



Relational Inclusion blog #65: A Sense of Agency

My youngest should be upstairs having his bedtime story, but he has reappeared downstairs and is currently in the living room trying to persuade daughter number one to give him her balloon. Daughter number one is in the process of hiding said balloon on the bookshelf above his head and somehow, he hasn't noticed.

I explain that he needs to go back up. He replies that he wants a balloon.

"OK," I say. "If you go up now, I will blow you a balloon up first thing in the morning."

"Blow me one up now and then I'll have it straight away in the morning."

Never try to negotiate with a six-year-old, I think, whilst ignoring my own advice.

"But if I blow it up now, the dog will burst it by the morning, like the one he burst earlier."

"I'll hide it," he replies.

I think of a work conversation I had earlier. *Make it his choice.*

"OK. If you go up now, then you can have a balloon first thing in the morning. I'll put one away for you now. If you don't go up, you're choosing not to have a balloon at all."

He thinks about it for a few seconds.

"I guess I'm choosing not to have a balloon."

The empty threats queue up in my head along with my impatience.

"If you don't go up now, you'll also be choosing not to have your tablet time when we go to gymnastics after school tomorrow."

And I know — I've repeated a strategy that just didn't work. And escalated it. Why do we have this incessant urge to layer consequence on consequence? Is it our Victorian past?!

And he is in one of those moods where whatever nonsense I threaten, he will just dig in further. Instead of making anything his choice, I've backed him into a corner.

"I guess I'll not be having tablet time then. Or be going to gymnastics."

Then he ups the ante.

"I'll just go to after-school club."

"That won't be happening," I say, and remove myself for a few minutes.

I take daughter number two up to bed and consider removing daughter number one so that he is left in the room alone. Old habits die hard. Isolating him is definitely not the answer. So I breathe a bit and rethink.

Then I come back downstairs and try again.

"OK. What seems to be the problem? Why don't you want to go upstairs?"

And, surprisingly, asking him straight seems to work.

"It's Mummy's fault. I hate her and she's caused this." His eyes fill with tears.

I could have argued with him. After all, I'm pretty sure his mum didn't do anything. He was only upstairs for a matter of minutes. But that would have been the wrong argument.

"OK. What did Mummy do?"

"I asked for an extra minute, and she wouldn't give me it."

"So, if I give you an extra minute now, will you go up?"

"Yes."

We set a timer and, after a minute, I call him to go upstairs.

"Only if you carry me."

Which I do.

None of this means that children should simply get what they want. He still had to go to bed. The boundary didn't disappear. By asking what the problem was, I had opened up a space where he could create a narrative that allowed him to get out of the corner I'd helped back him into. He didn't have to admit he was wrong. He didn't have to lose. And I didn't have to win.

He just needed a way back that he could control.

What changed was how we got there.

Sometimes we confuse relational practice with being soft, lowering expectations or allowing children to dictate what happens next.

It isn't.

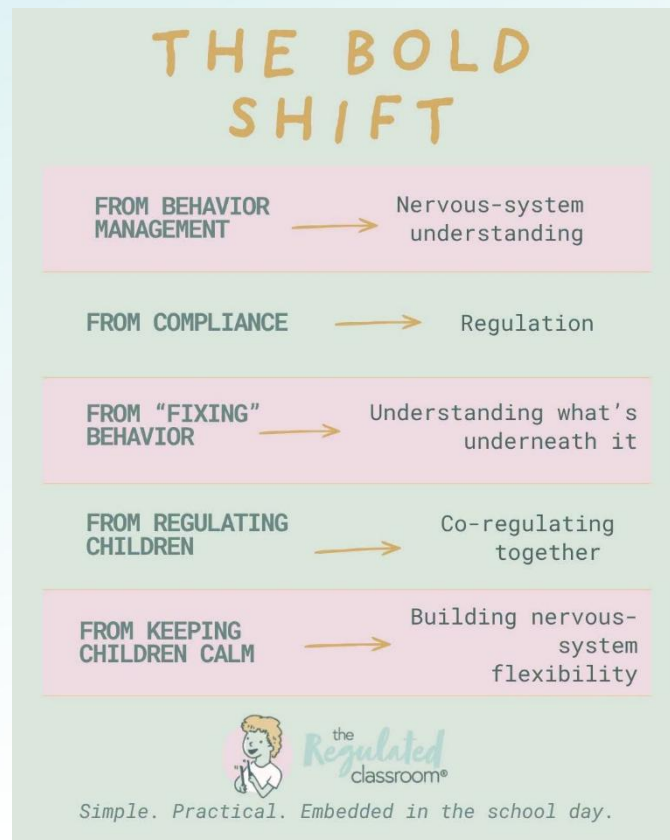
Behaviour is communication.

The difficult bit is remembering to listen before we start throwing empty threats at six-year-old logic

My one a day quotes for this week are:

1. *Even on the messy days, children still need softness from us.* (unknown)
2. *Day by day, what you choose, what you think and what you do is who you become.* (unknown)
3. *The older I get, the more certain I am that we knew exactly who we were when we were little, and then adults talked us out of it.* (Retel Thriver)
4. *The road to heaven feels like hell.
The road to hell feels like heaven.* (unknown)
5. *Psychiatrists try to fix individuals so they can be readjusted to society. But what if society itself is breeding mental illness! Then it's not individuals who need fixing, but the social conditions that mess them up in the first place.* (Sofa Archon)
6. *We have to be there for each other. It's kind of the whole point of life.* (@jordanklancaster | @Projecthappiness_org)
7. *The goal isn't to become a parent who never gets triggered. It's to stop letting your triggers do the parenting.* (Inside parenting)

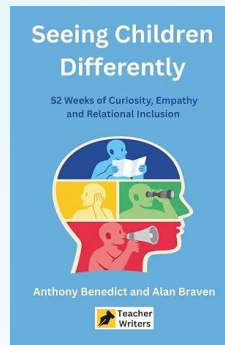
My two print and stick to the wall images this week are:



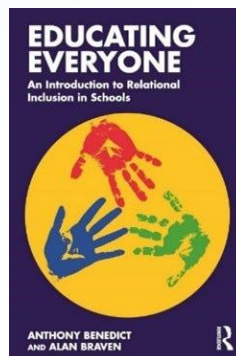
My recommended read this week is about the myth of the lizard brain: [Do humans really have a 'lizard brain' lurking beneath our rational minds? | Neuroscience | The Guardian](#)

If you find the Relational Inclusion blog useful, feel free to share with your networks.

Our brand-new book, [Seeing Children Differently](#) is out now and available from Amazon.



Our first book, *Educating Everyone: An Introduction to relational Inclusion in Schools* is also still available and you must buy it and tell everyone else to buy it too. It is available pretty much everywhere that sells books or you can get it here: [Educating Everyone](#)



Finally, I'd like to share a quote which has really stuck in my mind:

Your death will come on an ordinary day, in the middle of unfinished plans, and the world will continue on without you. So live a little. (@Mind Authority)

Thanks for reading
Anthony Benedict

CEO Ambition Community Trust