddy might also include flashcards. The use of flashcards could be demonstrated in class and students would be encouraged to use them at home.
- A number line could be included and the student would complete a worksheet using the number line. An alternative procedure would be to include an abacus to assist the student with completion of the worksheet.
- If the teacher has any card games or self-correcting materials that deal with addition, these could also be placed in the study buddy.

#### Measurement Study Buddy

- Include a tape measure, ruler, pencil, and paper.
- Provide a worksheet with a list of items located in the home to measure.
- Several objects could also be placed in the study buddy and the student told to measure them at home (Mercer & Mercer, 2001).

### Phonics Study Buddy

- A reading study buddy that focused on phonics could have a list of letters with the instruction that the student cut out photos from magazines of objects that begin with those letters (Mercer & Mercer, 2001). If necessary, old magazines could also be included in the study buddy for the student's use.
- This study buddy could also have a list of three-letter words with the vowels deleted and a vowel spinner. A vowel spinner can be made of cardboard (Mercer & Mercer, 2001). It is divided into sections with a vowel in each section and a spinning pointer. The student would spin the pointer, and then try to complete the word with the vowel that the pointer indicated on the board.

ing centers may help to improve students' attitudes toward school (Sloane, 1998). Teachers should encourage par-

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**During parent-teacher conferences, teachers can explain to parents the purpose and uses of the study buddy.**

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ents to interact with their children while they are completing activities from the study buddy. During demonstration sessions, teachers can model for parents how instructional materials, such as flashcards, can be used in the home.

### Final Thoughts

There may be several advantages to creating portable learning centers for home use. One advantage may be that the use of the study buddy may encourage parents to be more actively involved with their children as they complete their homework. Another advantage may be that if students enjoy learning centers in school, the weekend study buddy may extend that enjoyment into the home, while simultaneously improving their

### Reading/Writing Study Buddy

- The study buddy could contain a series of photos with the instruction that the student write a sentence for each photo or write a story about the photos. The teacher could take the photos from magazines, or take photos of the student in class and insert them in the study buddy. The student would later read his or her sentences or story to the class on Monday.
- The study buddy could also have a book that the student could read.
- Magnetic letters could be placed in the study buddy and the student told to make vocabulary words from the book.

academic skills. The portable learning center may serve as an additional tool for individualizing instruction and enhancing the achievement of all students.

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### Reading Comprehension Study Buddy

- A book from the school or class library could be placed in the study buddy for the student to read at home.
- There could also be a set of sentences about the book to be put in sequential order. Each sentence could be placed on a 4 x 6 card. The student would then place the sentences in order. An alternative sequencing activity would be to purchase inexpensive storybooks and disassemble the pages. These disassembled books could be placed in the study buddy and the students instructed to put them in order (Genisio & Drecktrah 1999).
- A worksheet with questions about the book could be placed in the bag.
- The study buddies could contain drawing materials so that students could illustrate certain events from the story.

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