

An Interoception-Informed Approach to Supporting School Participation

This approach is based upon the premise that so-called ‘challenging behaviors’ are not a choice, but rather are rooted in underlying dysregulation—an automatic response of the student’s nervous system. Therefore, we need to get curious about the inner experience of our students and consider outward behaviors through an interoception lens. There could be multiple interoception “whys” contributing to dysregulation. This chart gives you some ideas/possibilities but these are not exhaustive nor comprehensive nor are they prescriptive. Every student and situation is different. But overall, consider how you can understand and respond to dysregulation in a more curious manner.

School Activity	Dysregulation signs you may observe:	Interoception “WHY” could mean:	OLD responses	NEW interoception-informed responses
Morning routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -distractibility/difficulty independently completing routine -difficulty managing clothing and getting personal supplies from locker to classroom -blow-ups with peers -pushing/yelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -doesn’t recognize overwhelm in multisensory environments -differences in executive functioning (interoception is at the base of these skills) - unexpected touch feels painful or very startling -discomfort from classmates in their space - discomfort in outdoor clothing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Hurry up, your friends are already finished” “Hurry so you can get a token/sticker” “You know how to do this. Let’s go” “Make a smart choice” “You always forget your stuff” “You look so distracted.” “You will need to clip down if you don’t get in the classroom on time” “Pick up your things from the floor and put them in your locker” “Quiet voice in the hall, you’re being too loud” “Say sorry to Sally- we don’t push our friends” “You are angry.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “There is so much to look at and listen to. Let’s see if we can find a quieter place to get ready.” “You’ve done a great job so far, look around and see if there is anything of yours on the ground.” “High 5, check your checklist to see what is next” “I hear your voice is loud. Can I help you with anything?” “Are you okay?” “Does something hurt?” “It gets really busy and sometimes our friends can get too close. Does that bother you? Let’s move over to the side so you have more space.”
Circle time/instruction time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -zoning out/no participation -excessive movement/difficulty sitting -impulsive talking/touching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -doesn’t recognize fatigue - doesn’t notice or understand body signals of hungry/thirsty/hot/cold/etc. -body needs to be in a state of motion to attend -discomfort holding body in one position but unable to understand or communicate -brain distracted by external sensory environment -masking/hiding dysregulation to please 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Pay attention” “Criss cross applesauce” “Listening body, quiet hands, still hands” “Sit on your bottom” “No touching, just look” “Wait your turn” “You don’t look like you are with us.” “I’ll wait until you look like you are listening to begin” “Clip up/clip down” “I’m moving you to yellow/red” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I see you moving a lot right now. What does that tell us about your body energy?” “What does your body need right now?” “Do you want to sit a different way?” “Did you eat breakfast?” “Is your stomach sore?” “You have great ideas. I want to hear them. Can you try to remember your idea and I’ll ask you after ...” “I can see your hands are busy. What would you like to touch that can be yours and not your friends?”

School Activity	Dysregulation behaviour you may see:	Interoception "WHY" could mean:	OLD responses	NEW Interoception-informed responses
Student independent work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -zoning out -avoidance/yelling -whining/crying -not asking for help/clarification -inability to start, maintain, complete work -excessively off task -falling off chair -rocking/moving/standing at desk -excessive pencil pressure/broken pencils or crayons or ripped paper -chewing clothing/pencils/hair -frequent requests for bathroom use -complaints of stomach ache 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -doesn't notice or understand hunger/thirst/pain signals --unable to notice frustration and/or ask for help or seek a break -unable to notice anxiety and/or ask for help or seek a comfort item -unable to recognize confusion and ask for help -unable to recognize overwhelm and ask for help -unsure of how long work will last -distractibility of brain by external or internal senses -need for vestibular input to maintain focused or regulated but unaware of it -seeking proprioceptive or deep pressure sensations in body to remain regulated -big bladder sensations. -voiding secondary to stress. -confusion with bladder, bowel, stomach signals -missed bladder/bowel signals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Pay attention." "Didn't you just hear me? I just explained it." "You look angry." "Use your words." "It's not hard. You did this yesterday." "You haven't started YET?" "The teacher just told you." "Listen with you whole body." "Look at me." "Clip down." "First math, then swing." "If you want a token, you need to finish this worksheet" "Stop rocking, it's dangerous." "Sit on your bum" "Stop chewing on ..." "If you don't get it done you'll have to miss recess." "You'll have to wait until recess to use the bathroom" "You just went to the bathroom, you can wait." "Why didn't you go to the bathroom at break? Now you had an accident." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Did you eat breakfast?" "Is your stomach sore/hungry?" "How was your sleep last night?" <i>(Check the communication book from home to see if anything out of the ordinary.)</i> "I see your hands are tight...what is going on?" "I'm here for you. What do you need?" "Is there something I can do to help?" "It's kind of noisy here and hard to concentrate, here's some ear defenders if you want." "Sometimes this can be tricky, let's see if we can figure out where to start." "I love the way you are wiggling to help you do this worksheet." "Do you want a fidget?" "Would you like to use a different type of chair?" "You can stand at your desk if you need to." "Do you want to do math on the swing?" "I see your poor pencil is getting chewed pretty bad, do you have something else you'd like to chew on?" "Let's use the bathroom before recess since it's sometimes tricky to tell if you have to go or not." "Do you think you need to eat, go to the bathroom or are worried about something?" "I'm sorry this happened, let's go get cleaned up. Next time I'll help remind you to use the bathroom, how does that sound?"

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Snack/lunch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -extra messy eater -mouth stuffing -gagging -acting hangry!-irritable, aggressive, demanding -poor eater/not eating at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -doesn't notice the feeling of a full mouth -enjoys the tight feeling of a full mouth -doesn't recognize the internal sensations of hunger at all or only when they are very intense -doesn't connect the internal sensations to feelings of hunger/fullness -misinterprets inner sensations (e.g., mistakes anxiety for hunger) -is overwhelmed but doesn't notice or know how to respond (or responds in logical way but it is misinterpreted by others) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Slow down" "You are going to choke" "If you eat slowly, you get a token" "You're so messy when you eat" "Stop yelling or you will need to clip down." "First sit still at the table and then you can have your snack." "You need to appropriately request your snack with nice words" "You have to eat something, it's snack time" "That looks good, you better eat it" "If you want to go to recess, you need to eat" "You have to eat a healthy snack first" "You were fine eating in the cafeteria yesterday" "If you don't sit and eat, you will need to go to the principle's office to eat." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Let's cut this up so there are smaller, safer pieces to eat at a time." "How does your mouth feel when you take a big bite? Can you try a smaller bite and see how your mouth feels?" "That's a huge bite. Do you feel some of it coming out of your mouth?" "Where do you feel something in your body right now?" "What do you notice about your stomach?" "Are you thinking about your yummy food?" "When did you eat last?" "Would it be easier for you to eat somewhere else?" "Is it too loud/smelly/bright in here to eat?" "Is there anything in your lunch box you feel comfortable eating today?"
Recess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -pushing peers/frequent altercations -seeking rough play -clumsy/ aggressive -avoidance of peers or active play -poor listening -difficulty transitioning back into school -significant upset when clothing wet/cold -significant upset when winter clothing is not on right -unawareness of cold hands/face -refusing/crying/avoiding recess time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -doesn't recognize strong pressure/tension sensations -strong pressure sensations are calming/regulating -overwhelmed by busy sensory environments -auditory processing decreased as excitement increases -big tactile sensations are registered by their brain -missed cold or discomfort sensation signals by their body/brain -brain is predicting stressful sensory environment - stress response activated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Go sit on the bench" "I'm going to tell your teacher (to clip you down)." "You have to walk with the supervisor now" "Go play, don't just sit here" "You aren't listening, so you have to sit out" "I warned you about doing this yesterday." "There is nothing wrong" "Your pants/gloves are fine" "Don't worry about it" "You will be fine." "You need your coat/mits on" "Why didn't you tell me you were cold?" "Don't whine, it's fun outside." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "It is so busy and exciting on the playground, sometimes waiting our turn is hard. Can I help you?" "What do you want to play on right now that would feel so awesome to your body?" "What is your favorite thing to do when you are at recess? Why?" "It can be super busy outside. What would you like to do?" "How can we make recess more comfortable for you?" "Oh no, I see a wet leg. I can help you with that. Is it uncomfortable?" "Do you have another dry glove? How can we make it better?" "Let's check your hands and see if they are warm, cool or cold."