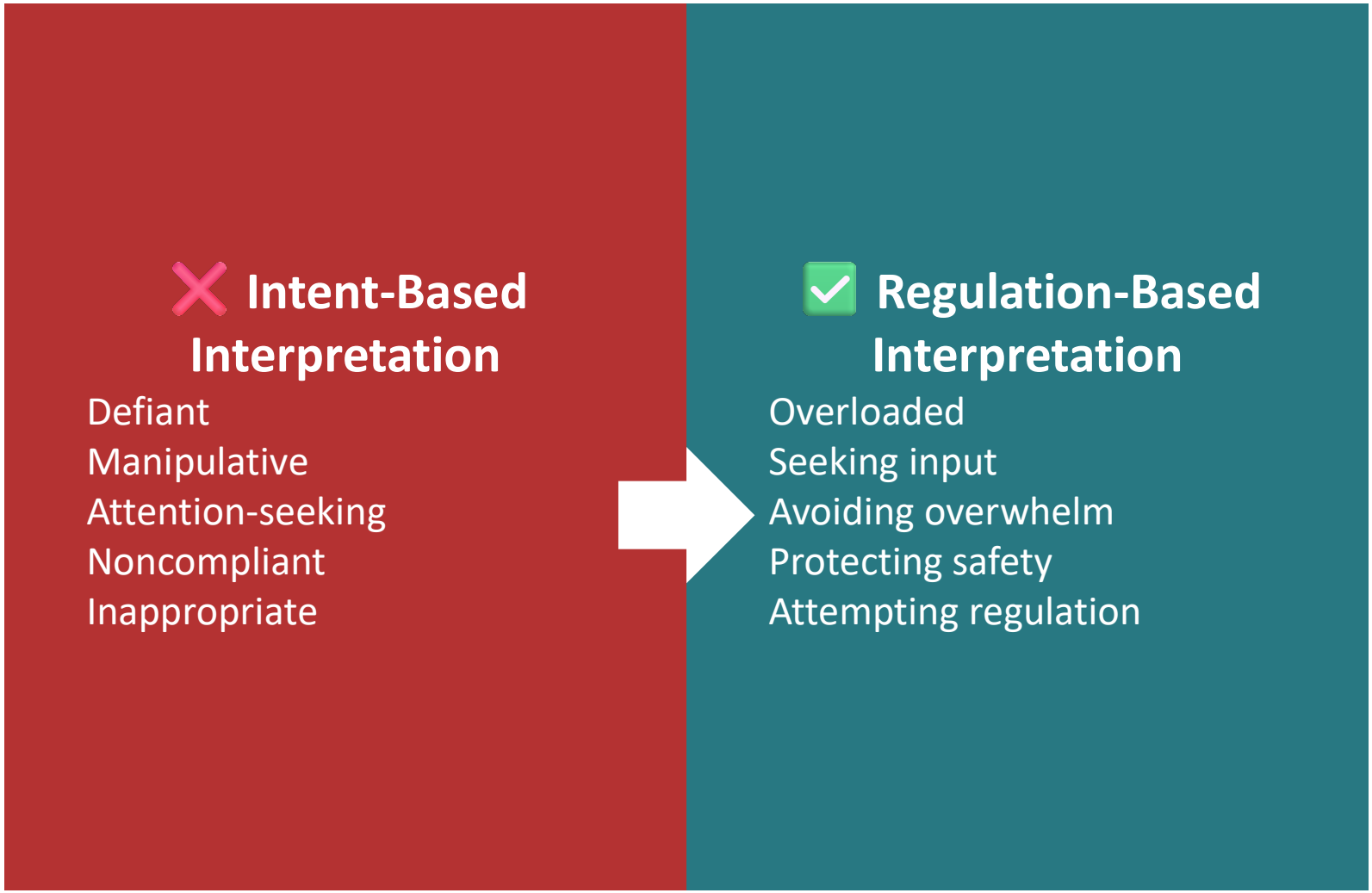
When Behavior Is a Question: Using the ASSUME a Sensory Reason™ Framework to Support Children with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities and Mental Health Challenges

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Why This Matters in Schools & Community Settings

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

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