



THE ADULT AT THE GATE

Why Children Need Adults Who Can Hold Thresholds Without Crushing Them

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

I will not crush what is growing in you. I will not abandon you to it either.

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.

There is a phrase that appears whenever people become worried about boys: “They need more male role models.”

Sometimes they do. Plenty of children benefit from having trustworthy men around them, especially where men have been absent, frightening, emotionally unreachable or simply missing from the everyday world of care. But “male role model” can become a lazy phrase. It tells us what category of adult should be present without telling us what that adult actually needs to be capable of doing.

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A man can be physically present and still be useless at a threshold. So can a woman. So can a teacher, parent, coach, grandparent or practitioner with excellent intentions and no capacity to tolerate a child becoming more powerful.

The deeper need is not merely for adults children can look at.

It is for adults capable of standing at the gate.

I can see what is growing in you. I will not crush it. I will not abandon you to it either.

MORE THAN A ROLE MODEL

A role model is usually imagined as somebody whose behaviour a child might imitate. That matters. Children learn from what adults do, not only from what they say. But threshold-holding is more relational than imitation.

The adult at the gate is the person who can recognise emerging capacity and respond proportionately. They know when to step closer and when to step back. They can challenge without humiliating. They can allow a child to experience consequence without using consequence as revenge. They can tolerate anger without either collapsing into appeasement or escalating into dominance.

This is difficult because children's development changes the relationship. A toddler's "no" can be funny until it is aimed at something the adult urgently needs. A confident five-year-old can suddenly feel "bossy" when their agency collides with our plans. An eight-year-old's competence can make adults proud right up until it becomes disagreement.

We often celebrate independence in theory and resist it in practice.

The adult at the gate notices this tension in themselves. They understand that the child becoming more capable will necessarily make the child less governable by simple command. That is not developmental failure. It is part of the point.

CONTAINMENT IS NOT CONTROL

Containment is one of those words that can sound softer than control while quietly meaning exactly the same thing. In the sense I mean it here, they are fundamentally different.

Control asks: how do I make this stop?

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Containment asks: how do I keep this within a form that can still be thought about, felt and related to?

A child is furious. Control may demand immediate emotional quiet. Containment protects people from being hit while leaving room for the anger to exist. A group becomes wildly excited. Control may shut the whole experience down. Containment may change the space, clarify the limit and help the children bring intensity back within mutual awareness.

This resembles what developmental research calls co-regulation: the child's regulation is initially supported through relationships with more capable others. Studies across infancy and childhood repeatedly show that self-regulation does not emerge by adults simply withdrawing support and waiting for the child to sort themselves out. Children gradually take over functions that were first held with them.

That gives us a more precise picture of authority. Good authority is temporary scaffolding around capacities that are still becoming internal.

The adult's power should make the child more capable of carrying themselves, not more dependent on the adult's power.

THE THREE FAILURES AT THE THRESHOLD

When adults meet emerging power in children, there are three common failures.

The first is to crush it. The child's "no" is treated as insolence. Physical intensity is punished simply for existing. Questioning is framed as disrespect. The child learns that relationship depends upon shrinking whatever feels inconvenient to adults.

The second is to worship it. Adults become so determined not to be controlling that every impulse is treated as authenticity. Boundaries dissolve. The child is asked to carry freedoms they do not yet have the judgement to manage. Adults then become resentful when the child behaves like a child inside the freedom we handed them.

The third is to abandon it. The adult withdraws emotionally or physically when things become difficult. "Fine. Do what you want." The words sound permissive, but the emotional message can be frightening: your power has pushed me out of relationship.

Threshold-holding requires a fourth response.

I am still here.

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Your force does not frighten me into domination. Your distress does not make the limit disappear. Your growth does not make you too much for relationship.

WHAT SAFETY LOOKS LIKE IN A BODY

Children do not encounter authority as a paragraph. They encounter it in bodies.

Voice. Pace. Eyes. Distance. Breathing. Hands. Posture. The speed with which an adult moves towards conflict. The difference between a body that is ready to attack and one that is ready to protect. The tension in a face when noise rises. The steadiness of somebody who can stay close to a child's fear without becoming infected by it.

This needs careful language. A child cannot infallibly “read character” from appearance, and no particular body shape communicates moral goodness. A large man can be frightening or exquisitely gentle; a slight woman can hold extraordinary authority. Embodied presence is not a mystical lie detector.

But bodies carry states. Developmental research on social referencing shows that children use adult emotional signals when navigating uncertain situations. Co-regulation research shows how adult responsiveness can help organise children's arousal and behaviour. The body is part of the signal whether we intend it to be or not.

So a useful supervision question is not merely, “What did you say?”

It is, “What did your body tell the child while you were saying it?”

Was the jaw tight? Were you looming? Were you backing away? Did your voice say calm while your pace said panic? Could the child feel that you were trying to win?

The adult at the gate must know that authority is embodied before it is explained.

Children often meet our nervous system before they meet our philosophy.

CHALLENGE WITHOUT HUMILIATION

Threshold adults do not only soothe. Sometimes love asks more.

A child says they cannot carry the bucket. The adult has watched them carry the same weight before and says, “Have another go. I'll walk with you.” A child loses a race and tries to destroy the game. The adult does not rescue them from losing. They help them

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remain in relationship with the feeling. A child wants to climb higher. The adult does not lift them onto the branch; they ask them to find a route their own body can manage.

This kind of challenge communicates respect. I believe there is more available in you than your first frightened answer suggests.

But challenge turns rotten when the adult needs the child to perform strength for the adult's sake. "Don't be pathetic." "Big boys don't cry." "You wanted to be grown up." That is not initiation. It is shame wearing the costume of toughness.

The difference is whether the challenge preserves the child's dignity and connection to their own signals. Real courage includes fear. Real strength can ask for help. Real independence includes knowing when you have reached the edge of current capacity.

THE ADULT WHO CAN SAY NO

Much modern discussion of relational practice becomes nervous around the word "no." As though warmth and boundaries live on opposite sides of a moral argument.

They do not.

A child needs to discover that another person can be loving and immovable at the same time.

"No, I won't let you hit him."

"You can be furious. The answer is still no."

"I know you want another turn. It is her turn now."

"I'm staying with you while you hate this."

This is one of the most valuable experiences authority can provide. The child encounters a boundary that does not require humiliation, withdrawal or emotional threat. The limit remains, and so does the relationship.

In Archetype Approach terms, Rebel meets Helper. The child's agency is real, but so is responsibility for impact. Friend meets Watcher: belonging remains, but the child is not absorbed into somebody else's desire. Planner provides structure, while Explorer leaves room for the child's developing response.

A good "no" is not the end of discernment. It is part of how discernment develops.

THE ADULT WHO CAN BE WRONG

There is another test of threshold authority that children notice quickly: can the adult survive being wrong?

Adults make poor calls. We misread tone. We accuse the wrong child. We set a limit too sharply. We become activated by something that belongs more to our own history than to the moment in front of us.

If authority requires infallibility, the adult must defend the mistake. The child then learns a dangerous lesson: power decides truth.

An adult who can return and say, “I thought you had pushed him. I looked again and I was wrong. I’m sorry,” teaches the opposite. Authority becomes more credible because it remains answerable to reality.

That is a deep form of strength. The adult’s status does not collapse when they revise themselves. The relationship becomes a place where truth matters more than saving face.

And this is where threshold-holding meets discernment. The adult is not merely managing the child’s development. They are demonstrating what mature power looks like while using it.

STANDING AT THE GATE

The child approaches something new: a harder task, a wider freedom, a conflict they usually avoid, a responsibility they have not carried before.

The adult does not drag them through. Does not block the entrance because growth is inconvenient. Does not disappear to prove a point.

They stand near enough to matter.

“I think you can carry more of this now.”

“I’ll help if you genuinely need it.”

“I won’t do the part that is yours.”

“I won’t let you use your growing power to harm somebody else.”

“And if you fail, you can come back.”

That is the adult at the gate.

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Not a hero. Not a guru. Not a gender stereotype.

Just a human being whose authority is sturdy enough to help another human being become less dependent upon it.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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