Relational Inclusion blog #39: Surviving Not Thriving

I promise this won't become a dog blog and I am aware I wrote about my dog a few weeks ago, but I feel like this one needs writing.

This morning, after the school run, my dog attacked a little dog. I did think carefully about my choice of words - attacked seems particularly emotive. Equally when he had a small dog between his jaws and was thrashing it about like a rag doll - there's no other way to describe it.

The other dog's owner was screaming - our dog wouldn't let go, a passerby started shouting at us (which is always really helpful in times of stress)- it really wasn't pretty.

Now our dog is generally really chilled out. He's good round our children, he doesn't bark. We have an old fluffy white cat who he mainly ignores although she did swipe his nose in their first meeting.

So, what on earth happened?

It's easy to jump to conclusions and start assigning blame. From the outside, someone might quite reasonably say:

"He's clearly aggressive."

"You should have muzzled him."

"He's not safe."

"You're irresponsible."

And from a distance — with no insight, no context, no curiosity — these types of comments are common, often accepted and people are after all, quick to judge.

But he's never attacked another dog before. Yes, he's responded when barked at. Yes, he's defended himself. But this was different. He is a rescue, and with rescue dogs it can take six months to a year for their real personality to emerge. Recently he'd started tensing around small, yappy dogs and squirrels, so we removed his muzzle in a controlled effort to help him desensitise and calm his nervous system.

When behaviour changes suddenly, the temptation is to treat the symptom, not the cause. And how do we traditionally deal with aggressive behaviour? More stringent rules? Tighter control? Punishment, reprimand, the removal of privileges?

Maybe he's too prey driven.

Maybe he's unsafe around children.

Maybe he belongs back in the kennels.

He's only an animal, after all.

But if we look through a lens of relational inclusion, everything shifts. We don't start with the symptoms; we start with the cause. He is a rescue dog. We have no idea what he carries in his emotional backpack. And he will never be able to tell us. Do we write him off — or do we learn together?

Maybe we should start with what we do know:

Greyhounds have a natural prey drive. Instinct. And racing training intensifies that instinct until it becomes a reflex:

- see movement
- adrenaline surge
- sprint
- repeat

If they can't develop this pattern well enough, they're discarded. And those who can? This loop is carved into them — neurologically, physically, emotionally. Even retired greyhounds who have never caught a thing still carry the imprint. It's muscle memory of the nervous system.

When their racing life ends, and they're suddenly expected to adapt to sofas, children, and parks… what exactly are we expecting? Instinct doesn't disappear simply because we want it to.

I am sure you can see where I am going.

Think about some of the families we know who are struggling. Think about the impact this has on their young children. Our classrooms and schools are flooded with too many children who are hungry, tired, scared and living with constant uncertainty.

Often this goes unnoticed. Most of them can't describe what they feel. Many don't even know their experience isn't universal. Their nervous system has adapted to survive. That's what nervous systems do. These children are surviving not thriving.

What my dog did wasn't about anger — it was his survival instinct. And that's exactly what I see in so many of our children. Suddenly, what happened this morning has become an uncomfortable and familiar mirror.

A child lashes out.

A child runs out of class.

A child flips a table, throws a chair, swears.

And the responses can be painfully predictable:

- The attack
- The blame
- The guilt
- The shouting
- The labels
- The pound of flesh brigade
- The demand for punishment

And here's the part we rarely notice. Why on earth did we start using criminal language to describe children's behaviour? Words like "attack", "assault", "perpetrator", "dangerous", "repeat offender". Courtroom words. Police words. We use them in classrooms as though a dysregulated seven-year-old is standing in front of a judge rather than a teacher.

And this isn't just a school problem. As the Children's Commissioner puts it:

> *"When it comes to children in care, we take away their innocence. They are criminalised for lashing out and damaging property, often with the staff tasked with caring for them the ones who call the police."* *The criminalisation of children in care | Children's Commissioner for England*

The moment we frame a child's distress as a crime, we stop seeing the child at all. But these children, like my dog, rarely have the words. They don't have calm explanations. They don't know what sits in their emotional backpack. They are hypervigilant and surviving on instinct. All they know is what their body tells them:

- A surge of adrenaline
- A flash of fear
- A short lifetime of being on edge
- An amygdala firing before logic can catch up

If we are not careful, all we see is aggression. But what we are really seeing is hunger masquerading as anger; tiredness dressed up as defiance; fear mistaken for disrespect; hypervigilance interpreted as hostility; survival behaviours punished as children are labelled as not being school ready.

Like my greyhound, these children repeat patterns taught by their lives — not because they're bad, but because they are surviving not thriving and this has shaped their nervous system. This isn't chosen behaviour. They're not choosing chaos. They're responding to it.

When we jump straight to consequences, exclusions, and labels, we're just shouting over the noise — like the man this morning — rather than listening to what the body is trying to say.

Relational inclusion asks us to pause. As Bruce Perry says, it's not "What did you do?" but "What happened to you?" and, more importantly, "What's happening inside you right now that you can't put into words?"

My dog didn't need punishment. He needed calming. He needed holding. He needed resetting and relearning. He needed someone unafraid of the instinct beneath the behaviour. And our children need the same.

If we only ever respond to the symptom, the symptom is all we'll ever see. If we respond to the cause, slowly we can change the world. That's the work. That's relational inclusion. Not excusing. Not diminishing harm. Just finally understanding where it comes from.

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

1) *Regulated doesn't mean calm. It means your nervous system knows how to move up and down, activated and settled, energized and still. Calm is just one state. Regulation is the ability to flow through all of them.* (Regulated classroom)

2) *Teach your children that life gets easier when you stop fighting it. The rain will fall whether you complain or not. Traffic will exist whether you stress or not. People will act how they want whether you worry or not. Focus on what you can change. Let go of what you can't. (*unknown)

3) *"When trauma gets triggered you don't act your age, you act the age the wound was created" (*Dr Gabor Mate)

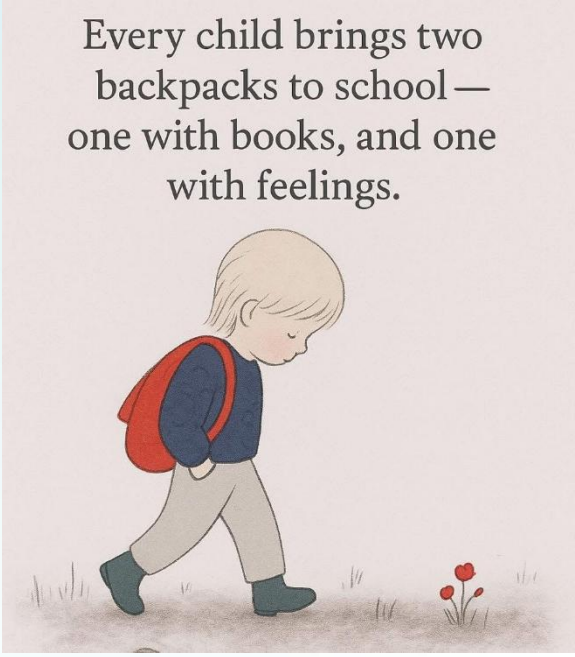
4) *We destroy the disinterested (I do not mean uninterested) love of learning in children, which is so strong when they are small, by encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards — gold stars, or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall, or A's on report cards. In short, for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling that they are better than someone else. We kill, not only their curiosity, but their feeling that it is a good and admirable thing to be curious, so that by the age of ten most of them will not ask questions, and will show a good deal of scorn for the few who do.* (John Holt)

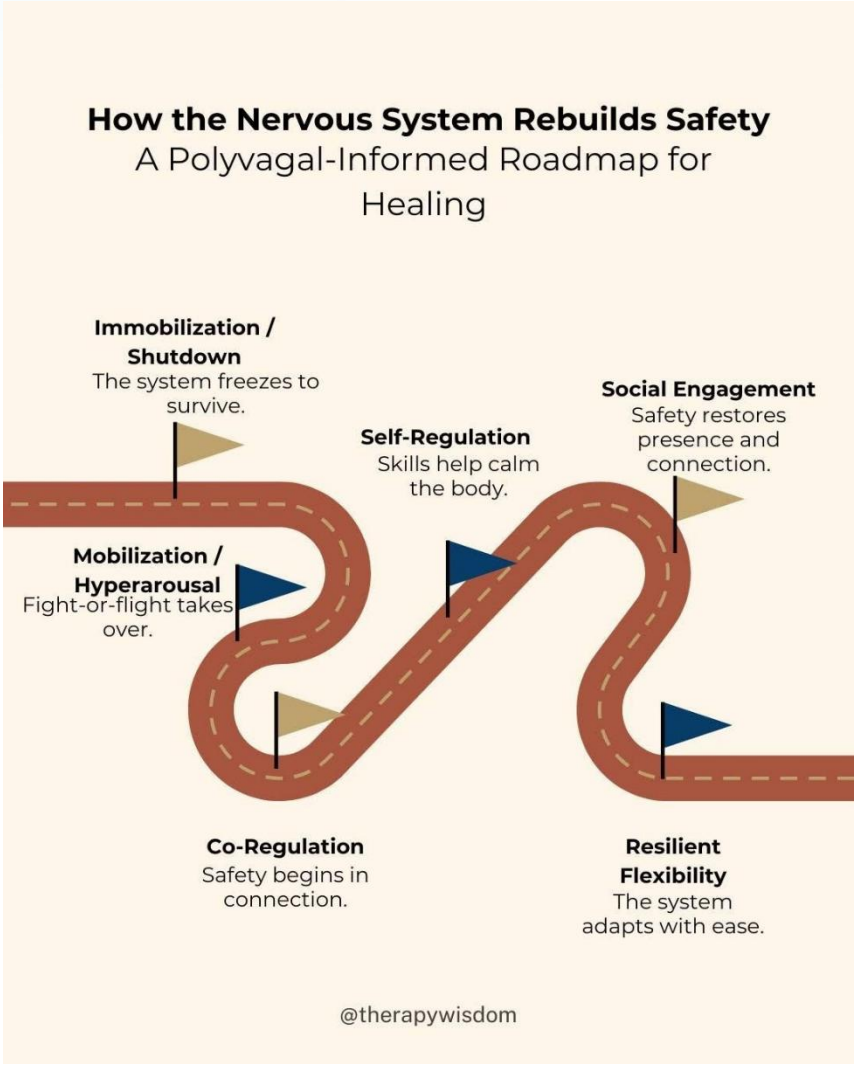
5) *Young kids are wired for impulsive behaviour*
Ages 2-4: act first and think later
Ages 5-7: can pause sometimes when calm
Ages 8-12: starting to use tools but still struggling with big feelings
Impulse control isn't a behaviour issues - it's developmental
(@The_Therapist_Parent)

6) *In a moment of stress, a child is experiencing their behaviour-not orchestrating it.* (unknown)

7) *Exclusion removes opportunities for skill-building. Students learn emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and flexible thinking by being in community-not by sitting in isolated rooms or receiving worksheets on "expected behaviour.* (unknown)

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



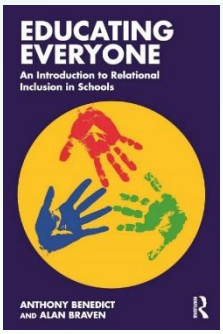


My recommended read this week is about the criminalising of children:

The criminalisation of children in care | Children's Commissioner for England

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. It is from the actor who breathed life into Big Bird (I hated Big Bird!). He describes Big Bird's emotional blueprint as:

He is six years old. He thinks the world is bigger than himself. (Caroll Spinney)

Thanks for reading

Anthony Benedict

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