



Relational Inclusion blog #49: The Pressure Cooker

This morning, my two youngest double-teamed me. Wednesday mornings are never great. It's Year 4 swimming, and although my middle daughter loves swimming, she has always disliked swimming lessons and hates having them at school. She tells me, very clearly, very articulately, and EVERY Wednesday, why.

"Why do I have to go swimming when I can already swim? Everyone in the Gold group hates it. We're not learning anything new. The pool is cold. There's not enough room in the changing rooms. My hair is wet for the day. Why can't we do something we enjoy? Why can't we learn something we don't already know?"

And to be fair, she's got a point. It's not an argument I've really got a good or any answer for. On top of that, English swimming pools aren't exactly my favourite places either — cold water, plasters and other things I can't and would rather not name floating around, hair-ridden floors with hidden verrucas waiting to pounce ... but I decide it's probably not the best moment to add that to the discussion.

Normally, she's up at six or half past, downstairs and ready for the day. But on Wednesdays, she doesn't want to get out of bed. And there is something definitely not quite right about an eight-year-old who already dreads a particular day of the week.

So I sit with her. We talk. She explains how she feels now, how she'll feel next Wednesday, and the Wednesday after that. She's adamant it will be like this for the rest of the year. She isn't being dramatic, she's being logical. This is one of those moments where there isn't really an argument to be had.

All I can say is that I agree with her. I understand what she's saying. I empathise. She's right. But sometimes in life there are things we have to do that don't feel fair, and we don't get much choice about them. What we do have a choice about is how we frame our day and what we do with it. Eventually, whether we like it or not, we just have to get on with it.

It takes time this morning. Patience. Some gentle cajoling. We have a cuddle and a kiss, but she's still not happy. She's unrelenting - Wednesdays will remain Wednesdays. I have to leave her face-down on the settee because it's time to go and wake her brother.

Upstairs, I ask my five-year-old if he wants his usual ten-minute warning. He asks if the girls are already downstairs. When I say yes, I'm met with a loud protest. "Oh man," he says, "It isn't fair. I wanted to be first this morning."

I tell him I'll let him stay in bed a little longer, forgetting — briefly — that he's currently convinced he doesn't sleep at all. He believes he stays awake all night and just pretends to sleep. Five-year-old logic has very little use for promises of the lie-in the rest of the world craves.

He buries his head in the pillow and refuses to move.

Eventually, I manage to get him downstairs, where his sister is still buried in the settee. He joins her, face-down, announcing that he's not doing anything and he's not going anywhere.

I explain it's time for breakfast and we need to get ready for school. He announces he's not having breakfast. I tell him that's his choice, I can't force him, but that if he skips breakfast, there won't be dessert later. Healthy eating matters.

Then I step away. There's a cat to deal with, a dog to let out, another child to support, and my own morning to manage.

When I come back, my middle daughter is slowly getting dressed. I return to my son and remind him there's still time for breakfast if he wants it. He announces that he's not having breakfast and he's not having screen time either, pre-emptively banning himself.

I pause. I breathe and I try to feel the floor with my feet.

When I come back again, I tell him we need to get dressed because we're going to school. He says he doesn't want to get dressed before breakfast. That's the opening I was waiting for. I ask if he'd like his breakfast. He would.

Research into children's agency reminds us that children are not passive recipients of adult decisions, but active participants in shaping their own experiences. As one study puts it, *"Children are active in creating meaning in life; they are not only recipients but also creators."*

These moments are the pressure cookers of life. It's no one's fault and this is when I so often get it wrong. Each of these tiny episodes (which don't feel so small at the time) add pressure — on individuals, on children, on families. And we can't forget ourselves in this. We have places to be. We have responsibilities. The clock keeps ticking.

What I could have done (and so often would have done) was lose my temper. I could have made threats, raised my voice, forced compliance. Everyone's blood pressure would have risen. The morning would have spiralled.

Instead, I tried to recognise that everyone has agency. Everyone is entitled to feel how they feel. There are some non-negotiables — we do have to get dressed, brush our teeth, and leave the house — but there are limits to what I can force. I can't make someone eat breakfast. And losing my temper wouldn't change how my son felt about himself that morning.

Later that day, my wife mentioned that he'd been talking about wanting to be first up. It might have helped to know that earlier, but we got through the morning regardless. We

arrived at school without tears or anger. No one was cross. No one was carrying any extra baggage into the day (except of course for the dreaded swimming lessons). My daughter was reluctant to get out of the car. We had a cuddle. She went in.

I don't know the research or the data, but I do find myself wondering about school swimming lessons. In a year, how many children who couldn't swim at the start, can by the end, and what are we really adding for those who already can?

With my little boy, we often downplay the importance of going first. But for children, it clearly matters. Turn-taking doesn't come naturally; it has to be learned. Maybe that, too, deserves a bit more thought than we usually give it.

If something consistently makes a child miserable, perhaps the question isn't how we help them tolerate it, but how often we really listen, and what we're prepared to change when we do.

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

1. *A child that is treated with respect won't have to spend their adulthood learning they are worthy of it. (A. Simeone)*
2. *What lies behind us and before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. (unknown)*
3. *Our reactions say more about our inner state than our child's behaviour. That's why tending to our own emotional health isn't optional in parenting – it's essential (Inside parenting)*
4. *People give you what they are, not what you deserve. What you deserve, you give to yourself. (unknown)*
5. *We can spend our time meeting our children's emotional needs by filling their cup with love, or spend time dealing with the behaviours caused from their unmet needs. Either way, we spend the time. (Pam Leo)*
6. *Lead with empathy, guide with wisdom, anchor with love. (unknown)*
7. *All humans make mistakes. What determines a person's character aren't the mistakes we make. It's how we take those mistakes and turn them into lessons rather than excuses. (unknown)*

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



My father always told me: "If you want to go for a run, go for a run, don't look for company. Sooner or later, on your fifth run or your twentieth, like-minded people will find you themselves."

And only recently have I realized that this principle works everywhere.

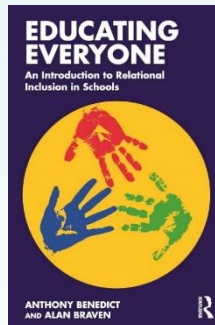
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My recommended read this week is about children's agency [Children's agency in parent-child, teacher-pupil and peer relationship contexts - PMC](#)

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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:

The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot.
Michael Altshuler)

Thanks for reading
Anthony Benedict

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