

Be 'In-the-know' about interoception!

Whitney McGeary, Registered Provisional Psychologist and Cheryl Hall, Occupational Therapist

Everyone knows what the five main senses are, **but....**

1. Did you know that **interoception** is another sense we all have?
2. Did you know that **interoception** is about feeling the feelings, and not just knowing the feelings?
3. Did you know that you can strengthen your own, in addition to supporting your child and or teen's, **interoceptive awareness**?
4. Did you know that strong interoception skills can best support **mental health, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social connections**?

Let's start off by defining some key words:

Interoception is knowing what physical sensation you are experiencing (i.e. fast heartbeat, steady heartbeat, slow heartbeat) and knowing where you are experiencing that sensation (your heart within your chest cavity).

Interoceptive Awareness (IA) is one's skillfulness in recognizing and understanding what is happening within one's body in connection to one's biological needs or emotional experiences.

IA has a role in detecting and interpreting our physiological sensations or signals that inform our emotions. **IA** helps each of us with knowing what body sensations we are experiencing when we are **hungry** (i.e., stomach growling, restless), **thirsty** (i.e., dry or scratchy throat), **sick** (i.e., nausea, dizziness), **tired** (i.e., heavy feeling in different parts of the body, low energy), or **need to use the bathroom** (i.e., feeling the urge to urinate and or defecate).

Noticing What's Going On Inside

Body sensations or signals are unique to everyone. There is no "right" or "wrong" way in recognizing one's body sensations. No two people will experience and feel the same body sensations in feeling hungry, tired, sick, sad, mad, scared, etc.

Some people feel their body sensations very strongly; some people feel their sensations all at once or all-over; some people barely notice them until they get intense enough; and some people may have a hard time noticing them at all. Sometimes, the bodily signals are there, but they are hard for someone to recognize and understand. This can get more complicated when you add emotions into the mix. Your child or teen might emotionally shut down and avoid talking about bodily sensations; they may feel uncertain expressing their feelings; or they might not know how to express their feelings. This is because your child or teen is **not in-tune enough yet** with their body sensations.

So, what does this mean for parents and their child and/or teen?

- If your child or teen has ADHD and/or a Learning Disability, they can struggle more than their peers, who do not have these diagnoses, with recognizing their individual internal body cues (hunger, thirst, needing the bathroom, anxiety/higher arousal, emotional triggers).
- When these body cues go unnoticed or misinterpreted, it can lead to subtle or explosive behaviour changes, attention dips, emotional outbursts, and/or missed needs (e.g., not realizing they are hungry until they explode emotionally - “hangry”).

Interoception is difficult to quantify and measure. However, curiosity and a willingness to learn about one’s body and emotions can lead to a deeper understanding of oneself both inside and out. Teaching children interoceptive awareness can be a tool to support emotional wellbeing and improve their executive functioning skills, such as attentional control, impulse-control, and self-monitoring.

Believe it or not **IA** helps us each recognize:

- **what** we are feeling, which is our emotional - mental state (i.e., happy/good, anxious, mad/upset, sad/low), and
- **where** we are feeling that feeling - the physical sensation or signal that one feels.

Knowing **what** and **where** we are feeling in the body increases one’s self awareness. Understanding the connection between our body and feelings, and how they influence each other, can help inform us - children, teens, and adults - about what our individual body needs to **feel regulated (or calm) enough** to do tasks. This is especially helpful for when your child or teen needs to complete non-preferred tasks, since they are often hard, distressing, and /or somewhat uncomfortable to do.

Imagine a student who needs to start their math homework—a task they perhaps do not enjoy. As they sit down, they notice their stomach feels tight; their shoulders are tense; and their heart is beating a little faster. By encouraging your child or teen to tune-in to their sensations, it could support them with realizing they are feeling anxious and/or overwhelmed. Instead of pushing through those big, uncomfortable feelings, which tend to show up, they are able to take a few deep breaths and/or tighten and release the part(s) of their body that feel tight and or tense. After their body feels calmer, this could enable them to better regulate their attention, get less distracted, and begin the math activity sheet with less resistance.

A Strategy to Support ‘Tuning - In’ to the Body-Emotion Connection

We can help children and teens, as well as ourselves, with building **IA** by practicing these three simple steps:

1. **Notice** body signals — “My stomach feels like it’s clenching or sinking” and/or “My stomach hurts or is growling.”
2. **Connect** the signals to an emotion or need — “Am I nervous?” or “Am I hungry?”
3. **Act** to feel better — “I’ll take a deep breath” or “I’ll grab a snack”

Teaching children and teens to ‘**tune - in**’ to their **body sensations**, when they are using vocabulary and language to express their feelings, can support your child or teen with connecting a specific body sensation to a specific feeling or to experiencing mixed feelings. This can lead to your child or teen **responding** rather than **reacting** in response to their environment.

Suggestions For Parents to Use at Home with Your Child or Teen

- Share and talk about your own body sensations and how they connect to the feeling(s) you are experiencing. Next time when you are feeling hungry, you could describe what bodily sensation you are noticing and experiencing while simultaneously encouraging your child or teen to do it with you.
- Use simple phrases like “I wonder what your body is telling you right now?”, “Does your body feel calm/sad/ scared/hungry/thirsty/anxious?”
- Talk about how your body parts feel when doing different activities or tasks, such as “my hands sting when I touch something really cold” or “my heart is beating really fast because you jumped out of nowhere and scared me.”
- Encourage your child or teen to check in with their body signals by using the following prompt, “My (body part) is (sensation) when I feel (emotional state). Examples of this are:: “My hands are clenched when I feel angry”; “My heart is racing when I feel excited”; “My body turtles when I feel sad or anxious.”
- Create a regular mini-pause during the day: 30-60 seconds for a “body scan” (First, put hands on belly/chest/back, then take a deep breath, and then ask “how do I feel inside?”)
- Link to behaviour: After noticing a body sensation, you could ask: “What could you do to feel better?” (i.e., snack, drink, stretch, toilet break, ask for help, take a movement break) or “What might help you feel better? Or calmer?”
- Make it fun and age-appropriate: Visual charts of body signals, “body signal bingo”, or “signal of the day” (e.g., “Today I noticed my body felt ...”).

It is quite likely you will **not** always know what your child is noticing about their body sensations or signals. However, if you intentionally model curiosity in learning about your own body and emotional experiences, it can send the message that your child or teen’s inner experience is important and valid.

Interoception Resources

Books For Children

1. Body Detective: Decode Your Sensory Signals Body Detective by Janet Krauthamer and Christiane Engel
2. I Feel... Something: Listening to Your Body for Kids (Social Skills for Kids, Interoception for Kids, Social Emotional Learning) by DJ Corchin
3. My Body Sends a Signal: Helping Kids Recognize Emotions and Express Feelings by Natalia Maguire and Anastasia Zababashkina
4. Listening to My Body: A guide to helping kids understand the connection between their sensations (what the heck are those?) and feelings so that they can get better at figuring out what they need by Gabi Garcia and Ying Hui Tan

Books For Teens

1. Interoception: How I Feel: Sensing My World from the Inside Out by Dr. Cara Koscinski
2. My interoception workbook: A guide for adolescents, teens, and adults by Kelly Mahler
3. Noticing My Body Signals: A Science Lab Adventure by Kelly Mahler

Books For Parents

1. The Interoception Curriculum: A step-by-step guide to developing mindful self-regulation by Kelly Mahler
2. Interoception Activities Adventures: Play based activities for emotional awareness, sensory progressing, and regulation by Dr. Cara Koscinski

Websites For Parents

[Kelly Mahler Resources \(free\)](#)

[Helping children with interoception awareness](#)

Podcast: [Securely Attached: The science of interoception](#)