



Relational Inclusion blog #50: On Getting Stuck

This morning, I somehow managed to back myself and my little boy into a corner. I got lots of things right which gave my son an opportunity to explain what he needed so that both of us could move on. And then, for some reason, I chose not to listen — or at least not to hear his words.

Let me explain. I was getting him dressed for school. We'd got his pants and his trousers on, but as I pulled his pyjama top off, his head got a little stuck. As I released him, he punched me in the nose.

He's five. A punch in the nose doesn't really hurt (yet), but he is getting stronger and he does have a tendency to lash out when he doesn't like something. I'm pretty certain I've written before about him hitting a girl at school. So my wife and I do try to pick him up when he does this so that he knows it's not okay.

What I get right is that I'm not cross (genuinely). I don't raise my voice, and I'm neither angry nor pretending to be. I stop dressing him and ask whether that was a sensible or kind choice. He pulls his 'digging in' face and I know we're about to enter a stand-off.

I ask him what we say when we accidentally hurt someone, and then repeat my initial question, "Is it a kind choice to hit when we don't like something?"

He says I've already asked him that, refuses to answer, and crosses his arms. The ridiculousness of the situation isn't lost on me. My five-year-old boy is standing half-dressed with his arms folded, and his small, pale body looks a bit pathetic. By this I mean I am under no illusions — this is a little boy who has made a mistake and needs help to move through it.

I tell him that he has a minute to think about it and quickly nip into the kitchen. I'm trying to give us both a bit of space. When I come back, I ask him again. I probably say something like, "Is there something you want to say?"

He replies that he doesn't know the words. He's forgotten them. And here is my first opportunity. He's told me exactly what he needs, and there's no reason not to help him with the words.

Do I do this? Oh no. Instead, I hear myself saying, "I don't think that's true, is it? I think you do know the words — you just don't want to use them."

I'm very proud of myself for keeping calm and managing my tone. But now I've got myself into a pickle and am playing a game I don't need to play for no apparent reason.

He then says, "Well, you hurt me."

This is opportunity number two. All I need to say is, “I’m sorry if I hurt you. It was an accident, but I’m really sorry. I wouldn’t ever want to hurt you.”

What I actually say is, “When?” — as if that matters — and then I argue with him when he makes up a pretend event where I hurt him. Why am I being stubborn? I have no idea. Why am I digging in with my own son, who still can’t always get his shoes on the right feet?

Now I’m in full idiot-dad flow. I’m very good at this and slip into it far too easily. I hear myself saying, “Right — I’m going to start the timer.”

In essence, this means the time he takes will be taken off his screen time later. He absolutely hates this. Usually he backs down straight away, but this morning the tears come.

Finally, I check myself properly. I look at my little boy — half dressed, not quite crying, but with tears of sadness and frustration in his eyes. For some reason, I still can’t quite relent, so I ask my daughter — who has been watching the whole thing play out with mild curiosity — if she will help with the words he needs.

I ask her whether it’s a kind choice to punch someone in the nose when you’re cross. She says, “It’s not.”

I ask her what we say when we hurt someone accidentally. She says, “Sorry.”

My little boy mumbles, “It’s not a kind choice,” and “Sorry.”

And I’m thoroughly ashamed of myself. I don’t know why I suddenly became obsessed with an apology. I don’t think we should force children to say sorry — especially when they’re not ready. I don’t know why I didn’t just give him the words when he asked for them. I don’t know why I asked my daughter to model them instead of doing it myself.

I do say that I’m sorry if I hurt him, and that if I did, it was an accident. I explain that I don’t want him to be sad and give him a chance to earn his time back by brushing his own teeth.

All of this takes place in roughly ten minutes. I’ve no idea why I dragged it out even that long, or why I backed us both into a corner. I suppose I have modelled repair. I haven’t shouted. Everyone’s morning ended up okay. These are small wins.

But what strikes me now isn’t that he hit me. It’s how quickly I confused staying calm with being right. I didn’t raise my voice. I didn’t shout. I didn’t lose control. But I also didn’t listen — not really.

And maybe that’s the same mistake we keep making with children — mistaking instinct for defiance, energy for disruption, curiosity for a lack of control.

As Lucy Sors and Louise Whitfield write in *The Conversation*:

“The key limitation for four-year-olds is not their physical ability to sit, but the developing capacities of self-regulation and sustained attention. Expecting children to simply ‘sit still’ ignores the fact that most of their learning involves movement, interaction and play — and that being still for long periods is neither developmentally necessary nor healthy.”

We tell ourselves we’re preparing children for learning, but sometimes we’re preparing them to ignore their own signals — to disconnect from what their bodies are saying in order to fit the shape of a system that never stopped to ask how it feels to be four.

Somewhere between tone and timing, I stopped being the grown-up he needed and became another person digging in, arms folded, intent on trying to win something that didn’t need winning.

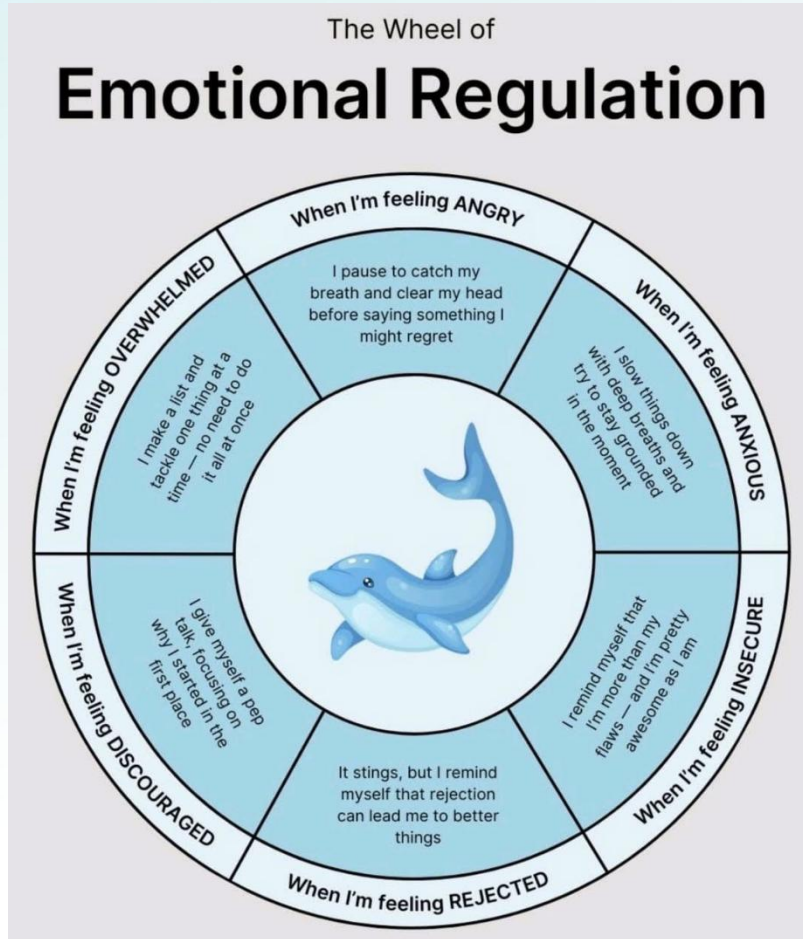
I often write about repair, regulation, and relational safety as if they’re ideas to be applied. This morning reminded me just how difficult that is, especially when the other person is small, half dressed, and looking at you with tears they don’t quite understand yet. Repair happened — eventually. But so did the damage of making it harder than it ever needed to be. I’ve spent years watching dysregulated adults back children into corners and worked consciously at being a teacher who didn’t do that. And yet here I was, calmly, quietly, doing exactly the same thing to my own son.

He asked me for words. And instead, I asked him for compliance.

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

1. *Forgive yourself for not knowing earlier what only time could teach.* (Unknown)
2. *They’re not trying to be difficult. Their emotions are louder than their skills. Regulation has to be taught.* (Unknown)
3. *The nervous system learns from repetition. Micro doses of joy, calm, and connection, again and again, are how we rewire.* (The Regulated Classroom)
4. *Stop trying to talk students out of dysregulation. The nervous system doesn't speak that language. It speaks movement, rhythm, and breath.* (The Regulated Classroom)
5. *We fight when we don't feel safe enough to play.* (Michael Allison)
6. *Make mistakes, just don't make them permanent.* (James Clear)
7. *Raising a child who never struggles isn't the goal. Raising a child who feels supported and capable of facing whatever comes is.* (Inside Parenting)

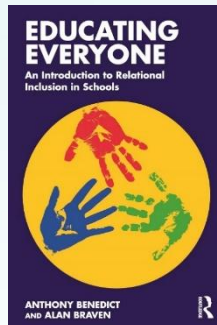
My two print and stick to the wall images this week are:



My recommended read this week is about four-year old's not needing to sit still: [Four-year-olds don't need to sit still to be 'school ready'](#)

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:

The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts. (Marcus Aurelius)

Thanks for reading
Anthony Benedict

CEO Ambition Community Trust