



WHY BOYS SEEK THE EDGE

Risk, Rough Play and the Developmental Question Hidden Inside “Watch This”

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

The edge is where “I think I can” meets reality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypal capacities and six axes of balance. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.

“Watch this.”

There are few phrases in early childhood more capable of making an adult immediately calculate distance to the nearest ice pack.

A boy is standing on something. He wants it higher. Another child says he cannot jump that far. Excellent. Now apparently he must. Somebody starts a race nobody organised. Somebody else turns a perfectly peaceful stick into a sword. Two boys who were building beautifully ten seconds ago are now rolling on the floor laughing, then growling, then laughing again.

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Adults often read these moments through one of two stories. The first says boys are naturally wild and should be left to get on with it. The second says this behaviour is a problem to be controlled before somebody gets hurt. Both are too simple.

Not all boys seek physical risk. Girls seek it too. Temperament, culture, opportunity, development, neurodivergence and social expectation all matter. But there is enough evidence that many boys, on average, engage more often in rough-and-tumble and certain forms of risky play for us to ask a better question than either “boys will be boys” or “how do we calm them down?”

What if, sometimes, the edge is where capability becomes visible?

The edge is not valuable because danger is good. It is valuable because uncertainty gives judgement something real to work on.

RISK IS NOT THE SAME AS DANGER

The literature on risky play makes a useful distinction between risk and hazard. Risk involves uncertainty the child can to some degree perceive and negotiate. A hazard is a danger they may not be able to detect or understand. A steep slope, a high branch or a fast bike can be risky because the child knows there is something to judge. A hidden drop, defective equipment or traffic beyond their perceptual ability is different.

This matters because modern safety culture can accidentally collapse the distinction. If all uncertainty is treated as danger, adults remove not only injury but rehearsal. The child gets fewer opportunities to calibrate height, speed, force, balance, fear and recovery. At the other extreme, romanticising danger as character-building can become adult negligence dressed in sturdy boots.

Brussoni and colleagues’ systematic review of risky outdoor play found overall positive associations with physical activity and several social and behavioural outcomes, while noting that the evidence base varied in quality. Research into rough-and-tumble play similarly suggests that quality matters. Physical play is not automatically regulating or prosocial simply because it is physical. The adult’s responsiveness, the child’s ability to read cues, and the capacity of both partners to stop or change intensity matter enormously.

In other words, the developmental value does not live in the bruise. It lives in what the child learns while approaching uncertainty.

WHAT IS THE CHILD ACTUALLY TESTING?

A child standing at an edge may be testing more than gravity.

Can I judge my own body? Can I cope with the burst of fear before I jump? Can I lose a race and stay in the game? Can I wrestle without turning play into harm? Can I get excited without becoming completely unreachable? Can I hear “stop” while every cell in me wants one more go? Can I disagree with an adult and discover that our relationship survives?

These questions are not always conscious. The five-year-old does not climb a wall while privately reflecting on the developmental integration of agency and consequence. He climbs because the wall is there and something in him wants to know what happens at the top.

But that is precisely why adults matter. We can see a larger pattern without turning the child into a theory.

Within the Archetype Approach, Mover helps us notice embodied action. Explorer notices the pull of uncertainty. Rebel notices agency and resistance. Energy notices intensity. Joker notices play with rules, status and tension. These are not five reasons why a boy jumps off a shed. They are five lenses that can slow our certainty and help us ask what quality is actually present.

Is he expanding into capability, or narrowing into compulsion? Is there playfulness, or panic? Can he still see the other children? Can he stop? Does failure make him curious or destroy him? What happens afterwards?

HEALTHY CHALLENGE HAS A SHAPE

Healthy challenge often has a particular feel. The child is alert. They may be nervous, but they remain connected. They can take information in. They adjust. They recover after a mistake. The challenge enlarges rather than consumes them.

Dysregulation looks different. Choice shrinks. The body accelerates beyond judgement. The child cannot hear the boundary, cannot read the face of the other child, cannot shift gear. The same racing game that was glorious five minutes ago becomes brittle. The same wrestling turns from mutual laughter to somebody being pinned while the other child no longer registers the protest.

This distinction is crucial because “give boys more challenge” is useless advice if the adult cannot read state. Sometimes the best response to a high-energy child is indeed a

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bigger physical task: pushing, carrying, climbing, digging, moving through space. Sometimes adding intensity is exactly the wrong thing and the child needs the nervous system equivalent of a harbour.

That is why behaviour-first practice struggles. It sees the external form — running, shouting, hitting, refusing — and reaches for a standard strategy. Perception-led practice asks what the form is carrying today.

Healthy challenge tends to widen choice. Dysregulation tends to narrow it.

ROUGH PLAY IS A SOCIAL LANGUAGE

Rough-and-tumble play is especially interesting because it looks, from a distance, suspiciously like the thing adults spend all day trying to prevent. There is grabbing, chasing, pinning, roaring, falling over and triumphant yelling. Yet good rough play is intensely social. It depends on reading the partner.

Is that laugh still a laugh? Was that shove part of the game? Did the smaller child genuinely choose to return? Can the stronger child inhibit force? Can the child who “wins” notice when winning has stopped being fun for the other person?

Research on father-child rough-and-tumble play has found associations with social competence, emotional skills and self-regulation, but effects are not uniformly positive and the quality of the interaction matters. Studies of “activation parenting” make a similar point: challenge appears most useful when it is paired with appropriate limit-setting and attunement rather than simple stimulation.

That is an important lesson for early years. The developmental gift in physical play is not merely release of energy. It is learning that power has to stay in relationship.

A child can be fierce without becoming cruel. Strong without ignoring signals. Excited without losing the ability to stop. Competitive without treating defeat as annihilation.

Those are serious human capacities being rehearsed in a game that may look to an adult like two idiots rolling around in the mud.

WHY MANY BOYS MAY BE DRAWN THERE

We should be careful with sex differences. Research finds average patterns, not destinies. Biology and socialisation interact, and adults themselves often offer boys and

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girls different kinds of play, risk and emotional permission. Any sentence beginning “boys are...” should therefore make us mildly suspicious.

Still, boys do, on average, show higher levels of some forms of physical and rough-and-tumble play across many studied contexts. The interesting question is what we do with that information.

One possibility is that many boys find embodied challenge a particularly available route into questions of agency, competence, hierarchy, force and belonging. The culture may amplify that route by giving boys more permission to be physical and less permission to express vulnerability directly. A child who cannot easily say “I need to know I am strong enough” can discover it by wrestling. A child who cannot say “I am frightened of losing status” may turn every game into a competition.

This is where the adult must resist both stereotype and denial. We do not need to tell every boy to climb higher. We do need to notice when repeated attempts to test strength, speed, courage or boundaries are carrying developmental meaning.

And we need to ask whether our settings provide enough legitimate places for those questions to be explored.

THE ADULT WHO DOES NOT PANIC

Children at the edge are watching our nervous systems.

Some adults communicate danger before they have even looked. The inhale happens first. Then the sharp voice. “Get down!” The child may indeed need to get down, but if every height produces the same alarm, there is no room for shared judgement.

Other adults communicate bravado. “Go on, you’re fine.” “Don’t be a baby.” The child’s own fear is treated as something to override in order to satisfy an adult image of courage.

Neither response teaches discernment.

A better adult can hold uncertainty without making it about themselves. They come closer. They inspect. They ask the child what the plan is. They name the real hazard. They reduce the challenge if needed without turning caution into shame.

“Your foot can’t reach that branch yet. Try the lower one.”

“You can wrestle, but when he says stop, your body stops.”

“You can race down the hill. We stop before the gate.”

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“I can see you want to prove you can do it. You don’t have to prove it by ignoring your body.”

This is authority as containment rather than domination. The adult holds the edge until the child can hold more of it themselves.

CAN I BECOME POWERFUL AND REMAIN LOVED?

Underneath all of this sits one of the most important developmental questions in the whole series.

Can I become powerful and remain loved?

Children grow. Their bodies get stronger. Their “no” becomes louder. Their peer world expands. Their private life begins. They discover that they can influence, resist, conceal, persuade, outrun, overpower and refuse. Power arrives whether adults are philosophically comfortable with it or not.

If every expression of power is met with fear or shame, the child may learn that belonging requires smallness. If power is admired without responsibility, they may learn that strength grants exemption from relationship.

The developmental task is harder and better: your power is real, and therefore your responsibility becomes real too.

The Rebel needs Helper. Mover needs Thinker. Explorer needs Planner. Energy needs Joker’s flexibility. Not because one side is good and one side is bad, but because power matures by discovering what it is answerable to.

Perhaps this is why some children seek the edge so insistently. The edge gives an honest answer. The wall either holds you or it does not. The jump is either within your current capacity or it is not. Your friend either still wants to wrestle or they do not. Reality pushes back.

Our job is not to remove that conversation between the child and reality.

It is to make sure they are not having it alone.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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