## Relational Inclusion blog #46: If I can't, You Can't

Getting the dog in and out of the car has become a great delight for my daughters. It doesn't seem to have appeared on my son's radar yet, which I guess is fortunate, because like anything else with an eight- and ten-year-old, fun can quickly and out of nowhere turn into conflict.

Somehow, daughter number one has become outward-journey dog patrol, and daughter number two takes charge on the return. The routine seemed to be going smoothly until today.

As we arrived, daughter number two asked if she could get the dog out. She explained that her sister always gets him out when we're about to walk, and then she has to get him out again at home, and *it isn't fair*.

Now who would have thought it would be a thing? I realise the fallibility of that statement. Everything is a thing when you're a child, and maybe so it should be.

It seemed fair enough, so I said, "Ok. Let's alternate. You can take it in turns, and because your sister always goes first, today it's your turn."

I don't know why I was surprised by the response I got.

"Absolutely not. I'm getting him out. It's my turn and it's what I always do."

Cue what I thought was a fairly reasonable re-explanation of why taking turns might be fair. I might as well have set fire to her feet with the reaction I got.

I like to think I practised the pause and gave myself a bit more thinking time. Instead, and mainly because I just wanted to go for a walk and not spend the next half hour arguing, I heard myself saying, "Right. Here's the choice. Either you take it in turns and that means it's your sister's turn now, or neither of you get to do it and I'll get the bloody dog out." (I didn't actually say bloody, but I really wanted to).

What surprised me was that she chose the second option. And stuck to it. To the point where her sister said, "It's fine, she can go first."

But now I was annoyed, and I wasn't having that, so I got the dog out.

It made me think of the Marshmallow Experiment, the one where a child is left alone in a room with a single treat and given a simple choice: eat it now, or wait and receive two later. It was designed to explore delay of gratification, and early follow-ups suggested that children who waited tended to do better later in life. Decades of motivational posters, reruns of the experiment and a quietly moralising message about willpower followed.

As is often the case with such interesting experiments, the awkward bits tend to get left out. Later research showed that waiting is deeply context-dependent. Children from unstable or resource-scarce backgrounds were less likely to wait, not because they lacked self-control, but because waiting isn't always a rational choice when adults or systems don't reliably come back with the promised reward. Not surprisingly, it turns out it was never just about willpower. Trust, past experience, stress, attachment, and environment all matter. Some children eat the marshmallow not because they can't wait, but because life has taught them that promises may never materialise.

What confused me was this: on one hand, daughter number one will always choose for both of them to have nothing rather than lose her turn. On the other, she can wait. She understands delayed gratification and applies it in other situations. At first glance, it's always tempting to reach for that familiar explanation. After all, that's the story we've been taught and we all like a quick fix.

But this wasn't that.

In the Marshmallow Test, the child's dilemma is relatively black and white: eat the marshmallow now and get certainty, or wait and risk an uncertain future reward that depends on a reliable adult. Waiting is framed as patience. Hope, even. But my daughter's choice didn't feel like *now versus later*. It felt like losing now whilst watching her sister get something she wanted, or everyone losing, which at least restored a sense of balance. That wasn't her being impulsive, it was emotional logic under threat.

In that moment, she wasn't calmly weighing outcomes. She's ten. Her nervous system was doing the maths much faster and much more bluntly: If I can't have this, I can't tolerate you having it either because that leaves me *powerless* or *excluded*. Choosing "no one gets it" restored control and parity. It also avoided the deeper pain of sitting in the space where someone else wins and you don't. This wasn't really about the dog at all. It was about status, fairness, and emotional survival.

I realised that some of the behaviours we're quickest to label as impulsive, oppositional, or immature are actually coherent moral positions taken under emotional threat. *I can't, you can't* isn't defiance. It's an attempt to restore dignity when something feels unfair, exposing, or unbearable.

This realisation is hard to unsee. It doesn't just happen with my children, but takes place in classrooms, staffrooms, systems, and, uncomfortably, in myself. Exclusion. Sabotage. Withdrawal. That instinct to cut off your nose to spite your face. This begins to look less like a lack of self-control and more like a relational act, a way of regaining parity when someone feels they're about to lose something that matters.

Delayed gratification only works when certain conditions are already in place. It assumes emotional safety. It assumes trust in the system. It assumes a quiet confidence that your turn will come. Sibling dynamics, especially between close-age siblings, don't reliably offer any of those things. Turns don't feel procedural; they feel existential. "Not my turn" may well register as rejection. And in those moments, the nervous system makes a different call: *I'd rather sack it all than sit with that feeling*. Again, this isn't defiance. It's self-protection.

That's the key difference from the marshmallow test. In the experiment, waiting represents hope. In family life, waiting can mean *watching someone else have what you want*. That is a far harder emotional task, one many adults still struggle with.

None of this was resolved by logic in the heat of the moment. And I didn't try to resolve it, I did, at least, manage to do one thing better. We went for a walk. And although I was feeling grumpy (more a reflection on me than my daughter), I left the children to play instead of pushing for an answer.

At the end of the walk, I came back to her and asked again, "Are you happy to take turns now? It seems a bit silly for both of you to miss out."

I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was, when she said simply, "Yeah. Sure."

I asked why she hadn't said that in the first place. And she said, "I've had time to think about it now."

Out of the mouths of babes. I know this, and yet so often it's difficult to put into practice. The learning so often comes afterwards, when things are calm, when thinking is possible.

The uncomfortable truth is that this kind of response often shows up in children who feel things deeply, who are finely tuned to fairness, and who struggle to tolerate moments of relational imbalance. Those aren't flaws. They're raw materials. Our job isn't to stamp them out, it's to shape them into something that can survive the world without burning it down first.

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

1. *Enjoy the moments as they arrive; they are the only place life ever truly lives.* (Dede Hawkins)

2. *When parents listen to understand, the relationship always wins. Ears open hearts; ego closes them.* (@artofparenteen)

3. *You can't tell a child to calm down if no one's ever taught them how. Regulation isn't instinct — it's a skill. And all skills begin with guidance, not demands.* (The Contented Child)

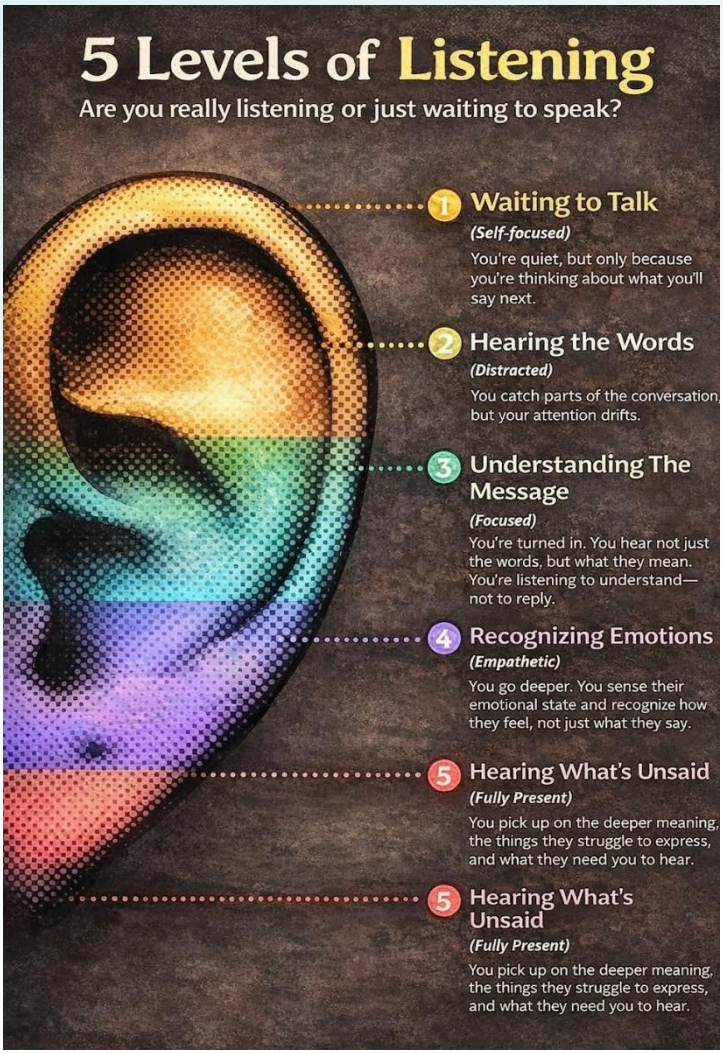
4. *Punishment is not a tool of teaching. It is a tool of control. Discipline means to teach, not to dominate.* (Eli Harwood)

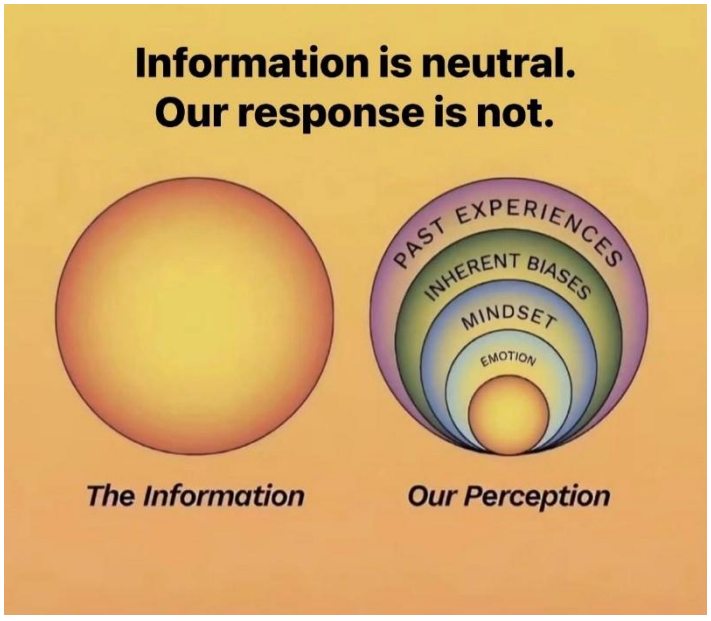
5. *Discipline doesn't mean domination. It means modelling patience, teaching boundaries, and guiding with dignity. Fear doesn't build character. Connection does.* (Ms Wright Way)

6. *Often we think the hard work is in the changing and bettering of ourselves. more often the hardest work is just accepting ourselves where we are right now*. (unknown)

7. *Make someone smile every day but never forget that you are someone too.* (unknown)

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

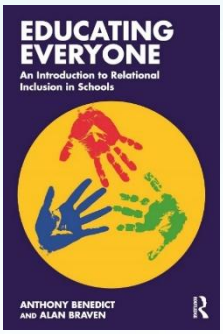


My recommended read this week is about revisiting the marshmallow test: [Revisiting the Marshmallow Test: A Conceptual Replication Investigating Links Between Early Delay of Gratification and Later Outcomes - PMC]

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:

> *Every pattern in your life repeats until you learn the lesson. The moment you choose differently, the loop ends and growth begins.* (@yogawithyaduveer)

Thanks for reading
Anthony Benedict

CEO Ambition Community Trust