

Early Worlds & First Feelings:
Supporting Interoception Development Through a Neuro-Affirming Lens
Part of The Unfolding Neurodivergent Journey Series
Video Course
Kelly Mahler, OTD

Video Course
CPD hours: 3 / CE credits: 3



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When the Body Speaks Before Words

Before children learn to describe feelings, they live them through their bodies. From the first cries to the first classrooms, interoception—the sense that helps us notice and interpret internal body signals—forms the foundation of emotional awareness, regulation, and self-understanding. Yet many early-childhood environments, driven by compliance-based expectations, unintentionally disrupt this process.

Dr. Kelly Mahler, occupational therapist and leading voice in interoception research, invites clinicians to see early sensory experience as both a relational and neurobiological event. How does body awareness develop when caregivers respond to internal cues with curiosity rather than correction? How does co-regulation foster a child's capacity to identify emotions before they have language for them?

Grounded in developmental neuroscience and neuro-affirming practice, this session reframes early distress as communication rather than defiance. Mahler explores how interoceptive differences shape behaviour, how early misattunement impacts emotional trust, and how sensory environments can be adapted to meet diverse nervous systems. Participants will leave with evidence-informed, practical strategies for supporting families and educators in cultivating environments that protect body trust and nurture the beginnings of self-regulation.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:



1. Explain how interoception develops during early childhood and contributes to emotional regulation and self-awareness.
2. **Describe how compliance-focused environments disrupt interoceptive development and body trust.**
3. Apply curiosity-based and co-regulation strategies that foster felt safety and bodily connection in children's earliest experiences.

About Kelly Mahler

Dr Kelly Mahler, OTD, OTR/L, is an occupational therapist, educator, and researcher whose pioneering work on interoception has reshaped how we understand emotional regulation, sensory awareness, and early neurodivergent development. She has practised since 2002, earned her doctorate at Misericordia University, and is a co-principal investigator in research on interoception, self-regulation, trauma, and neurodiversity. Author of *The Interoception Curriculum* and *Interoception Activity Cards*, Kelly brings more than 20 years of clinical experience, international training, and compassionate innovation to support professionals, families, and individuals in honouring the body's signals as foundational to connection and learning.

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cpd@nscience.world

UK/Europe: +44(0)2070961722



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