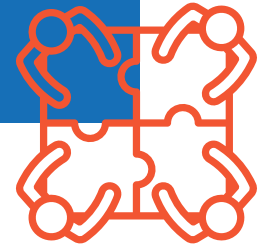


# Reframing Engagement: When “*Doing Nothing*” Is Actually **Doing Something**



## WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

In schools, engagement is often defined by what we can see: eyes forward, hands working, bodies still, voices responding. When students don't match this picture, their behavior is frequently labeled as a problem to fix.

*This guide exists to challenge that assumption.*

Learning, regulation, and engagement do not always look busy, verbal, or compliant. In fact, some of the most important learning happens quietly, slowly, and internally. When we rush to interrupt these moments, we often disrupt regulation and limit access to learning, especially for disabled students.

## A GROUNDING PRINCIPLE

Stillness, wandering, pausing, or opting out can be meaningful parts of regulation and cognitive processing. When we expand what we accept as engagement, we expand who gets to belong. If only some students can succeed under our definition, the definition needs to change.

## COMMON MYTHS ABOUT ENGAGEMENT

- **Engagement must be visible**
- **Engagement must be verbal**
- **Engagement must be continuous**
- **Engagement must look the same for all students**
- **Quiet means disengaged**

These assumptions prioritize adult comfort over student needs.

## WHAT ENGAGEMENT CAN LOOK LIKE

### Engagement:

- is flexible
- is individual
- is often invisible
- supports dignity and access

When educators slow down, observe more carefully, and trust regulation, students are more likely to engage meaningfully, on their own terms.

### Engagement may include:

- listening without responding
- watching peers before participating
- staring out a window while processing
- pacing or moving quietly
- doodling or fidgeting
- opting out briefly and rejoining later

## REGULATION VS. AVOIDANCE: A CRITICAL DISTINCTION

Regulation	Avoidance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Supports nervous system balance</i></li> <li>• <i>Helps the student return to learning</i></li> <li>• <i>May look quiet, slow, or internal</i></li> <li>• <i>Often temporary and self-directed</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prevents access to learning</i></li> <li>• <i>Persists despite support</i></li> <li>• <i>Increases stress over time</i></li> <li>• <i>Requires problem-solving and redesign</i></li> </ul>

## THE COST OF INTERRUPTING REGULATION

If we expect:

- still bodies
- immediate responses
- continuous participation

...we may unintentionally:

- disrupt regulation
- escalate behavior
- reduce access to learning

## CALL OUT: WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PREK CLASSROOMS

In early childhood settings, engagement often looks different from traditional expectations, and even more different from adult assumptions.

Young children may be engaged even when they are:

- Moving their bodies during group time (rocking, shifting, lying down)
- Watching peers instead of immediately joining
- Holding or exploring materials without using them “as intended”
- Looking away while listening
- Entering and exiting activities before settling

These are not always signs of disengagement. They are often signs of regulation, processing, and entry into participation.

## THE ADULT REALITY CHECK

### Adults regulate all the time:

- walking while thinking
- staring out windows
- pausing before responding
- stepping away from tasks
- working in bursts

**We don't call this disengagement.  
We call it thinking, regulating, or focusing.  
Students deserve the same grace.**

## WHAT TO NOTICE INSTEAD OF CORRECTING

### When a student appears disengaged, observe:

- body language and breathing
- sensory environment (noise, light, movement)
- timing (fatigue, transitions, overload)
- patterns of re-engagement

## LANGUAGE SWAPS FOR TEAMS AND IEPS

INSTEAD OF SAYING	TRY:
"off task"	"regulating"
"not participating"	"processing"
"doing nothing"	"engaging in a different way"