

# Interoception

## Understanding our body and our feelings

### What is interoception?

- Interoception is an internal sense which enables us to notice, identify and respond to internal physical and emotional states. Researchers and health professionals have learnt a lot more about interoception over the past 10 years. We now know that being able to recognise the way our body is feeling is linked with the ability to understand and regulate emotions.
- Interoception skills are needed to help us to recognise when we:
  - need to go to the toilet
  - are hot or cold
  - are hungry or thirsty
  - are in pain or have been hurt
  - are feeling tired
  - are becoming upset, angry, excited, or any other emotion.
- Interoception skills give us the tools we need to be able to manage our physical and emotional wellbeing.
- People with well-developed interoception can use both logic and emotions to respond effectively to their environment without a lot of effort.
- People with less well-developed interoception skills can have a hard time knowing how to respond to their environment and must think carefully about responses that come easily to others. This can lead to fatigue, sensory overload, shutdown, meltdowns, and anxiety.
- Difficulties with interoception can impact participation during the day in other activities – e.g., it is very hard to concentrate on school or work tasks when you are hot, cold, tired, hungry or need to use the toilet.
- Effective interoception requires:
  - Being aware of our body (e.g. noticing an increase in heart rate, fast breathing, grumbling stomach, dry mouth, full feeling in bladder)
  - Interpreting these cues (e.g. understanding what the signal means – dry mouth=thirsty)
  - Acting on these cues (e.g. getting a drink)



## What are some signs my child may be struggling with interoception?

- Difficulties with toilet training or having accidents (not realising they need the toilet until it is almost, or too late).
- Wearing clothing that doesn't match the weather - e.g., doesn't seem to feel the cold, or wears heavy clothing in summer.
- Forgets to eat or drink, or in contrast seems to constantly eat without being hungry.
- Doesn't seem to feel pain or realise when they have been hurt, or in contrast seems to overreact to small injuries.
- Doesn't recognise when to take a break from physical activities - e.g., doesn't seem to notice when their heart is racing, or they are getting "puffed".
- Struggles with managing emotions and social interactions and has a hard time trying to describe how they are feeling.

## What can help with developing interoception skills?

- Building regular toileting, eating, and drinking into the daily routine.
- Providing cues to recognise physical and emotional states, for example:
  - "I can see that you have goosebumps, is your body telling you that it's cold?"
  - "I can see that your face is red and clammy, is your body telling you that it is hot?"
  - "I can see you jiggling on the spot, is your body is telling you that it needs to wee?"
  - "I can see you have a grazed knee, you have hurt yourself"
  - "It looks like you are getting frustrated, because you are stamping your feet"
  - "I can see you yawning a lot. Is your body is telling you that you are tired?"

It is important to remember that we all experience our interoceptive sensations differently - like how you might feel hot, while your friend feels cold - and neither is right or wrong. Not respecting and validating children's experiences by either telling children how they are feeling or by disagreeing with them, no matter how well meaning, can result in our children not being able to trust their body sensations. This can have negative impacts on their mental wellbeing and increase their risk of abuse. Our aim is to support body autonomy by positively increasing our children's awareness of their unique sensations so they can better manage their own physical and emotional needs.



Other ways to increase our children's awareness of their unique body sensations that supports autonomy include:

- Taking opportunities to explain how your own body is feeling and encouraging your child to do the same. Using the correct terms for body parts and helping your child understand how their body works is also helpful, for example:
  - "My mouth feels very dry, that's my body telling me that it is thirsty. Does your mouth feel dry sometimes?"
  - "My stomach feels very full and uncomfortable, I think I ate too much dinner. How does your stomach feel?"
  - "My stomach is grumbling, I can hear it, I must be hungry. Does your stomach grumble sometimes?"
  - "My heart is racing very fast, and I'm breathing very quickly after running around, I think I might need a rest. Can you feel your heart beating fast?"
  - "I was nervous doing that big speech, my tummy felt funny, like there were butterflies inside. Have you ever felt like this?"
  - "I feel full and uncomfortable down low in my belly (point), that means my bladder is full and I need to wee."
- Doing activities and then talking about how they change the way our bodies feel. The talking about it is very important to help our brain make the connection between our body and our feelings (remembering to validate their responses even if it's different to what you expected):
  - Playing with different textures and temperatures and discussing how they feel e.g., hot, cold, slimy, sticky, smooth, rough
  - Yoga and stretching
    - "Where can you feel the stretch?" "How does it feel after stretching?"
  - Deep breathing exercises - e.g.,
    - Rainbow breathing - Take a deep breath in through your nose, as you do raise your arms up over your head making a rainbow shape. When you breathe out through your mouth, move your arms back down to your side.
    - "How does your body feel?" How fast is your heart beating?"
  - Meditation - e.g.,
    - Try Apps like HeadSpace, Calm, Smiling Mind, Ten Percent Happier
  - Mindfulness - the practice of being aware of what we are sensing and feeling in the moment, without judgement - e.g.,
    - 5 senses activity - take a moment to get comfortable and try to identify 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can feel, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste.
  - Progressive muscle relaxation - e.g.,
    - Lying on the floor and progressively clenching and then relaxing groups of muscles e.g., face, hands, arms, feet and legs
  - Activities at the playground - e.g.,
    - Swinging - "Can you feel the wind on your face?" "How do your arms/legs feel?"
    - Climbing/monkey bars - "How do your hands/shoulders feel?"



# Connecting feeling with body cues

