

# Creating a Calming Engagement Plan

In **Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®)**, the impacts of trauma are described in terms of the “5 B’s of Trauma”: brain, biology, body, behaviors, beliefs. Trauma can impact the body in a variety of ways, including sensory processing difficulties. These difficulties can manifest differently for every individual. Some individuals seek more sensory input while others are more avoidant of sensory input. Individuals who **withdraw or shut down** need just as much help regulating their bodies as the individuals who **fight or run away**.

So, what do Calming Engagement Plans have to do with this? Creating a personalized Calming Engagement Plan empowers individuals to self-regulate because the plan identifies strategies that work for that specific person. These plans take personal preferences and experiences in to account. When creating a Calming Engagement Plan for a child, it is most effective to co-create the plan with the child when both the child and adult feels safe, calm, and engaged in the present moment.

## Teaching Regulation



Regulation is the act of monitoring, processing, and adjusting how our body feels so that our energy level can match the environment or social expectations. Regulation is related to attachment, physiology (e.g., hunger, thirst, sleep, blood glucose levels), emotional development, and sensory processing.

The most important thing to remember is that people must be taught how to self-regulate through relationship.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the goal of self-regulation is not to suppress big emotions. Expression is healthy and is a nonnegotiable part of the human experience.

The goal of self-regulation is express emotion in appropriate ways.

In order for youth (and adults) to learn to self-regulate, they must be taught through modeling, explicit instruction, repetition, and play to:

- Regularly check-in with their body and assess energy levels
- Determine what energy level matches the social situation
- Build an awareness of their individual sensory preferences
- Identify strategies to regulate either by calming or alerting their body

Many concepts introduced in this guide are adapted from the following book written by a TBRI Practitioner:  
Smith, M. L. (2021). *The Connected Therapist: Relating Through the Senses*. Marti Smith Seminars.

## Regulation Check | What does my body feel like right now?

A regulation check is an easy, playful way to help people identify their current energy level and then decide how to shift their energy to the level needed for the situation. The “just right” zone is the where a person is regulating their energy level to match the environment and social context.

Having a script and a visual can help guide regulation checks without the need for lengthy explanations and language processing.

When developing a script or visual for regulation checks, offer at least 3 options:

- one for low energy (e.g., tired, bored, sad)
- one for “just right” energy levels (e.g., regulating, calm, ready to learn)
- one for high energy (e.g., hyper, angry)

Use these examples or develop your own symbols or system for a regulation check.

WHICH ANIMAL MATCHES HOW YOUR BODY FEELS?



LOW ENERGY



JUST RIGHT



HIGH ENERGY

WHERE IS YOUR ENERGY LEVEL?



LOW ENERGY



JUST RIGHT



HIGH ENERGY

THUMBS UP, DOWN OR TO THE SIDE?



LOW ENERGY



JUST RIGHT



HIGH ENERGY

As you proactively teach individuals how to identify where their energy level is, you can also practice identifying what energy level is appropriate for different situations. For example, before bedtime it is appropriate to be low energy, and before participating in a sports competition, it is appropriate to be high energy. It can be helpful to provide other relevant examples or ask the youth to provide their own examples. Keep in mind, there are no “bad” energy levels. The energy just needs to match the social context and conditions.

## Overview of External and Internal Senses

Individuals are constantly receiving sensory input from people and the environment. When crafting a Calming Engagement Plan, it is important to pay attention to sensory preferences and how sensory input impacts a person's external and internal senses. Challenging behavior displayed by youth could be related to a sensory issue, so it is important to consider sensory preferences when thinking about activities that will help a youth regulate or return to a state of calm.

There are five external senses:



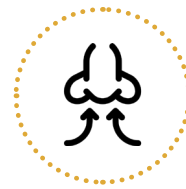
SIGHT



SOUND



TOUCH



SMELL



TASTE

There are also three internal senses:

### VESTIBULAR

Our vestibular system is related to spatial awareness, balance, and head position. Sensory input is dependent on head position and fluid moving in the inner ear. For example, when you trip while walking, your body will try and regain balance. Other activities that involve vestibular input are things like spinning, rocking side to side, hanging upside down.



### PROPRIOCEPTION

Proprioception involves deep muscle and joint sensory input that tells us where our bodies are in space. Almost all self-soothing activity involves the proprioceptive system. For example, bear hugs, putting pressure on a wound, and a back rub all involve proprioception.



### INTEROCEPTION

While the other senses discussed so far involve processing and integrating external sensations or sensory input, interoception is the sense that processes and integrates sensory input from inside the body. For example, feeling hungry, thirsty, tired, nauseous, full, like you need to use the restroom, and anxious (heart racing, muscles tensing) all involve sensory input from inside our body. *While interoception is an important component of regulating, strategies to bring awareness to the interoceptive sense are more proactive and long-term (e.g., yoga, meditation, mindfulness). So, these strategies are not necessarily something that would be used in Calming Engagement Plan. Rather, they are strategies that should be incorporated proactively when working with children.*



## Sensory Preferences

Each person has their own sensory preferences. It is important to identify how sensory information is perceived as safe or unsafe by an individual. Some types of sensory input can be triggering, while other types of sensory input can help shift energy to the “just right” level for the situation. The same person can like one type of sensory input, dislike another type of sensory input, and be neutral towards other types of sensory input.

For example, someone that does not like a lot of sound might avoid, or be triggered by, situations where there are loud, echoing sounds, such as a busy school gymnasium. This same person might also like a lot of visual input and enjoy or seek out activities that involve bright lights, colors, and movement like watching animated movies.

If you are unsure about an individuals' sensory preferences, use the Sensory Preferences Checklist designed to go along with this resource. The checklist helps uncover patterns in an individuals' sensory preferences.

Whether you completed the Sensory Preferences Checklist, or whether you feel that you already know the child's preferences, work with the child to fill out the table below:




Sensory Preferences	Notes
Sensory input that you like:	
Sensory input that you don't like:	
Sensory input that is triggering for you, scares you, or makes you feel unsafe:	
Sensory input that helps you calm:	

# Creating a Calming Engagement Plan | Sensory Preferences

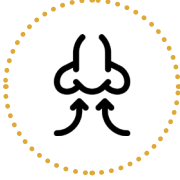
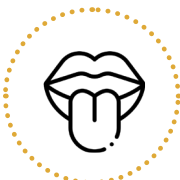
After determining an individual's sensory preferences, you can identify strategies to help them get to the “just right” energy level. Use the table below to help an individual create their calming engagement plan by:

- Crossing out strategies they know are upsetting, triggering, or just not enjoyable to them.
- Circling or highlighting strategies they already use and know work for them
- Noting new strategies that they might want to try
- Adding other strategies to the “fill in the blank” spaces when applicable



As you work through the list of strategies below, be intentional about including opportunities for connection. Connection is just as powerful as, if not more powerful than, sensory experiences when it comes to regulation. For example, listening to music with slower beats per minute is a calming strategy that could be even more calming if a child can listen to music with a safe adult so that they are experiencing connection and regulation at the same time.

Sense	Tips to Calm	Things to consider:
<p><b>SIGHT</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Position your body so you can see the door and the whole room</li> <li>• Use sunglasses, a hat, or a hooded sweatshirt to dim bright lights</li> <li>• Turn off lights that are blinking, pulsing, or flickering</li> <li>• Utilize calming colors: blues, greens, browns</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Room scanning, especially for exits can signal lack of felt safety (movement in the peripheral vision can trigger a threat response)</li> <li>• Bright lights and circular or chaotic patterns are alerting</li> <li>• Alerting colors are red, orange, yellow</li> </ul>
<p><b>SOUND</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use noise-canceling headphones</li> <li>• Go to a quiet space or room</li> <li>• Listen to familiar or relaxing sounds (e.g., a favorite song, rain sounds)</li> <li>• Listen to rhythmic sounds (e.g., ocean sounds)</li> <li>• Listen to music with slower beats per minute</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music with higher beats per minute is alerting</li> <li>• Some music also provides a proprioceptive sensation (e.g., rap music, highly rhythmic, or fast tempo music)</li> </ul>
<p><b>TOUCH</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Touch with firm pressure, like a hug, high five, back rub, or hand on the shoulder</li> <li>• Use weighted items (e.g., blankets, stuffed animals, lap pads, neck pillows)</li> <li>• Feel smooth, soft, or familiar textures (e.g., a soft blanket, a smooth stone)</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light touch (e.g., tickles, feathers along arms), cool air on the skin, and feeling rough or uneven textures (e.g., sand) are alerting types of touch</li> <li>• Note: showers can be perceived as light touch</li> <li>• Use symbolic touch if you are unsure how someone will respond to touch</li> </ul>

# Creating a Calming Engagement Plan | Sensory Preferences

Sense	Tips to Calm	Things to consider:
<p><b>SMELL</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilize calming scents like lavender, vanilla, cinnamon, sugary smells, and baking smells</li> <li>Smells that are familiar and pleasing to the individuals (e.g., favorite dinner) are also calming</li> <li>Breathing strategies to use in combination with calming scents:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Soup or pizza breathing (deep breathing)</li> <li>Square breathing</li> <li>Fresh air or removing yourself from an area with scents that are triggering or overwhelming</li> </ul> </li> <li>_____</li> <li>_____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scents can elicit fear responses for people. The sense of smell has direct access to the emotion center and can elicit a fight/flight/freeze response if the scent is associated with a stressful experience.</li> <li>Note: cologne or perfume can be a big fear response smell for some people</li> <li>Peppermint, citrus, and floral scents are alerting scents</li> </ul>
<p><b>TASTE</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sweet tastes</li> <li>Mild flavors</li> <li>Warm foods</li> <li>Familiar or culturally comforting foods</li> <li>Water</li> <li>_____</li> <li>_____</li> </ul>	<p>Foods or textures that are alerting include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Salty, crunchy foods (foods that scatter are difficult to motor plan)</li> <li>Cold or hot food or liquids (temperatures provide more sensory input)</li> <li>New foods</li> <li>Minty or spicy flavors</li> <li>Note: fizzy drinks also provide tactile sensory input</li> </ul> <p>Dehydration can cause electrolyte imbalance and an increase in excitatory neurotransmitters, so offering water can be calming</p>

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Sense	Tips to Calm	Things to consider:
<p><b>VESTIBULAR</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rocking movement</li> <li>• Swings—movement front to back and side to side</li> <li>• Rhythmic sports (e.g., tennis, swimming)</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spinning in circles, hanging upside down, jumping up and down are alerting activities</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROPRIOCEPTIVE</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stretching or yoga</li> <li>• Wall pushes</li> <li>• Move heavy items or wear a backpack</li> <li>• Chewing bubblegum</li> <li>• Sucking - lollipops, drinking through a straw or water bottle</li> <li>• Tight clothing</li> <li>• Squeezing a stress ball or other type of fidget</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>• _____</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Note: walking on your toes can be a sign of seeking proprioceptive input because a smaller foot surface area increases pressure and signal strength of sensation</li> </ul>