

OCALI | Connecting the Dots Podcast – Episode 33 Quest for Curiosity: Bringing Interoception to Life

Simon Buehrer: Welcome back to Connecting the Dots. I'm Simon Buehrer.

Megan Trowbridge: And I'm Megan Trowbridge. Simon, before we jump in, I just want to do a quick interoception check on you. How's your body feeling right now?

Simon Buehrer: How's my body feeling? Huh. I don't know that I've ever thought about that. No one's ever asked me that.

Megan Trowbridge: I'm asking you now.

[LAUGHTER]

Simon Buehrer: Okay ... [LAUGHTER] Let's see. My stomach feels a little fluttery. That could either mean that I'm really excited about this episode ... or I skipped lunch.

Megan Trowbridge: Those are two totally different things, Simon. Lots of important distinctions there. That's one of the reasons why I want to chat about interoception today and what that's all about.

Simon Buehrer: Exactly. Because if I misread that signal, this podcast is going to go very differently.

Megan Trowbridge: I hope your body's telling you you're excited and not hungry because otherwise you're going to have to go grab a quick snack, and I'm going to end up doing this by myself, right?

Simon Buehrer: [LAUGHTER] Well, I can snack and talk at the same time.

Megan Trowbridge: All right. So this episode is going to be just a little different than what we've done in the past. What you're about to hear was originally recorded live during OCALICONLINE, which is our big annual conference.

I had the opportunity to moderate a panel discussion with Kelly Mahler. She's an occupational therapist and educator and a self-described "interoception groupie."

Then we also had Amy Brennan, she's an occupational therapist, as well. Then Pam Thornburg, who is a parent mentor, who's worked in social services all of her adult life.

Our conversation during that panel followed a 13-part interoception series hosted by our Autism Center.

Simon Buehrer: After a series that long, we kept coming back to these same questions. What actually happens after professional development? Are the lessons applied in practice? Does implementation lead to meaningful changes and does it improve outcomes for students? Instead of just talking about interoception theory, this session focused on implementation, what it looks like in real schools with real educators and real students.

Megan Trowbridge: You're going to hear some stories about how teams shifted from compliance to curiosity and how helping students understand their body signals changed the way that adults responded to behavior.

Because when someone says, my body feels hot and busy, that's very different starting point than just saying "stop that." Just think about interoception through a different lens with the implementation piece.

Simon Buehrer: Exactly. Whether your body feels calm or caffeinated, or somewhere in between. We're glad you're here. Let's get started.

Megan Trowbridge: My name is Megan Trowbridge. I'm the program director with the Autism Center at OCALI. I'll have Kelly introduce herself next.

Kelly Mahler: Hey, everyone. I'm Kelly Mahler. I'm an occupational therapist, and I am also an interoception groupie.

Megan Trowbridge: I don't know that you're a groupie. You're like the enforcer of it.

[LAUGHTER]

Pam, you want to go next?

Pam Thornburg: Hi. I'm Pam Thornburg, and I'm the parent mentor for Miami Trace Washington City Schools in Fayette County.

Megan Trowbridge: Amy.

Amy Brennan: I'm Amy Brennan. I'm an occupational therapist for Sycamore Community Schools in Cincinnati.

Megan Trowbridge: Thank you. Again, this panel discussion came about because a lot of us attend PD, professional development, and then we don't really know what happens afterwards. Do they take the information and do something with it?

What we've done is, Amy and Pam both had such great comments during the sessions and their feedback. We asked them to join our panel to explain to others what they learned along the way and how they implemented some of the things that Kelly went over throughout the series. That's what we intend to do today, is give a little bit of education about interoception, but mainly, we want to see and hear what Pam and Amy have done with the content from that session.

Before we jump into implementation, let's ground ourselves first. Kelly is going to walk us through what is interoception, and why it matters so much when we're talking about behavior.

Kelly Mahler: Interoception, just in case it's new to any of you listening, it's our sense of how our body feels. It's how many of us experience internal sensations, and it's going to be different for each of our bodies.

But maybe you might notice a feeling, like your heart is racing fast or your muscles are tensing or your skin is sweating, your head is throbbing.

There's so many different inner feels, and we experience those because of interoception.

To be aware of those body signals helps us to be aware bigger of how ... what emotion we're feeling? Are we hungry? Are we in pain? Are we anxious? We know that every single one of our bodies are born into the world, every human body is born into the world, having some general sense of how their body's feeling, whether it's comfortable or uncomfortable.

We're probably not born into this world saying, I'm hungry or I'm thirsty or I'm cold or I'm overwhelmed. But we do have this general sense of how our body is feeling either comfortable or uncomfortable and that we're wired to communicate that comfort or discomfort to our caregivers.

When our body is uncomfortable, we communicate that, whether it's crying or turning our head or flinching or whatever it is. That alerts the caregiver that something is off in our body.

Our body needs something. Our body's having a feeling.

That caregiver then is on this quest for co-regulation. They have to make guesses about what's happening inside the infant's body. They don't know for sure if it's hunger or if it's too bright or the infant's cold, they have to go through a series of guesses until they figure out what that internal felt need is.

Then when they get it right, that's when the co-regulation is effective and it's helping, and so many people learn more about their body. They start to shift from just this general sense of my body is comfortable or uncomfortable to being able to understand it with more clarity, like this is hunger in my body or this is anxiety in my body.

Then they start to learn how to regulate that. My body feels so much better when I eat or my body feels so much better when I take a quiet break or I go for a walk. They start to really gain this knowledge through that co-regulation process. They gain this knowledge about their body, which gets them to a place of self-regulation, and that self-regulation is where we really understand our bodies enough to be able to figure out what our body's feeling and what our body needs, ultimately, for that place of regulation.

Simon Buehrer: Megan, what I love about this framework is that it shifts us from asking, "What behavior is this?" to "What is my body experiencing?" Like what you asked me to start off today's program.

Megan Trowbridge: Absolutely. Often in schools, we're trained to analyze behavior through compliance or through functions or through consequences. But interoception invites us to slow down, get curious about discomfort, and not to fix immediately, but to understand first.

Kelly Mahler: There's a lot of our students that have had very loving co-regulation experiences at home, but I just want to be really clear. There's just no amount of bubble wrap that we can put around kids to protect them from just being bombarded by the society at large.

We just live in a culture, just being very over-general here, but an "anti- body listening" culture. We are bombarded by lots of messages of saying, "Don't listen to your body." "Ignore what your body needs ... feels ... to please other people, to get your rewards and reinforcers, etc."

This interoception piece of helping our students to really gain that knowledge about their bodies is really important to be able to achieve that self-regulation. If they don't have that knowledge yet about their body, they don't have that firm interoception

connection, then they are left with co-regulation, which is what I think we're seeing a lot in the schools.

Co-regulation is hard. I think it's really important to acknowledge that, especially when we're trying to co-regulate with some of our children or student that might not be able to tell us what their body needs. Then it goes back to that piece we were talking about with co-regulation with infants. We have to make guess after guess after guess until we figure out what their body needs.

It can be really hard.

It is this place of curiosity that we need to hold open, and I think that quest for curiosity ... instead of what I used to do before really knowing about interoception ... and it's hard for me to talk about this, even though I talk about it quite a bit, but it's very vulnerable ... but I was making so many assumptions about the students that I was supporting, and thinking I knew what was going on with them, and when we switch to this interoception piece and this co-regulation piece, this quest for curiosity, many times, I at least discover things that completely shock me. And I realize I was making the wrong assumptions.

I guess it's not easy advice, but just stay curious, try to be on a quest to really understand that source of the discomfort in the body and what could be happening.

Megan Trowbridge: Quest for curiosity.

One of the things that surprised many of us in this series was this. Before we teach students to notice their body signals, we have to notice our own. Our panelists, Amy and Pam, are going to discuss their self-awareness, and Pam's going to share a story about one of her students.

What did you notice about your own interoception awareness and regulation as you began to model co-regulation for your students?

Amy Brennan: I think I just had a greater awareness of my own. I think Kelly might have mentioned this, we put that aside a lot of times.

Because we were talking out loud about how our bodies were feeling in the classes and with my students that I see, I think it just brought my own emotional feelings and body feelings to the forefront more, and being able to think about how those needs were being met, because I was modeling that for my students too.

I think it just created a greater awareness for myself.

Megan Trowbridge: Pam, for you?

Pam Thornburg: I agree. I think it was a better awareness. I tend to be sometimes a little outspoken, and so I think that other people should be—and they're not.

I think that for me, it was learning to pause and to be able to really help me understand that I need to listen to other people.

I think we find in general that we are ... when we ask somebody, "how are you?" they come back with a quick answer of "okay." But then we don't stop and say, are you really okay, and what does that mean? What does that feel like?

I started doing that with myself and then with other people, and it was surprising how many people do not want to really talk about it until they know they can.

Megan Trowbridge: That's great. Thinking about what you just said, Pam, can you share a moment when co-regulation helped a student begin to self-regulate more effectively? Because we know that co-regulation is the foundation. Do you have an experience with that?

Pam Thornburg: I can think of several, but I have one that just when my office was moved, it's right across from the gymnasium. I have kids all the time coming in and out of there, and I can hear them, and I heard a little girl one day last week and she was coming from the hallway and she had just come out of the gym and I heard her say to herself, "I'm so hot. I can't stand this."

I thought, okay, this is my opportunity. I'm going to go out, open my door and I'm going to say, how are you feeling?

She said, "I'm hot." And I said, can you tell me how that makes your body feel? What does it mean that you're hot?

She said, "My face is red, and I can feel it."

I said, what does that feel like?

She said, "It just feels like it's bright."

I said okay, and I said, what about the rest of your body?

She said, "Well ..."

And I said, you can think about it for a minute.

She said, "I feel kind of cool, too. But that doesn't make sense."

I said, it does make sense! I said, because you're coming out of a hot room, you're sweaty. I said, the air has hit your body, so now you feel a cooling sensation. I said, where do you feel that at?

She said, "On the back of my neck."

Then she looked at me, and she said, "I've never talked about that before."

I said, you just learned something new, and you taught me something new.

Simon Buehrer: This was an amazing story. A student learned to notice and name her internal experience—not because she was dysregulated, but because someone paused long enough to ask.

Megan Trowbridge: One of the most important takeaways from this series was this. We often start with emotion words, but emotion words don't mean anything unless they're grounded in the body experience. Let's listen as Kelly talks about this connection, and Amy shares another student's story.

Kelly Mahler: When we talk about body signals, we're talking about, how do your body parts feel? How do your hands feel right now? Are they tight or loose, are they cold, are they wet? Are they fidgety? There's so many different feels that we have in our bodies.

What we're finding is that those body signals provide a foundation for understanding emotion words. You come to understand what the word "anxious" means for you, or what the word "hot" means for you, or "tired" means for you—through your own unique body signals.

We know that ... and what I think is part of the coolest thing about interoception, is it's showing us just how different each of our bodies are. What your body feels like when you're tired or hot or ... it's going to be different than what my body feels like, and what I notice in my body.

Providing students with opportunities to learn about their own unique body signals then tends to give emotion words more concrete meaning.

Otherwise, students, what we're finding is they're just memorizing all of these emotion words that we're all throwing around, including myself, just assuming that they have this understanding of, like, what it means to be frustrated.

Really, it's getting at this deeper foundational level of starting with body signals before we ever start talking about these emotion words. And then coping skills are even further down the line of being able to understand your body.

Amy Brennan: I had a student for my middle school group that we had, and we had done a series of the different experiments to help understand how our body parts experience different things. He came in from recess one day, and he typically came in over-excited and needed to do some calming type things when he came in from recess.

After we'd done our series of experiments and he'd been practicing for a while, he came in and he said, "My hands and body feel hot. I think I need to hold an ice pack to calm down."

The teacher and I were shocked, because he would usually say, "My hands and body feel hot," then we would have to prompt him and say, what does that mean? What do you think that means and what do you need to help them feel comfortable?

He was then able to identify, "I need an ice pack to calm them down," and then was able to utilize that appropriately, which was a really big deal for him, because he had a hard time verbalizing that, typically.

The next time he came in after that, we thought that would just become a pattern that he would always ask for the ice pack. Instead, he came in and he said, "My hands and body feel hot, my body feels busy. I think I need to jump." Then he went and moved to his jumping area and did that.

I would say we did the group for 6-8 weeks, but he was able to start applying that on his own, and we were just shocked.

It seems so simple when you think about it, but really it's not, and for him to be able to verbalize how his body was feeling and then what he needed on his own without someone offering options or choices was a very big deal.

That was a proud moment for us. For him.

Simon Buehrer: This is what makes interoception different from just teaching coping skills. We're not just saying, "Use a strategy." We're helping students understand why their body needs one.

Megan Trowbridge: I always go back to, what does implementation actually look like? We want to prime you a little bit with the knowledge that Kelly has a lot of resources

on her website, which both of these ladies will reference, such as “experiments” is a term you’re going to hear. They will also discuss some of the strategies they learned in the training and how they use them to connect those body signals with emotion words.

What were your first steps in bringing interoception into your setting? Whether it be the classroom, a therapy space, a home, how did you get started in introducing this to your colleagues?

Amy Brennan: I found one teacher that I thought would be great to try it with in her class. She and I work very well together, and she’s always gung-ho about anything I bring in to try. I thought okay, we’re going to try it in her class first because she’s willing to try anything with her students to see if it will help, help them stay regulated throughout the day.

I was strategic in where I started it, but then also, we slowly just started doing the experiments that Kelly has listed, one week at a time and moving through them.

Without a definite ... I think usually we’re on such a timeline, and it is a process and trying to understand that it is a process and giving ourselves time to work through that, I think, was a big help. We started there.

I also started in individual sessions with some of my individual students just trying the terminology and starting to talk about their bodies and doing some of the “experiments” with them and talking about, after you do this, does your body feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Slowly introducing the terminology, and not feeling like I had to bring everything into the first session because I was really overwhelmed.

I did do several of her courses before I started trying some of that, because I was overwhelmed, like, oh, man, how do we start this? It’s such a great curriculum, but it can seem overwhelming when you have so many steps.

But just picking small pieces at a time to start with made a big difference.

Megan Trowbridge: I think that’s how Kelly starts off her sessions anyways, giving us these little pieces of information to start with. Pam, how did you have a different role being a parent mentor. How have you introduced this either with families or within your buildings that you serve?

Pam Thornburg: Honestly, I started out with a teacher as well. She had come to a group of us with the guidance counselor and our team, and we were just discussing a

couple of students that were new to her classroom that had not been in school prior, and she was having some concerns about how she wanted to relate to them. She wasn't able to figure out the best possible way because they both had individual needs, but there were also similarities.

She said, I think I need a change. I need to figure out what I can do. I just gave her the information that I had received from the training, and I said, what we can do is incorporate it into your teaching.

We can draw your body on the paper, and you can take it in, and you can start in the mornings and say, here I am. This is my body. This is how I feel this morning. Would anybody like to participate with me?

She chose those two children. They drew their bodies, and they were able to understand that not only did they have those feelings, but she had them as well, and she was willing to share those with them.

When she'd come in and said that she had a head cold and her nose felt stuffy and she might not be very happy this morning, then she was able to explain that.

Simon Buehrer: What we have learned is that you can start with one classroom, one teacher. Start small, model it, and use gradual, intentional shifts.

Megan Trowbridge: If you could give one message to professionals or parents beginning the journey, what would it be? Kelly, do you have a message?

Kelly Mahler: I think the biggest thing is just to be kind to yourself because interoception often represents a shift in the way our education system many times is built, and what I hear from so many of my educator colleagues is interoception really represents many times the reason why they got into the job to begin with, because they want to get to know kids, and not necessarily have to be using all of these behavior modification techniques.

It's more about getting to know each individual body and what each individual body needs so that they can thrive within a classroom setting.

Pam Thornburg: Just to never stop. Just keep pursuing this, keep being curious, learn to pause, learn to listen, and just know that it will work. You just have to give it time and be open minded and think outside the box.

Megan Trowbridge: Amy, what message would you have?

Amy Brennan: I would say start small and work to add things as you feel more confident.

Megan Trowbridge: What a great panel. This was really hard to edit a 60-minute conversation down to 20 minutes. The whole 60 minutes was just very insightful.

I think that we have all learned is that interoception is a way to look at behavior through a lens. When a student says, "My body feels hot and busy," they're halfway to self-regulation.

Simon Buehrer: There were so many great takeaways from this discussion, and you did a great job, Megan, of really trimming it back to that 20-minute target. I know that was a challenging exercise, but you did a great job of doing that.

You can head over to our Inspiring Change page to get links to all the resources that we shared in this episode. You'll find it at ocali.org/podcasts.

You've been listening to Connecting the Dots from the Autism Center here at OCALI. You can learn more about the Autism Center and find out even more great resources, strategies, and supports. Just bounce on over to ocali.org and scroll down to the Autism Center.

Megan Trowbridge: Thanks to our guests for this episode, Kelly Mahler, Amy Brennan, and Pam Thornburg, and thanks for listening.

I'm Megan Trowbridge.

Simon Buehrer: I'm Simon Buehrer. We'll see you soon.

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