

Relational Inclusion blog #34: A Sign of the Times

On Wednesday, a headteacher emailed me this:

On Bonfire Night, I wanted to share a little moment with a girl who came to ask if she could borrow two sets of ear defenders — one for her and one for her sister. It really made me think about how inclusive the school is, and how comfortable the children feel expressing their needs. It also reminded me of the difficulties children face, and the things that are inflicted upon them out of tradition — things that many don't actually enjoy. Needless to say, she went home happy, armed with both sets. ❤️

It made me think — not so much about Bonfire Night itself, but about fireworks and Mischievous Night. Oddly enough, when I mentioned Mischievous Night to my wife, she'd never heard of it. I thought everyone had. Maybe it's a regional thing. For those of you who don't know me, I grew up in Leeds. When I was really young, Mischievous Night was celebrated the evening before Bonfire Night. Celebrated might be the wrong verb. Teenagers hit the streets after nightfall and caused chaos. It's funny that something so normal then sounds so strange now. I'm not sure it happens or is allowed to happen anymore. Maybe Halloween has replaced it.

As a child, it terrified me. I imagined gangs of older kids roaming the streets, breaking windows, egging houses, smearing treacle on door handles, lighting bags of dog poo and posting them through letterboxes. I'm pretty sure some or all of those things happened. When I asked my mum recently if I'd imagined it, she said it had happened and it had all got a bit out of hand.

If Mischievous Night wasn't enough, then came the fireworks. In the weeks leading up to Bonfire Night, my secondary school was chaos. In those days (and don't I sound old) the whole school emptied out to the local shops at lunchtime. Some of the kids would bring fireworks to throw at each other. You'd see people ducking behind walls whilst bangers and rockets exploded around them. They laughed as they did it but I never found it so funny.

Later, in the early years of my career as a teacher, one of the deputies used to give an annual assembly about fireworks. Every year, he'd tell the same story about his mate who was destined to be a great cricketer, except that one year a firework exploded in his hand and took his fingers off. We still give assemblies about firework safety. I'm not sure how much the children listen.

I often wondered, even then — who exactly is Bonfire Night for? Why do we really have fireworks?

Fast-forward to now. I'm an adult, a parent. The Scout hut near our house held its annual bonfire on Sunday. It was really busy as always. There was food and mulled wine. The Cubs and Scouts did their little turns; A real family and community event.

Then the fireworks started. The Scout leaders had already decided to opt for quieter fireworks, someone even mentioned silent fireworks. However, when you're five, an unexpected bang must sound like some kind of random explosion.

My little boy climbed down from my shoulders and said, "Daddy, can we go home and get my sister's ear defenders? I don't like the noise." I didn't even know he knew what ear defenders were.

I looked around. Quite a few children whose parents were maybe a little better prepared, were already wearing ear defenders. My little girl then snuggled in beside me. "It's too loud," she said, "I don't like it." I ended up holding my hands over her ears.

A few nights later, on Bonfire Night itself, my eldest said, "Dad, I was scared at the bonfire."

I wanted to say, "Don't be silly, you didn't look scared. You had a great time." But I'm learning slowly to listen and not project.

Instead, I said, "Tell me what you mean."

She said, "I just don't like the bangs. I didn't know where they were coming from or when they would happen. Now we're inside, it sounds like someone keeps tapping on the window and it's scary."

For a week before and after Bonfire Night, my children find it hard to get to sleep because of the fireworks.

And it made me think: we're scaring our children. Personally, I really like fireworks. I like the loud noises and colours in the night sky. But if something we do for children ends up terrifying them, perhaps we've got it all upside down. Who are the fireworks really for and why do we keep doing it?

Now, this might be rose-tinted glasses, but the firework displays I remember as a kid were a bit pathetic. The Catherine wheels never spun properly, and if the rockets flew up in a straight line it was a bonus. The bangers sort of fizzed rather than banged.

These days it's a full-on pyrotechnic display. The fireworks don't just bang — they explode with a boom that shakes the ground.

Are we mollicoddling the kids and making them softer? On this occasion, I don't think so. And at the risk of harkening back to *when I was a lad*, I certainly wasn't scared as a child, of a firework display.

It reminds me of a colleague who told me about some work he had done with a school to look at how children felt and what they thought of their school. In Year 7, the children

reported feeling unsafe. There was talk of bullying and fear. By Year 9, those responses had changed — pupils said they felt fine, that everything was calm.

The school took this as a success story. “Look how well they’ve settled,” they said.

But the reality was that the children hadn’t stopped feeling unsafe — they’d just stopped reporting it. They’d learned to live with fear. They’d normalised it. They’d adapted to a culture that hadn’t really changed.

And that, too, feels like a sign of the times.

Are we listening, hearing, and seeing the children for who they really are — or are we only reflecting what we want, as supposedly grown-ups who might just be a little bit stuck in our old ways?

Last week’s announcement about scrapping the EBacc (which I don’t disagree with) came with talk of new tests and different measures. I believe that there should always be accountability, but it makes me wonder — who is the curriculum really for? Who are exams for, what do they test and measure? Is this a system that truly places children front and centre — that sees them as our future — or is it a reactive one. Maybe we should be measuring whether children are emotionally and physically well and healthy, whether they are truly literate and numerate.

A reflective system would start with inclusion and belonging. It would identify what the smallest and most vulnerable children need and then build outwards. It would listen. It would notice when something meant for joy has become something that terrifies.

Relational Inclusion asks us to pause and notice what we’ve normalised — and then maybe to begin again, differently.

My one-a-day quotes for this week are:

- 1) *If you're ever the smartest in the room- find a new room.*
If you're ever the loudest voice in the room- stop talking and start listening.
(unknown)
- 2) *You are not just a parent (or a teacher); you are an architect. You are building the inner voice your child will listen to for the rest of their life.*
Make sure that voice is kind. (Arsalan Moin @psychtreatment)
- 3) *Teach your children to remove the "I want you to like me" sticker from their forehead and place it on the mirror, where it belongs.* (Susan Jeffers – Inside Parenting)

- 4) *Trying to change behaviour without connection is like trying to open a door without a key. You might get it open but there will be damage. (@The Therapist Parent)*
- 5) *Don't demand eye contact - I actually listen better when I'm not looking at you. (The Autistic Teacher)*
- 6) *You're not stuck because you don't know what to do. You're stuck because you know what to do, but you're not doing it. (@entrepreneurshipfacts)*
- 7) *We teach children how to solve equations but not how to sit with their pain. Emotional intelligence is the lesson life keeps repeating until we finally learn to listen to our hearts as much as we do our minds. (Balt Rodriguez)*

My two print and stick to the wall images this week are:

You are presented with two options:
Evolve or Repeat.



R.A.I.N.

When your feelings start to weigh you down, let it...



Recognize	Allow	Investigate	Nurture
Recognize what you're feeling Notice and what is hapen- inside you. For instance: "I feel nervous" or "This uncomfortable."	Allow it to be there Rather than resisting the feeling, "It is alright to feel like this" or "This is simply part of being human."	Investigate gently Be curious instead of harsh. Ask yourself: "What is behind this feeling?" "What do I need right now?"	Nurture with kindness Drop self judgment and offer yourself support "I am doing my best". This will pass, and I will be okay.

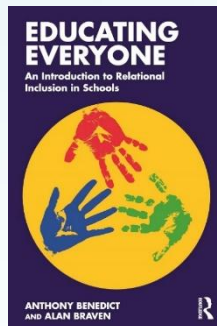
@recoverytraumaltd

My recommended read is about the impact of harmful school policies:

[“It’s not a compliance issue—it’s a design failure” Psychologists call for action on mental health and “harmful” school policies - Special Needs Jungle](#)

If you find the Relational Inclusion blog useful, feel free to share with your networks.

Our book, Educating Everyone: An Introduction to relational Inclusion in Schools is out now and you must buy it and tell everyone else to buy it. It is available pretty much everywhere that sells books or you can get it here:



Finally, I’d like to share a quote which has really stuck in my mind:

If the big people aren't okay, the little people won't be either. (@drjodycarrington)

Thanks for reading

Anthony Benedict

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