

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

Body-Based Regulation

Why bodies matter for traumatised children

Why bodies matter

When a child is dysregulated, the cognitive/verbal brain is partly offline. Asking them to 'think calmly' or 'use their words' or 'reflect on choices' doesn't work because those parts of the brain aren't fully available. The body, however, IS available. Body-based interventions — particularly those involving proprioception (sense of body position), deep pressure, rhythm, and breath — can regulate the nervous system more directly than cognitive interventions. This is not pseudoscience. There's robust research on the connection between body and nervous system regulation, particularly polyvagal theory work by Stephen Porges and applied work by clinicians like Bessel van der Kolk and Bonnie Badenoch.

Proprioceptive activities (5)

#	Activity	How
1	Wall push-ups	Stand facing a wall, push hard for 10 seconds, rest, repeat. Heavy work calms the nervous system.
2	Chair push-ups	Sit in chair, push down on seat to lift body, hold 5 seconds. Discreet, classroom-friendly.
3	Carrying heavy items	Books, bags, anything with weight. Errands that involve carrying — calming.
4	Animal walks	Bear crawl, crab walk, frog hop. Engages multiple muscle groups. Good for younger children.



#	Activity	How
5	Pulling / pushing	Resistance bands, parachute games, tug-of-war. Heavy resistance work.

Deep pressure activities (5)

#	Activity	How
6	Weighted lap blanket	Small weighted blanket on lap during seated work. 5-10% body weight max.
7	Bear hug self	Wrap own arms around self, squeeze, hold. Self-administered deep pressure.
8	Burrito roll	Wrap in a blanket, snug but not tight. Provides whole-body pressure. Pre-K / KS1.
9	Ball squeezes	Stress ball, putty, theraputty. Hand pressure transmits regulation.
10	Pillow / bean bag press	Sandwich child between cushions (gently, with consent). Younger children love this.

Rhythmic movement (5)

#	Activity	How
11	Drumming	Drum on knees, on a desk, on a real drum. Rhythm regulates.
12	Walking with rhythm	Walk to a beat — clap, count, sing. Rhythmic walking calms.
13	Swaying / rocking	Sit, stand, sway side to side. Side-to-side movement reduces activation.
14	Group songs with actions	Singing + movement + rhythm together. Especially powerful for younger.



#	Activity	How
15	Bouncing on a ball	Therapy ball or even a stable chair. Bouncing in rhythm is calming.

Breath-based (5)

#	Activity	How
16	4-4-8 breathing	In for 4, hold for 4, out for 8. The longer out-breath activates parasympathetic.
17	Finger breathing	Trace one hand up and down with the other; in on up, out on down. Visual + tactile.
18	Square breathing	Trace a square; each side is one phase of the breath.
19	Bumblebee breath	Make a hum on the out-breath. Sound + breath + vibration.
20	Blow bubbles	Real bubbles. Forces controlled out-breath. Universally calming for younger children.

How to use these in practice

1. **TEACH IN CALM TIMES.** Don't try to introduce these when a child is dysregulated. Practise during calm moments so they're familiar when needed. 2. **BUILD A MENU WITH THE CHILD.** Different children prefer different things. Try several. Let the child identify their favourites. 3. **MAKE THEM CONCRETE.** Print a 'calm-down menu' card the child can refer to. Pictures work for non-readers. 4. **NORMALISE THEM CLASS-WIDE.** Don't make these only for the dysregulated child. Whole-class breathing, whole-class movement breaks. Reduces stigma; benefits everyone. 5. **INTEGRATE WITH OTHER STRATEGIES.** Body-based regulation is one part of a wider trauma-informed approach. Doesn't replace relationships, predictability, or co-regulation.

What to avoid

- **FORCED PHYSICAL CONTACT.** Some traumatised children find touch threatening. Don't impose deep pressure activities. Always with consent.
- **MAKING IT WEIRD.** Movement breaks should feel normal, not therapeutic-with-a-capital-T. The more they're framed as standard



classroom routine, the more children use them. • EXPECTATION OF INSTANT EFFECT. Body-based regulation works gradually. A single breathing exercise won't fix a meltdown. But repeated practice over time builds capacity. • REPLACING RELATIONSHIPS. Body-based activities don't replace co-regulation with a safe adult. They complement it.

