

When Behavior Is a Question: Using the ASSUME a Sensory Reason™ Framework to Support Children with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities and Mental Health Challenges

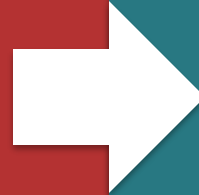
- ▶ Jordan Smelley, MHPS , Certified People Planning Together (PPT) Lead Trainer

Why This Matters in Schools & Community Settings

- ▶ Behavior is often misinterpreted as defiance.
- ▶ Misinterpretation increases escalation and shame.
- ▶ Small adjustments can dramatically improve regulation.

✗ Intent-Based Interpretation

Defiant
Manipulative
Attention-seeking
Noncompliant
Inappropriate



✓ Regulation-Based Interpretation

Overloaded
Seeking input
Avoiding overwhelm
Protecting safety
Attempting regulation

Interpretation drives intervention.

The ASSUME Framework

- ▶ Ask: What sensory input is happening?
- ▶ Scan: Body cues and environment
- ▶ Shift: Language and expectations
- ▶ Use: Regulation supports
- ▶ Modify: Environment and structure
- ▶ Escalate: Collaborate with specialists

Trauma-informed safety + consent

- ▶ Some examples can be triggering (trauma, suicide, touch-related behaviors).
- ▶ Focus is safety, consent, boundaries, and dignity—especially for school settings.
- ▶ We use a “both/and” lens: sensory + trauma + pain/school health factors can co-exist.

Learning outcomes

- ▶ Differentiate proprioceptive/tactile seeking vs avoidant patterns and how they show up in schools, classrooms, and community settings.
- ▶ Apply an interpretation lens that reduces escalation, shame, and power struggles while strengthening engagement.
- ▶ Implement practical, low-cost strategies including language shifts, environmental adjustments, classroom modifications, grounding tools, and inclusive participation supports.

Key definitions

- ▶ Proprioceptive processing: body awareness; pressure/movement input.
- ▶ Tactile processing: touch/texture/temperature input.
- ▶ Patterns can be seeking (craving input) or avoidant (overwhelmed by input).
- ▶ In school settings these can look like “behavior problems”, “not listening”, “meltdowns”

Proprioceptive seeking Patterns in Schools

- ▶ Restless energy
- ▶ Difficulty sitting still
- ▶ Invades personal space
- ▶ Seeks movement or pressure

Proprioceptive seeking — what to do instead (teachers and school staff moves)

- ▶ Offer movement options
- ▶ Provide structured breaks
- ▶ Use grounding activities
- ▶ Allow flexible seating

Case Study: Proprioceptive Seeking

- ▶ Student pacing during instruction
- ▶ Ask: Classroom noisy
- ▶ Scan: Restless body
- ▶ Shift: Supportive language
- ▶ Use: Movement break
- ▶ Modify: Standing option

Proprioceptive avoidant patterns in Schools

- ▶ Avoids crowds
- ▶ Shuts down
- ▶ Appears defensive
- ▶ Overwhelmed by proximity

Proprioceptive avoidant – what to do instead (teachers and school staff moves)

- ▶ Increase space
- ▶ Predictable approach
- ▶ Reduce surprise proximity
- ▶ Offer written/alternative participation

Case Study: Proprioceptive avoidant

- ▶ Student withdrawals during group activity and flinches when approached from behind
- ▶ Ask: What changed in space or proximity?
- ▶ Scan: Defensive Posture, shallow breathing
- ▶ Shift: From Defiance ➡ Nervous System protection
- ▶ Use: Predictable approach & Visual Cue before proximity
- ▶ Modify: Seating near wall, increased personal space

Tactile seeking Patterns in Schools

- ▶ Frequent Touching(objects or people)
- ▶ Difficulty with physical boundaries
- ▶ Seeks texture or pressure
- ▶ High-contact regulation attempts

Tactile seeking — what to do instead (teachers and school staff moves)

- ▶ Teach consent scripts
- ▶ Provide designated tactile tools
- ▶ Offer structured deep-pressure alternatives
- ▶ Practice boundary language

Case Study: Tactile Seeking

- ▶ Student hugging peers without asking and/or frequently touches others during transitions
- ▶ Ask: Is this connection-seeking or sensory seeking?
- ▶ Scan: High energy, close proximity, repeated contact
- ▶ Shift: From inappropriate ➡ regulation attempt
- ▶ Use: Teach consent & structured sensory alternatives
- ▶ Modify: Scheduled deep pressure input & greeting routine

Tactile avoidant patterns in Schools

- ▶ Avoids touch
- ▶ Sensitive to textures
- ▶ Distressed in crowds
- ▶ Touch feels overwhelming

Tactile avoidant — what to do instead (teachers and school staff moves)

- ▶ Get consent before contact
- ▶ Reduce incidental touch
- ▶ Offer alternatives (tools, gloves)
- ▶ Prepare before unavoidable contact

Case Study: Tactile Avoidant

- ▶ Student pulls away from touch and/or becomes upset during line-up or close seating
- ▶ Ask: Is unexpected touch triggering distress?
- ▶ Scan: Tensing Shoulders, Stepping back, guarded posture
- ▶ Shift: From rude ➡ tactile avoidant response
- ▶ Use: Predictable boundaries & verbal cues before contact
- ▶ Modify: Increased personal space & seating adjustments

De-escalation through interpretation

- ▶ 1) Pause
- ▶ 2) Name without blame
- ▶ 3) Offer regulated choices
- ▶ 4) Re-engage with micro-goal
- ▶ 5) Document what helped for future planning (IEP/504/behavior supports)

When to collaborate or refer

- ▶ Persistent sensory patterns impacting learning
Behavior escalates despite classroom supports
- ▶ Collaborate With:
 - Occupational Therapy
 - School Counselor
 - School Nurse / Health Team
 - IEP / 504 Team
 - Family & Caregivers
- ▶ Remember:
Sensory intersects with trauma, pain, medication, sleep, and neurodevelopment.
- ▶ It's rarely either/or.
It's usually both/and.

Pocket guide: Assume a Sensory Reason

- ▶ Pause → Scan → Shift → Support → Modify → Collaborate
- ▶ **Dignity + Safety + Choice**

Closing Thought

“Behavior is not always a choice.
Sometimes... it’s communication.
Sometimes... it’s protection.
And sometimes...
it’s the body asking a question
we were never trained to hear.”

Questions / Contact

- ▶ Jordan Smelley, MHPS
- ▶ Website www.jordansmelleyprss.com
- ▶ Email: jordansmelleyprss@gmail.com



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