

PAUL DIX

LIVE IN LONDON

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WELCOME

The relational dance starts with the stunned silence, the pretending you don't exist, ignoring your polite requests. It quickly pivots to the "get lost", the "are you mad?", and the "I found your insta and ChatGPT says you are a weirdo", all building to the inevitable shouting/ swearing/ slamming doors. The dance is not a serve and return. It is not as predictable or as robotic. You might field 100 serves before you can get a return. From your perspective the dance is about unconditional respect, about soaking up the shrapnel of explosive lives. It is about holding the line but never giving up when it is trampled on. From their perspective it is a test to see if you have the stamina for it. To see if you will stay the course until the last dance or dip out early for a cab home.

The dance is rarely elegant, it is awkward at first and then wildly unpredictable. It doesn't follow a pattern of footsteps. If only. It is why the best practitioners working with the most dysregulated children have 1000 variations, and even then they find themselves a bit stuck. The dance isn't for everyone. Some adults seek a more rigid set of rules for the children who are struggling the most. They prefer military drill to dance. Some refuse to dance properly. They have no empathy, provide no safety in the tricky bits, and never bow to their partner.

The dance is the relationship forming and finding roots.

The dance needs emotionally available adults with boundaries, and a dance card that is not exclusive. Dancing with a safe adult is the route to lasting change. Luckily you can have two left feet and still do the relational dance perfectly.

I hope today gives you a few more steps to try.

Thank you for being here.

Paul Dix



(You will be relieved to hear that there will be no actual dancing in today's performance.)

POSITIVE SEQUES

You might not feel that the child you are correcting today is in need of any positives. They might have annoyed you sufficiently that the thought of dropping in a positive comment appears ridiculous. Yet counterintuitive behaviour support is often the most productive strategy.

Positive segues are non sequiturs that work beautifully together. An unexpected positive in the flow of adjusting behaviours. It is not a sandwich of bad news, it is not as prescriptive as that.

Finding space for the positive segues can be tricky at first. With a bit of practice it will become as natural as a PE teacher in shorts in February. It is the moment of pause after you have asked a child to correct their uniform. The dead air time can invite the child to counter your request, or consider the validity of it, or simply reject it. The space is not a moment for you to sit and expect an answer. It isn't a space for the child to reflect much on their behaviour or consider writing an extensive apology. I mean, you are quite busy. Instead fill the space immediately after your request by slipping in a positive thought. It could be as simple as:

“Morning Oscar, thank you for taking the ear buds out, well done for getting to school on time today, now you are ready to have a great day.”

Or:

“That isn't the best decision you have made today, odd because yesterday I was really impressed by your control and focus.”



Including a positive reflection while correcting the behaviour means that the child is left feeling that you hold your boundaries with care. It is a relational correction of behaviour that gives some balance and lets the child know that being the boundaries is a relationship that sustains. It might seem like a small thing to you but for many children the constant correction without any positive reflection starts a negative internal monologue. It isn't long before they begin to see themselves reflected only in your negative comments. This slow drip of negative reinforcement is not something that any teacher wishes to impart, but sometimes classes are hectic, teaching is exhausting and drift happens. Yet a small shift in language and intent can make a huge difference. It leaves the pupil with the positive thought ringing in their ears and your relationship deepened.

As always, deliberate practice is your friend. Think of just one area of behaviour that you find yourself constantly picking up on, and create your own positive segue to try. Let's start with early behaviours. The small stuff that needs correcting. Complete these corrections with a positive:

"I need you to tuck your shirt in..."

"Where should you be right now?..."

"Put that away..."

"You weren't on time today..."

"I need you to leave the room..."

Experienced teachers match the correction with a positive all the time - it is in the rhythm of their speech - it is effortless:

"You are 10 minutes late, but you have brought a face that looks ready for some learning!"

"You know our rule, coat off please. Love your timekeeping today BTW."

When emotions are running high the positive segue grounds everyone. It is an instant reminder that behind your relentless holding of the boundaries there is kindness, compassion and trust.

It turns out that positive noticing is not just for encouraging great behaviour, it is also extremely useful when correcting behaviour.

LEADING BEHAVIOUR

If you are leading teams of adults in relational practice you have to be fully in. Not just, “Oh look, Paul’s shiny book”, but fully immersed in evidence-based behaviour practice. Your colleagues need to see your values in your own practice every day. You must be ready for the predictable push back and potholes. You will need to be unflinchingly determined in pursuit of your goal. It won’t be easy, but then nothing worthwhile ever is. But it will change your life and in turn you will change many others. It’s a relational pyramid with your voice leading from the top. Lead with confidence, with pride, and with eyes on the prize. We all stand on the shoulders of giants and there are so many people to support you along the way.

As a leader there may be fires that need putting out, but try not to become Fireman Sam. Other adults need your vision, not your bucket and hose. It takes seconds to don the firefighter’s uniform but years to remove the expectation that your heroic arrival is all that will save the day.

If you did nothing else, changed nothing else but the adult response to behaviour, your climate would quickly improve. A positive shift in adult behaviour is so significant that it puts even the juiciest classroom management strategy into second place.

Achieving a successful relational approach is a steady drip-feed of best practice by all adults. It isn’t an overnight revolution. Your colleagues may never forgive you for that. Good change takes a good deal of time. Good change brings everyone along for the ride, in a first-class seat.



POSITIVE NOTICING

Supporting children's behaviour is counterintuitive. You don't improve your child by pointing out their faults and labelling them with deficit language, even if it feels like the right thing to do. You change their behaviour by building on the good stuff. You get more of the behaviour that you notice most. Rather than spending your time picking up on every bad move and irritated shrug, start noticing the positive. "Love how you did that straight away, you are very kind". Notice the positive regularly, consistently, daily. "Thank you for sharing, you are so generous with your sister". Bring out the best behaviours, highlight them for and with your child. Catch them doing the right thing and show them your pride at their selflessness, kindness, and respectfulness. Grow behaviours from their green shoots. "Alfie thank you for being down early and ready for breakfast. Oh, you didn't realise the hour had changed? Still impressive though". Even if you have to fake it to make it. Positive noticing is relational gold.

Your consistent response to your child's behaviour will need some practice. Start by using 'I noticed...' whenever you correct their behaviour. "I noticed that you turned the light back on and have an iPad under your duvet", "I noticed that you haven't cleared up", "I noticed that you were rude". There is no blame or judgement in "I noticed". It doesn't inflame arguments, pour on shame, or encourage a defensive response. "I noticed" helps you to stay calm and consistent, even when behaviour starts to wobble. Couple this with resisting the urge to offer an instant unplanned improvised sanction. Get used to saying "I'm going to take a few minutes to think about what should happen next".



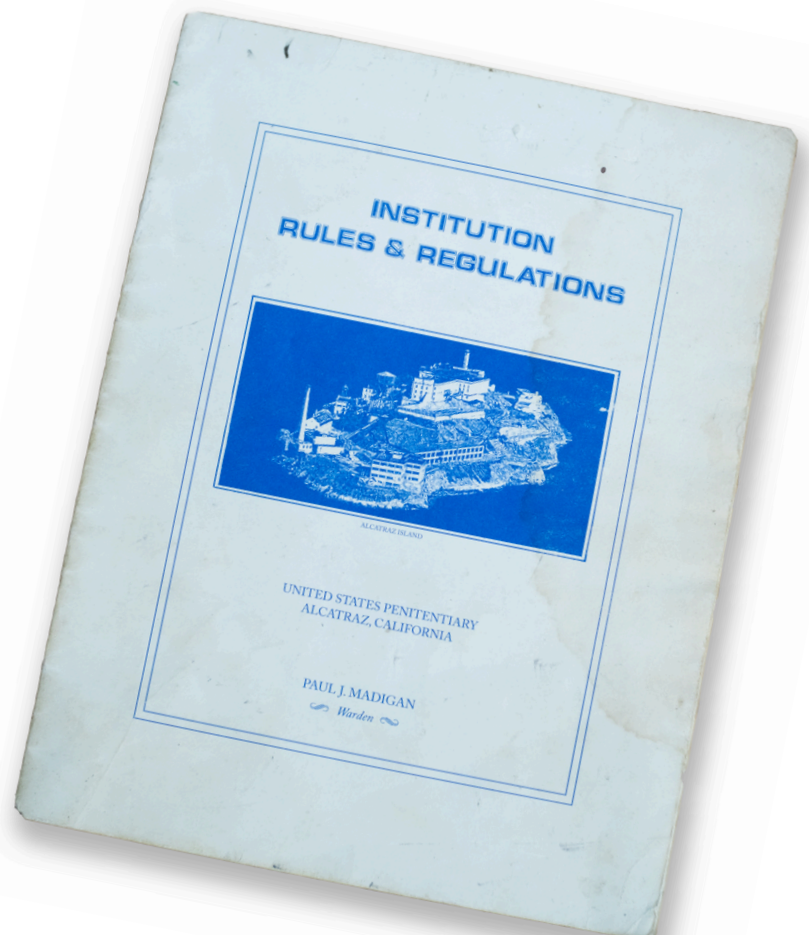
BOUNDARIES

If adult responses are improvised, children see the gaps immediately. There is no consistency. The rules don't really exist and the only rule becomes "Don't piss off the adults!".

Once the rules are just three words, suddenly all the adults are on the same mission. They are using the same language, have the same focus and are consistent in their purpose. The child might wonder what on earth is going on: "The boomers have only gone and got a frikkin plan!".

You can be strict without being angry, you can have discipline whilst being kind, and you can have order without fear. Simple rules, clearly stated and relentlessly applied. It isn't just ice cream that will keep your child happy.

Punishment isn't an effective teacher. Restorative conversations are. Stop connecting your child's behaviour with your emotions/ parenting guilt/ worry that they will end up banged up. Teach them to look in the mirror at their own behaviour. Ask them the questions to encourage reflection. Don't insist on an apology (although it is always appreciated) but question for understanding: "What happened?", "What were you thinking then?", "Who has been affected?", "How can we put things right?", "What about next time?".



ANGRY ADULTS

Train yourself to interpret your child's behaviour for what it is. A child pushing at the boundaries. Change your lens. Simple. Refuse to allow their poor behaviour to provoke your emotion. Not any of it. Work hard on it. No eye roll or shrug or muttering swear words. No shouting, slamming doors or hiding in the shed. Strip out the emotion and refer back to "our rule about...". It gets much easier. Stop the guilt/ worry/ panic that your child may turn into an axe murderer, interfering with your rational mind. It's okay. Your response is always better when it is rational.

The angrier the adult the more the child learns to avoid, keep secrets and lie very convincingly. The conversation starts to become about your emotional state. "Dad was quite angry, I don't want to go back in there", "Is Dad okay yet?" and "Why has Dad started smoking again...?". You don't want to teach your child to behave according to your emotional state. They need a much better and more consistent model.



CHARLOTTE'S PAGE

I spent a long time basing my understanding of children and young people on my own childhood experiences. I expected their behaviours to mirror my own - both in terms of the boundaries I understood and the ways I chose to push them.

Viewing the world using my own lens made implementing relational practice tricky. I found myself trying hard to lead with nurture but hitting a wall of behaviours that stopped me in my tracks.

A 21 year old who reels off their rights first and foremost appears entitled. Yet our young adults hold their boundaries because the world has taught them that it is essential to do so. Whether it was watching the #MeToo campaign unfold or the Black Lives Matter movement grow moment by moment, their experiences of the world have told them that it is not a safe place.

The 15 year old who is defensive, distracted and defiant? Teenagers navigate a world that is all consuming by design. Where every action is either rewarded or annihilated with likes, comments, screenshots and shares. Where every action is comparable not just amongst safe and trusted peers, but strangers and bots that are programmed to tap into our insecurities and desires. The virtual world is one of high risk, high dependency and high levels of comparison. The virtual world and what it teaches our adolescents about relationships makes them highly sensitive to shame. It corrodes their self esteem and replaces any intrinsic motivation with an addiction to credibility and elevated social status.

And younger children? You only have to walk down the road or spend half an hour in a restaurant to see how many young children are attached to devices. A 7 year old who spends two hours a day on a device - even if they are watching bedtime stories or learning how to draw cats - will be addicted to the blue light that devices produce. We don't see children who are bored, who have space for creativity, risk taking or independent problem solving. Our children need those experiences to develop a healthy understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Many young children learn that they must fight for attention. They fight phones, careers and the juggles and pressures of working parents that pay their bills by the skin of their teeth. For adults, our lives have become busier, more overwhelming and really expensive. Just like children and young people, parents are subject to the comparison of other people's instagrammable lives. It can make our best efforts not feel good enough. It can make us feel deflated and defeated. It can dull even the brightest sparkles - and it can mean that we don't hear our children because we are lost in scrolling.

For adults and children alike, it is useful to remember that our brains have not developed a unique storage spot for 'nonsense we saw on social media' - our brain just files what we are exposed to. Videos that are shot on phones, that aren't edited, that are often shared in real time, are very easy for our brains to file as 'experiences'. It isn't like reading a newspaper. When we are immersed in digital media or wearing headphones and interacting in real time, our brain assumes we are there. Many children (research suggests 12%) will be trauma-experienced as a result of media consumption. Much of that started during the pandemic.

Trauma, particularly that which is experienced through media consumption, can be effectively processed back 'out' of the brain's filing cabinet when there is a strong, relational foundation of emotional safety and trust.

Those of you who have spoken to me will know that those children are mine. That the scrolling, stressed, trauma experienced adult is me, and that safe, consistent relational practice has transformed each of our lives. In the small moments, remember that this sometimes challenging and often counterintuitive work, changes everything.

On the website, on the 'Charlotte page', you will be able to look further at why children and young people have changed. There are also free resources that will help you with trauma processing within safe, relational environments.

You know where I am if you need me.

Charlotte Clarke



THANK YOU

The mission is to spread WTAC practice to everyone who works with children and young people. To build relational communities that are inclusive, kind and safe. For families, educators and support services to be equipped with consistent approaches. And for children and young people to be given one message.

Relational practice is no easy ride but the rewards are life changing. For adults too. The work has come this far because of you. We have put together some resources for you to say thank you and to take you further into our work here
www.whentheadultschange/theatre-club

Much love

Paul



P.S. Oh and by the way
I am writing a new book.
The working title is Drift
and it will be out late 2026.
Yup, you heard it here first.



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 **CHANGES**

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