



Relational Inclusion blog #57: Swimming

As much as my two younger children dislike swimming lessons, they do love swimming so this weekend we decided to go family swimming. And all was going, well, *swimmingly*, until the very end.

The pool is very family friendly, it's relatively warm (which is a bonus and an exception in my experience - why do they make pools so cold??), it's one of the few pools where you're allowed to dive and there are loads of floats and things for the kids to play with.

When I say loads, there were easily enough for one each and probably one spare, but what I've learnt is, when you're a child, that doesn't necessarily make things fair.

My little boy is the only one who can't swim, he happily splashes around in arm bands and pretty much adopted one of the large floats which was big enough for him to sit on. He's also fairly particular about which things he'll use and which he won't - usually this is colour related (he's not a fan of white). And being 5, he's easily distracted.

So, he'd strayed from his float and was mumbling to himself, quite lost in his own little water world.

Until, of course, daughter number 1 swims over and takes control of 'his' float. There's nothing that triggers any child more than an older sibling taking something that you were playing with (but aren't any more).

Let the fun begin.

Except I then see daughter number one (who happens to be twice his age and size) using her size and weight to shove, defend, protect what she perceives to be her 'new' possession.

And this is the point that I feel I must step in. We've had endless conversations about not using size and weight against smaller/younger children and I'm slightly more concerned because we are in the water and my son can't swim.

"But he's got armbands on," daughter number one points out, which is true but isn't really the point.

And then we return to the stand-off (which I wrote about in *If I can't you can't*).

Daughter number 1 absolutely refuses to get off the float. My boy is now desperate to recover the float he has been playing with for the last half hour and I'm more than a little concerned that she's shoving him about in the water.

My wife comes to assist, and, in an attempt to turn things into a game, and avoid any more of the empty threats that I've just started slinging about such as, "if you don't get off the float then you're getting out of the pool." Which in principle is right — she's not being safe — but in practice is utter nonsense, because how on earth will I get her out against her will?

My wife says, "Shall we just tip you off the float." Which she does.

Daughter number 1 is now more determined than ever and swims back to the float. I'm in between and sort of block her to which she screams at the top of her voice, 'Get off me, let me go.'

Which starts to turn more than one of the other swimmers' heads.

Great.

Fortunately, it just happens to be the end of the session and somehow when I say, "It is actually the end and we do have to get out," She does as she's told.

We have the expected grumpy ride home and then several difficult conversations.

My wife reminds me that I've used my size and weight to stop our daughter which is modelling exactly the opposite of what we are trying to teach our daughter to do.

I remind my wife that she used her size and weight to push our daughter off the float in the first place.

And then we both speak to our daughter about what just happened and how we all could have managed it better. (To be clear, the focus is firmly on our daughter's choices though we do model apologising for our actions).

Interestingly my daughter spends the 'talk' playing with two coat hangers and trying to balance them from her mouth. We resist the temptation to tell her to stop playing with things and concentrate on us.

Then I look down, and lo and behold, I've a coat hanger in my hand which I'm absentmindedly twiddling. Physician heal thyself.

We talk about how we are her grown-ups. About how it is really important that when we give instructions - especially about safety - that she follows them.

We explain that even if she doesn't agree, it is really important she does what we say and then talks to us about maybe why that isn't fair afterwards.

And she listens and she fidgets and she disagrees. It gets to the point where she's had enough. And, if I'm honest, I've had enough.

She asks if she can go, and in the way that parents must, we say a bit more and then let her go.

It's difficult. She is ten years old. She is strong willed and if she thinks for a second that something isn't fair, she will absolutely dig in. And there is something in that. Something in her agency.

And equally we are her parents. We still have to step in when it matters.

But it's a lot to ask of a ten-year-old. How do you keep someone's will without breaking their spirit?

In the heat of the moment, it's easy to get lost in old habits. The same is true for us, not getting it right but noticing and trying again next time.

My one a day quotes for this week are:

1. *Without self-reflection, the brain repeats patterns instead of truly changing* (KNOW YOUR BRAIN)
2. *The truth is that we are all seeking belonging.* (Brené Brown)
3. *You're not done meeting everyone who's going to matter to you. Some of the best moments of your life haven't happened yet.* (UnknownLifeLessons)
4. *Maybe children don't need to be more school ready. Perhaps it's schools that need to be more child ready...* (unknown)
5. *The past only hurts when you try and live in it* (unknown)
6. *The world needs more people who pause before reacting and try to understand instead of lashing out.* (unknown)
7. *Parent blame is the quickest way to hide a failing system.* (@SENDClarity)

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

THE REGULATION SERIES

WHEN A CHILD SAYS “I DON’T CARE”

WHAT “I DON’T CARE” CAN REALLY MEAN

When a child says, “I don’t care,” it rarely means they truly feel nothing. More often, it is a protective phrase covering something much more vulnerable underneath. It can mean, “I care too much and it feels unbearable.” It can mean, “I already feel ashamed.” It can mean, “I don’t know how to show you what is happening inside me.” What sounds dismissive on the outside is often a sign that a child’s nervous system is trying to protect them from embarrassment, disappointment, fear, or emotional overload.

A PROTECTIVE RESPONSE, NOT A CHARACTER FLAW

Children do not usually reach for “I don’t care” because they are lazy or heartless. They often say it when their nervous system is under strain and they cannot find safer words in the moment. If a child feels cornered, corrected, exposed, or pushed beyond what they can manage, this phrase can become a fast protective response. It helps them look less vulnerable on the outside, even when things feel messy and painful on the inside. It is often armour, not indifference.

WHAT MAY BE UNDERNEATH IT

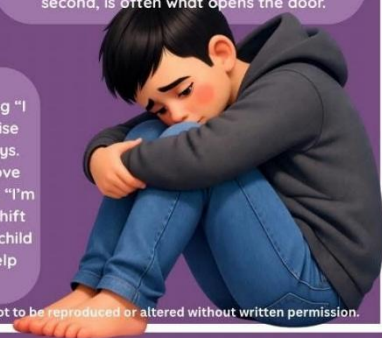
Under “I don’t care” there may be thoughts like “I’m already failing”, “You don’t get it”, “I can’t do this”, “I’m too cross to talk”, or “If I act like it doesn’t matter, it might hurt less.” Some children use these words when demands feel too high. Others use them when they expect telling off, feel ashamed, or worry they will disappoint you. A child who seems dismissive may actually be dysregulated, flooded, and trying to protect themselves from emotions they do not yet know how to carry well.

WHAT HELPS IN THE MOMENT

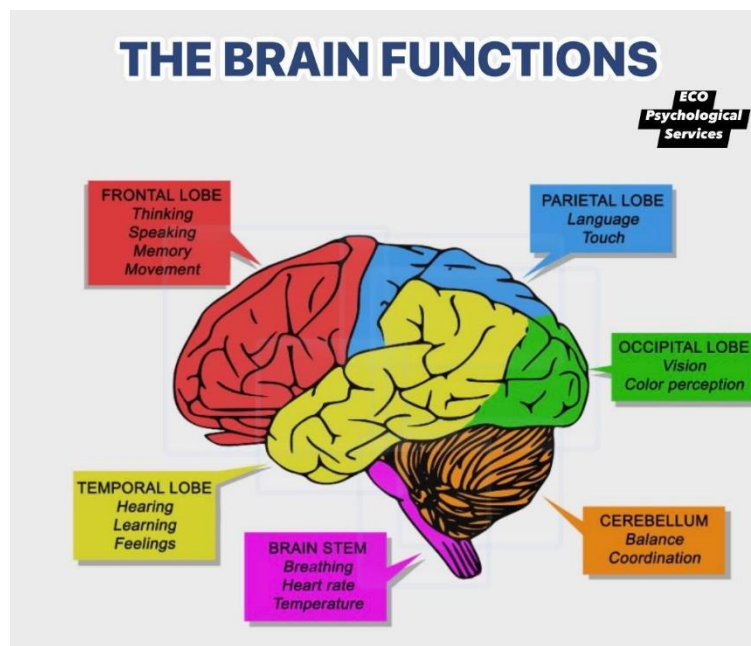
When emotions are running high, arguing over whether they do care usually makes things worse. Instead of meeting the phrase head-on, try to respond to what may be underneath it. You might say, “It feels hard to talk right now,” “I think this might matter more than it looks,” or “We can come back to this when your body feels calmer.” Lowering the heat, staying steady, and reducing pressure can help a child feel safer. Regulation first, conversation second, is often what opens the door.

WHAT WE WANT CHILDREN TO LEARN

Over time, the goal is not simply to stop a child saying “I don’t care.” The deeper goal is to help them recognise what they do feel and express it in safer, clearer ways. With enough co-regulation, children can begin to move from “I don’t care” to “I’m embarrassed”, “I’m angry”, “I’m worried I’ll get it wrong”, or “I need a minute.” That shift matters. Because behind those hard words is often a child who needs understanding, emotional safety, and help putting their inner world into words.



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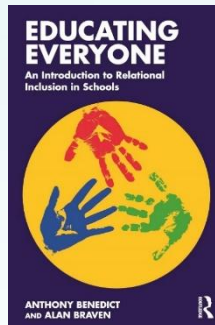


My recommended read this week is about why parenting fads fail:

<https://iai.tv/articles/gentle-parenting-is-doomed-to-fail-auid-3493>

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:

In the end we only regret the chances we didn't take. (diary of a newbie)

Thanks for reading

Anthony Benedict

CEO Ambition Community Trust