

Interoception: Our “Inner Sense”

When asked to identify senses, five commonly come to mind- smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing. This grouping includes our “far senses.” In addition to these, we have three “near senses” which include the vestibular (balance/movement), proprioceptive (muscle and joint awareness), and interoceptive (inner) systems. Most of us rarely consider how we take in information about the world around us, but every bit of it comes in through one or more of our senses. This sensory information then gets processed by our central nervous system automatically.

Everyone has different sensory preferences. About five to ten percent of the general population has significant differences in processing sensory information. Although these people may have typical vision and hearing test results, and their taste, smell, and touch receptors can take in the sensations around them, their central nervous system is unable to make sense of the information coming in and use it to help the person navigate their environment. When this happens, it causes ongoing stress as the individual receives confusing and stressful sensory input throughout the day.



Think about the last time you were sick. Your senses were likely on high alert, and you were probably extra sensitive to sound, light, and other sensations for a short period of time. It took significantly more energy to complete the simplest of tasks during this time. Just imagine if that were your existence every moment of every day. Children who have experienced trauma are at a higher risk of having significant sensory

difficulties. This can keep the brain stuck on high alert as these novel sensory experiences make the environment unpredictable and therefore, unsafe.

The interoceptive sense has long been given little attention. Still, it has come to the forefront of trauma research in recent years. Interoception is the sense that tells us what is happening inside our bodies. It controls our ability to feel hunger, thirst, the need for a bathroom break, or recognize that we are tired and need to sleep. When these sensations happen, we take actions to put our bodies into balance. For example, when we are hungry, we eat. When a person’s interoceptive sense is not working well, they may not recognize these signals at all. So, it is easy to see how this could create significant problems.

For example, a child who does not have a sense of thirst may not drink enough water leading to dehydration and irritability. After a time, this same child becomes chronically constipated. When kids get constipated, they can lose the ability to hold urine and/or feel the urge to urinate, leading to bedwetting. Drinking more liquid is an important factor for this child instead of limiting fluids to address bedwetting. However, developing a schedule and routine for children who have difficulty with these issues helps address their bodily needs. Therefore, it is key to preventing a downhill spiral.

A more subtle connection has been made between interoception and emotional intelligence. Not only does this sense help us recognize fundamental needs, but it also alerts us to our heart rate, breathing, pain, tension in our muscles, hot or cold feelings, when something tickles or itches, when we are nauseous, or are experiencing sexual arousal. Emotions are linked to physical sensations in our bodies. For example, when you feel anxious, you may feel a fluttering sensation in your stomach, and your hands get clammy. When you are angry, perhaps your muscles tighten, your heart starts to race, and your face begins to flush. Interoception is what allows you to feel and recognize these signals.

Interestingly, no two people will feel the same emotion the same way. Also, some people can very easily sense their internal signals and can tell various sensations apart. For others, knowing if their stomach is tight because they are hungry or nervous, or even if it could be that way because

of gas, is far more difficult. This is known as interoceptive accuracy. Also, some of us pay attention to these signals much more often, recognizing a change in our heart rate or breathing several times throughout the day. This is what is called interoceptive attention.

Some activities can help improve interoceptive attention. As we become better at this skill, we can also identify our emotions and regulate ourselves. Just beginning to think of how we feel about our emotions in our body and asking our children about the physical sensations they are having about various emotions can start an excellent dialogue. Keep in mind that it can be much more difficult for some people to identify and describe these feelings than it is for others.

Resource Spotlight

In partnership with Midwest Music Therapy, Music That Reclaims has been granted funds through the St. Louis County Children's Service Fund to provide music therapy to foster and adoptive children in the area free of charge. Music therapy is "the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program."

How does music therapy help your child? Music provides traumatized children with a sense of safety and security through predictable patterns and soothing sensations. Healing can begin when children feel safe. Rhythmic, patterned, repetitive activities are at the heart of regulating a nervous system that has run amuck. Trauma-informed care provides ample opportunity to engage in such activities throughout the day. This can take the form of walking, riding a bike, swinging, jumping on a trampoline, or engaging in music!

Music can address a range of issues including, trauma, neglect, or abuse. For example, a child can be pre-verbal and still benefit from the bridge that music provides. For a child resistant to a more traditional form of therapy, music can feel more like play than the work of "talking about your feelings." Music has been proven to assist in affect regulation, as well as communication and social/behavioral dysfunction. In addition, music can improve self-esteem, develop confidence through mastery, and foster a sense of identity. Enhancing these attributes can improve placement stability.

Parent Adaptability: A Key Ingredient for Foster and Adoptive Parenting

The sky is azure, bees are buzzing around the plump blooms of spring's bounty, the children are playing with abandon in

Other excellent activities that help improve interoceptive awareness include yoga, mindfulness training, and breathing exercises. Engaging in strenuous physical activity helps people become more aware of the activity of their hearts.

As caregivers, becoming more aware of our interoceptive sense can help us stay regulated. It is a good model for our children when we attend to our interoceptive signals by taking steps to care for ourselves. Be sure to take a nap, drink plenty of fluids, and take deep breaths when you start to feel stressed. A regulated caregiver can then assist a child with coregulation. Take a moment to quiet yourself and allow your inner sense to speak to you. You'll be glad you did.



The non-profit Music That Reclaims was founded by Melanie Barrier, once a foster child herself. She found that music was the constant in her life, regardless of what home she was living in. The local non-profit provides several services to foster and adoptive children in the area. Children can attend musical performances, such as the St. Louis Symphony. They are also provided musical instruments and can participate in music education and music therapy. In addition, the agency provides services for children from infant to 19, both individually and in group settings. Please contact Maria Morris, MT-BC at 314.503.4631 or support@midwestmusictherapy.com for more information.

Tell them FamilyForward sent you!

the back yard when you realize that it is time to head inside, to slow the tempo to transition into day's end. You call the

children to come in to wash up for dinner. They willingly comply...

Okay. So that is the dream you are having when the alarm goes off, and you brace yourself for another trying day with your foster children. You know the STARS trainers told you there would be hard days. Why do they always have to be right? Still feeling the tension that settled in your neck and shoulders from last night's standoff, you draw a few deep breaths to calm, then groaning, you heave yourself out of bed to begin the morning.

On good days, parenting is hard, but it can be particularly challenging when you try your best to establish a trusting, safe relationship with a youth who has unwillingly entered your family to be cared for while birth families work toward reunification. As parents, we have expectations about how family life should unfold, how children should do their best, and how teens should mature into functioning adults if they are to make it in the world. We know how we were parented, and in many ways, we turned out okay. So why isn't the same approach working with these kids? It's all about their history, history of trauma, and feeling of not being safe or protected by adults. It's all about their unspoken, unconscious need to survive. With that understanding comes the need for parents to adjust their expectations.

Children who have experienced chaos and disruption in their early years have developed a template for responding to the world and people. They are not aware that they approach situations from the point of view that they need to protect themselves at all costs. Anything new is considered a danger, and adults are not to be trusted. And so simple requests are greeted with an automatic no; any suggestion of an alternate way is an assault on their intelligence. Their challenging behaviors are not about you; it's about their history.

Often, parents expect that children will slip into a home and be comfortable with the family's culture. Family humor or rituals such as eating together or going on weekend excursions where everyone is expected to participate can feel very foreign to children who may have never experienced moments of family cohesion or connectedness. At best, it feels uncomfortable, maybe even risky or disloyal to their birth family. But, as one professional put it, if you have an inflexible child that meets an inflexible parent, it equates to a meltdown.

Parents who have a need to "fix the child" are going to struggle when they get pushback from their kids. If parents view regimented structure as the only pathway to healing the child yet fail to see change, it may be because they have not gained the child's trust. Frustration can mount for the parent when they interpret a teen's defiance as just a few precipitous steps away from breaking laws that lead to incarceration. Underlying the parent's frustration is fear; fear that this child may stumble and fall while under their watch.

Take a deep breath! Transformation takes a long time, and parents need to allow the child to take the lead. Parents need to accept the child where they are, listen without judgment



and provide unconditional love, particularly when they are at their most challenging. What is asked of foster and adoptive parents is not easy.

Values will clash, and parents need to be okay with that. It doesn't mean you are condoning a particular choice, but it is vitally important that the youth feel they have choices to make. Behavior needs to be decoded. What need is being met when a child is yelling at their parent? Are they afraid and can't find the words to express their fear? Are they frustrated because they feel they have failed once again? Are they venting their disappointment at not making the cut for the basketball team? Do we allow them to regress to a younger stage to cope with demands beyond their capacity? Or does recreating conflict in the relationship feel more familiar to them? For children of trauma, stepping outside of their comfort zone is very emotionally demanding and, at times, not doable. They may not be capable of being flexible, so the parent will need to adapt.

While structure is important in providing a sense of safety and predictability for a child, parents remain flexible when working with them. Listen to them with your heart. A response is not always required. Being physically and emotionally present for your child is paramount when things are rough. You are modeling empathy, a building block of trusting relationships.

And make sure you cut yourself some slack, parenting is hard work, and you will make mistakes. Be honest with your child when this happens and apologize. Strong bonds can form in the humbling and humanizing act of reconciliation. Channel your thoughts to the reed in a stream. It bends with the flow but does not break.

In May, make sure you celebrate your parenting role during National Foster Care Month.



safer, healthier relationships
for children and families

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Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit familyforwardmo.org/publications to read LifeLines online.

Educational Opportunities for Adoptive and Foster Parents

With the decrease of COVID-19 cases in our area, we intend to have in-person learning resume at our Creve Coeur offices, located at 1167 Corporate Lake Drive, St. Louis, MO 63132. We will continue to follow the protocols in mask-wearing and distancing as established by our administration. This may require limits in the number of people we can accommodate for classes. So, please be thoughtful and let us know as soon as possible if there is a need to cancel. This will allow others to join from the waitlist.

As in the past, we remind all attendees to make appropriate childcare arrangements as we cannot provide oversight of children left unattended in the lobby. Therefore, our priority is to keep all stakeholders safe.

STARS Classes

Thursdays, March 3, 10, 17, 24, 31 and April 7, 14, 21, 28, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

This is the mandatory preservice training for foster care licensure in Missouri.
Registration will only be accepted through Children's Division.

Healthy Relationships

Wednesday, April 6, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Children in the foster care system often have not had healthy relationships modeled for them within their families of origin. They have witnessed domestic violence, inappropriate familial and peer relationships and experienced violation of their bodies distorting what is or is not appropriate in relationships. Exploring topics that may be difficult for adults to discuss with children and teens is the starting point of becoming comfortable with the subject matter. Developing a healthy self-respect is the foundation for future beneficial relationships. As their caregivers, we must engage our children in ongoing conversations.

Road to Recovery: Supporting Children with IDD Who Have Experienced Trauma

Mondays, April 18, 25 and May 2, 9, 16, 23, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

This six-module curriculum developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network explores the complexities of parenting a child with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities (IDD) with the view toward recovery from trauma for this population. Using knowledge learned through this offering, foster parents can better advocate for a child's safety, well-being, happiness, and recovery through trauma-informed practice and move away from the strict behavior containment and compliance often used with the IDD population.

Continued Connections

Thursday, May 12, 2022 | 6:00 – 8:30 pm

Honoring teens' former attachments help a child grieve their losses, maintain connections, confirm their identity, and form healthy attachments with others. This training will provide parents with resources to move beyond their own discomfort to support the relationships, acknowledge their feelings, and develop action plans to facilitate connections for their teens.

Parenting KIDS (Kids In Difficult Situations)

Wednesdays, May 18, 25, and June 1, 8, 15, 22, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Children with histories of abuse and neglect tend to exhibit challenging behaviors such as chronic lying, stealing, aggression, difficulties with eating and/or sleeping. Trauma-focused parenting is discussed, emphasizing the impact of trauma on brain development. Ensuring a child's physical, emotional and psychological safety is paramount to decreasing behavioral issues and changing the brain's default for appropriate behavioral responses. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network curriculum is utilized and supported with additional material/videos from professionals in developmental trauma. 18 hours of class time is covered in six consecutive weeks.

Parenting Children with Drug and Alcohol Exposure

Thursday, June 9, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Children prenatally exposed to alcohol or drugs can experience a wide range of medical, developmental, and mental health challenges. This training discusses the effects of a range of substances, as well as parenting techniques that are helpful in the daily challenges. Parents are empowered with the knowledge that having at least one caring adult in the child's life can positively impact the long-term outcome.

Is This Behavior Normal?

Monday, June 13, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Children do not come with manuals! This class will provide an overview of normal childhood development. Adoptive and foster parents are sometimes stumped about a child's behavior and what, if anything, they should do about it. Training will cover childhood developmental tasks and explore ways parents can nurture their children at each stage.

ACES and Increasing Resiliency in Children

Tuesday, June 21, 2022 | 6:00 – 8:00 pm

The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) score is reviewed along with the higher risks for chronic health conditions as adults. ACEs are extremely common yet are now being considered a public health crisis. Learn ways to build resiliency utilizing the protective factors critical to strengthening and nurturing children.

Reaching Higher

Wednesdays, June 29 and July 6, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:30 pm

This seven-hour training was developed by the National Center for Child Welfare Excellence at the Silberman School of Social Work to increase the competency of those caring for children who identify with the LGBTQ community. The first half is designed to have participants assess their own values and beliefs and learn the basic information about this sector's risks and needs, specifically within foster care. The second class is devoted to skill development through a series of fast past scenarios entitled, "What to Do, What to Say."



Register for Training

Contact 314.534.9350 ext. 7234 or
email intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org

Visit familyforwardmo.org/calendar to view training information online.