



Relational Inclusion blog #56: The Imaginary Audience

“I’m embarrassed playing with my Barbie dolls,” daughter number one announced at bath-time last night.

I can’t remember the last time I saw her playing with a Barbie doll if I’m honest, but I didn’t feel like that was the response she was looking for. And, as I think back, she has been saying for a week or so now that she doesn’t know “what she’s into anymore.” We never quite got to the bottom of that one. Clearly something is going on in her mind.

“Ok,” I replied, “what’s brought this on? What do you mean?”

“Well, my friends don’t play with toys like that anymore.”

Ah.

Now sometimes children’s story books really come in handy. A while ago she was reading *Isadora Moon* and, in the story, a new girl in school was mean to Isadora about her teddy, but it was a mask. When Isadora bumped into the girl out of school, she was busy playing with her own little doll, but she didn’t want the children in her new school to think she was a baby so she projected those feelings onto Isadora.

You get the picture and so did daughter number one (with a bit of daughter number two’s un-necessary help).

“So, you see, though a couple of your friends might not be playing with their dolls anymore, I bet quite a few still are and they just didn’t want to say that in front of the group.”

Daughter number one smiled.

“But I’m embarrassed by bedtime.”

Now, before we continue, I must explain daughter number one’s intricate bedtime routine. Because I was interested to see where this was going — something told me it wasn’t about Barbies.

She has an old dressing gown which goes first on top of her sheet. Then she places a finger puppet on her hand which she once rescued from a drawer of my old things. She clutches five very particular soft toys and then lays her head on a squish-mallow Santa on top of her pillow. I then must put — in true Henry VIII style — another grown-up dressing gown over her, followed by a blanket and then her duvet.

I don’t know how she doesn’t sweat to death.

Then I read her a chapter of her book. We have a cuddle and then I leave her room.

"I don't need my teddies," she began. "They're just a habit but I don't need them. But then ... well it's you. It's just so embarrassing."

"I am your dad — it's ok for me to put you to bed."

"But you're 51 and you're in my bed. And — well most of my friends..." (she doesn't see my eyebrows raise) "...put themselves to bed."

Ahhh.

And so I explain that her bedtime is her bedtime. She can do whatever it is that makes her comfortable because the most important thing is that she feels safe before she goes to sleep.

I say that she can put herself to bed if she wants (we have tried that before, it didn't really work. She just wasn't ready to settle on her own) but that it's also ok for me to put her to bed if that's what she wants.

I say that the time will come soon enough when she really won't want me to put her to bed. And that it will be one of those things that we don't even realise — but suddenly it just won't happen anymore.

I also ask if this also applies to carrying her upstairs to bed (because she is almost too big for that) and she grins.

Her mum chips in with, "Hang on- I actually fed you tonight!" and we all laugh. Properly laugh.

Earlier that afternoon I had been at a talk where the speaker explained that social exclusion registers in the brain in much the same way as physical pain. This is especially true for children and young people. Watching daughter number one wrestle with Barbies, bedtime and belonging, I could see exactly what he meant. Growing up is probably the hardest thing we ever do.

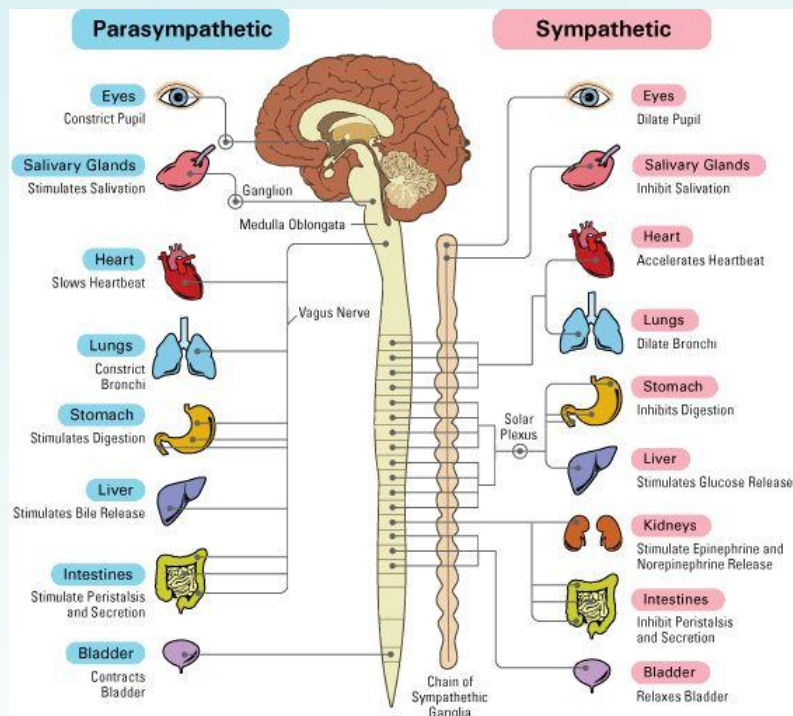
Trying to work out who we are, what we like, and how we fit in with everyone around us is a minefield. Children are rarely subtle about it either. They let each other know exactly where they stand, often hiding the message inside embarrassment, teasing or something else entirely.

Somewhere along the way children start asking themselves a new question: How do I be me and still fit with everyone else? Barbies weren't really the problem. Finding out how to belong was.

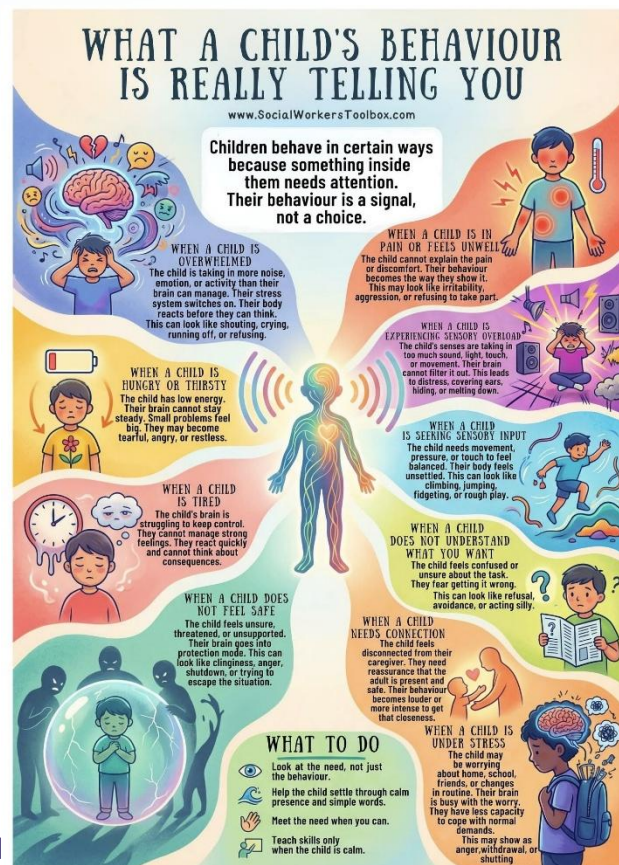
My one a day quotes for this week are:

1. *People who do not understand your silence will never understand your words.* (Unknown life lessons)
2. *We tend to forget that baby steps still move you forward.* (Peaceful mind peaceful life)
3. *Children don't get traumatised because they get hurt, they get traumatised because they're alone with the hurt.* (Inside Parenting)
4. *In science we call it energy. In religion we call it spirit. In the streets we call it vibes. All I'm saying is... trust it.* (Power of positivity)
5. *Forgive yourself for not knowing earlier what only time could teach.*
6. *The nervous system is the instrument. Reality is the frequency. What you experience depends on how the instrument is tuned.*
7. *If adults were expected to work under the same conditions children experience at school, we'd call it a hostile work environment.* (happinessishereblog.com)

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



Schema Explaining How Parasympathetic and Sympathetic Nervous Systems Regulate Functioning Organs



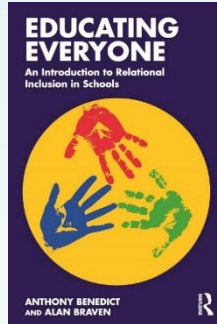
My recommended

[childhood could leave lifelong marks | scienceillustrated.com](https://scienceillustrated.com)

hidden pattern in

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:

At school I try to be like everyone else. but it's like acting in a play all day. (12-year-old, autistic child)

Thanks for reading
Anthony Benedict

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