

THE NIGHT GARDEN



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# THE DREAM BEFORE LANGUAGE

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*How Very Young Children May Carry Inner Experience Through Body and Play*

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

**Before children can tell us what happened inside them, feeling may travel through rhythm, movement and play - but the adult must not mistake possibility for proof.**

A two-year-old wakes crying.

There are no words for the dream, if there was a dream.

There is only a body pulled tight, a hand searching for the familiar shoulder and a breath that takes a while to find its rhythm again.

Later that morning, the child wraps a wooden figure in fabric.

They hide it beneath a cushion.

They uncover it.

They gasp.

They do it again.

And again.

An adult watching may wonder whether the play belongs to the night.

Perhaps it does.

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Perhaps it belongs to yesterday, to a game with an older sibling, to separation, to surprise, to the pleasure of making something disappear and return, or to nothing that can be neatly named at all.

The child cannot tell us.

This is where early-years practice has to become both more imaginative and more disciplined.

We must be open to the possibility that inner experience arrives before language.

We must also resist the fantasy that adults can read the preverbal child like a secret manuscript.

A gesture is not a confession.

A repeated game is not a diagnosis.

A twitch in sleep is not a telegram from the unconscious.

Steady on.

The mystery is real.

So are the limits of what we know.

## BEFORE THE CHILD CAN SAY, "I DREAMED"

Dreams enter relationship through report.

An older child can wake and say, "There was a wolf," or, "I was falling," or, "Grandad came back."

The words are incomplete, but they give the adult something to meet.

The infant and young toddler cannot offer that kind of account.

They sleep, stir, vocalise, smile, cry, reach, startle and return to waking life.

But we cannot ask what, if anything, was experienced from the inside.

Newborn and infant sleep contains a great deal of active or REM sleep. That fact is fascinating, but it does not allow us to conclude that babies dream in the same way adults report dreams.

REM sleep is a measurable sleep state.

A dream is a subjective experience.

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The first can be observed from outside.

The second usually has to be told.

Developmental dream research becomes difficult precisely because the younger the child, the more the method shapes the answer. Even preschool dream reports vary depending upon how, when and where adults ask.

With babies, there is no report at all.

So the honest position is not, "Babies definitely dream rich symbolic dreams."

Nor is it, "Nothing meaningful happens in infant sleep."

The honest position is that sleep, memory, emotion and brain development are active from the beginning, while the exact form of infant dream experience remains beyond direct access.

We begin, then, with humility.

*Before language, the child does not have less inner life. They have fewer ways to hand it to us.*

## THE BODY ARRIVES BEFORE THE STORY

Long before children can tell a coherent story about themselves, they already know rhythms.

Approach and withdrawal.

Tension and release.

Hunger and satisfaction.

Presence and absence.

A sound that means somebody is coming.

A smell that belongs to safety.

A pause that lasts too long.

An excitement that tips into overwhelm.

These are not yet autobiographical stories in the mature sense.

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The baby is not lying in the cot thinking, "This resembles the difficult Tuesday I had three weeks ago."

But early memory is not absent simply because later autobiographical recall is fragile.

Infants can learn, recognise, anticipate and retain aspects of experience before they can narrate them. The personal life story develops gradually through memory, language, selfhood and shared conversation.

Before the child can say, "This happened to me," experience may be organised through sensation, expectation, emotion and action.

That matters for the Night Garden because the first return of an inner image may not look like an image at all.

It may look like a rhythm.

Hide. Find.

Fall. Catch.

Leave. Return.

Roar. Freeze.

Build. Knock down.

Cover. Uncover.

The child may repeat the shape of an experience before they can explain its meaning.

But we have to hold that sentence carefully.

May.

Not must.

## REPETITION IS NOT A CODE

Adults are pattern-seeking creatures.

Give us a toddler, three repeated movements and a clipboard and we will have a theory by snack time.

The child lines up animals.

The child repeatedly fills and empties a basket.

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The child hides under the table whenever the door opens.

The child makes the baby fall from the bed and then rescues it.

The child asks for the same frightening page of the story again and again.

These patterns may be meaningful.

They may relate to schemas, sensory pleasure, motor mastery, prediction, imitation, relationship, imagination, recent experience or emotional processing.

Several things may be happening at once.

What they do not provide is a fixed translation.

Filling does not automatically mean emotional emptiness.

Enclosure does not automatically mean insecurity.

A falling doll does not prove trauma.

A repeated wolf does not prove fear.

And because a behaviour follows a difficult night, it does not follow that the behaviour is the dream returning.

A useful practitioner notices sequence without claiming ownership of cause.

"After waking distressed, the child repeatedly hid and uncovered a figure during play."

That is an observation.

"The child was reenacting a nightmare about abandonment."

That is a story the adult has added.

It might one day prove insightful.

It might also be complete nonsense.

Describe, do not decode.

The rule matters even more when the child has no language with which to disagree.

## PLAY AS THE FIRST OUTER LANGUAGE

Play is often called the language of childhood.

It is a lovely phrase, but it can make adults too confident.

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Languages have speakers who can correct us.

Preverbal play does not come with subtitles.

Still, play allows young children to move experience into the shared world.

An absent thing can be represented.

A cup can become a hat.

A block can become a phone.

A toy can sleep, cry, disappear, return, attack or be comforted.

Research shows that symbolic play and the ability to pretend emotions emerge surprisingly early and develop alongside language. Yet evidence does not support the grand claim that pretend play is a single magical cause of healthy development.

Play is better understood as one of several routes through which children explore, practise and organise experience.

That modest claim is more useful anyway.

The young child does not need the adult to announce, "Ah, the hidden bear is clearly your unconscious fear of separation."

They need time, materials and a person who can stay nearby without grabbing the story.

The child puts the bear under the cloth.

The adult waits.

The child uncovers it and laughs.

The adult says, "There it is."

That may be enough.

The play has been witnessed without being colonised.

*The younger the child, the greater the adult responsibility  
to leave room for meanings they cannot yet correct.*

## THE ADULT WANTS A STORY

Words make adults feel safer.

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Once something has a name, we can place it in a file, explain it to a parent and pretend we know what to do next.

Preverbal experience is awkward because it refuses to become tidy.

The child cries at the same transition every day.

They wake at night and cling.

They repeatedly bite one particular soft toy.

They crawl into small spaces and go silent.

The adult begins assembling a narrative.

Birth trauma.

Attachment.

A nightmare.

A sensory need.

A past life, if the room is feeling especially lively.

Any of these may form part of somebody's belief or clinical understanding.

None should be imposed as fact from a thin observation.

There is an ethical asymmetry here.

The adult has language, status and the power to record.

The young child has a body and a pattern.

Once the adult story enters the record, it can follow the child for years.

A possibility becomes a concern.

A concern becomes a profile.

A profile becomes the lens through which every later action is seen.

This is how symbolic curiosity can quietly turn into professional mythology.

The Night Garden must be built with stronger gates than that.

## RHYTHM BEFORE SYMBOL

Not every young child is yet using symbols in the same way.

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Before a block reliably becomes a car or a figure becomes a monster, play may be rooted in physical pattern.

Carrying.

Dropping.

Spinning.

Climbing.

Pushing.

Enclosing.

Passing objects from one hand to another.

Moving away and returning.

These actions deserve respect without being turned into riddles.

The body may be practising force, distance, balance, timing, prediction and control.

It may also be finding a tolerable shape for feeling.

A toddler who repeatedly crashes may enjoy the sound, the impact, the reaction, the certainty of cause and effect, or the chance to rehearse a sudden event under their own control.

The most truthful response is often to widen the provision rather than narrow the explanation.

Offer things that can fall safely.

Build things strong enough to push.

Create routes for fast movement and places for deep stillness.

Give containers, fabric, tunnels, heavy objects, soft objects, water, sand and materials that transform.

Then watch what the child does when more possibilities become available.

Meaning may emerge through variation.

Or the child may simply have a cracking time posting stones into a tube.

Both are allowed.

## **THE ARCHETYPES BEFORE THEY ARE NAMED**

The Archetype Approach does not require a child to speak before patterns of energy and attention can be noticed.

The Mover is visible in the child who knows through action.

The Watcher appears in the long pause before approach.

The Explorer crawls towards the unknown.

The Builder stacks, joins and tests what will hold.

The Friend reaches for faces, rhythm and shared delight.

The Rebel turns away, stiffens or refuses the offered spoon.

The Helper brings the dropped object back.

The Joker discovers that a strange noise can change the whole room.

The Imagineer begins to treat one thing as another.

The Planner recognises sequence and protests when it breaks.

Energy surges through the whole body.

The Thinker returns to the mechanism until it makes sense.

These are not diagnoses hiding inside babies.

They are ways of noticing living tendencies.

In the preverbal years, the danger of labelling is especially sharp because the adult can mistake a developmental phase, temperament, tiredness or context for a fixed identity.

The point is not to decide, "This is a Mover baby," and spend the next six years making every observation fit.

The point is to ask what forms of relationship, movement, rest, exploration, construction, play and predictability the child currently needs access to.

Pattern should open provision.

It should never close the child.

## **A NIGHT GARDEN FOR BABIES AND TODDLERS**

A Night Garden for very young children should not look like a miniature therapy room.

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No adult needs to sit beside a twelve-month-old asking what the black clay represents.

The provision is simpler, more sensory and more relational.

Soft and firm materials.

Objects that appear and disappear.

Fabric for wrapping, covering and revealing.

Mirrors.

Baskets and containers.

Figures with simple, open expressions.

Animals.

Blocks that can become shelter.

Tunnels and dens.

Drums, bells and objects that allow sound to begin and stop.

Water, sand, mud and dough.

Books with repetition, disappearance, return, darkness, homecoming and transformation.

Most importantly, familiar adults whose bodies do not turn every strong moment into an emergency.

The Night Garden is not defined by dark colours and moon-shaped cushions.

It is defined by symbolic hospitality.

For the youngest children, hospitality may mean allowing a repeated action to complete without interruption.

It may mean joining the rhythm.

"Gone."

Pause.

"Back."

It may mean slowing the body, offering a boundary or placing the basket where the child can reach it again tomorrow.

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The environment says: something happened here, and you are allowed to return without having to explain yourself.

### WHAT TO NOTICE

Observation still matters.

The answer to over-interpretation is not to stop looking.

It is to look more precisely.

### SEQUENCE

What happened before the play began?

Had the child just woken, separated, fallen, been startled, heard a story or watched another child?

### FORM

What did the child actually do?

Which objects, movements, sounds and people were involved?

### AFFECT

Did the child appear frightened, delighted, concentrated, calm, angry or hard to read?

### FLEXIBILITY

Could the pattern change?

Did the child accept another ending, object or person, or did interruption create distress?

### RELATIONSHIP

Was the child inviting somebody in, keeping everybody out or moving between the two?

### RETURN

Did the pattern appear once, recur across days or disappear when the child moved on?

### IMPACT

Is the pattern supporting ordinary play and exploration, or is distress affecting sleep, eating, relationship or daily functioning?

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These questions produce better observation without pretending to solve the child.

### WHAT TO WRITE DOWN

Record what another adult could reasonably have seen or heard.

"After waking from sleep crying, the child held the practitioner for approximately five minutes. Later, they repeatedly covered and uncovered a wooden figure, saying, 'gone' and 'there'."

That is useful.

"The child processed a dream of maternal abandonment through symbolic play."

That is not an observation.

Nor is it harmless.

The language of records becomes reality surprisingly quickly.

Useful recording may include frequency, context, changes, the child's exact words, adult responses and any effect on daily life.

Interpretive reflections can be discussed separately and clearly marked as possibilities.

"We wondered whether the pattern may relate to recent separation, though this is not known."

Even then, ask whether the speculation helps the child or merely makes the adult feel clever.

Not every wonder needs to enter the file.

*Pattern should open provision. It should never close the child.*

### NIGHT WAKING, DISTRESS AND ORDINARY DEVELOPMENT

Babies and toddlers wake for many reasons.

Hunger.

Temperature.

Illness.

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Teething.

Developmental change.

Separation.

Noise.

Sleep associations.

A wet nappy.

A nightmare, perhaps.

Or no reason the adult will ever discover.

The Night Garden must not turn ordinary night waking into evidence of hidden symbolic disturbance.

Nor should persistent distress be romanticised as a meaningful archetypal process.

Parents should seek appropriate health advice where sleep problems are severe, prolonged, suddenly changed, associated with breathing difficulties, unusual movements, illness, injury or significant effects on the child and family.

Early-years practitioners are not sleep clinicians.

We can notice, support routines, share observations and encourage families towards suitable help.

Mystery is not an excuse for vagueness when health matters.

## **DREAM, DISCLOSURE AND THE LIMITS OF INFERENCE**

The preverbal child presents a particular safeguarding responsibility.

They may communicate distress through behaviour without being able to provide a verbal account.

That does not mean adults should decode play into allegations.

Research on children's memory and testimony reminds us that young children can remember real experiences, while adult questioning and expectation can also shape later reports.

The correct response is careful observation, accurate recording and ordinary safeguarding procedure.

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No dream-like play proves that an event occurred.

No lack of language proves that nothing occurred.

Look for the whole picture.

Changes in behaviour, injury, fear linked to particular people or places, sexualised behaviour outside developmental expectations, repeated waking disclosures as language develops, and other signs may require consultation with the designated safeguarding lead.

The practitioner should not interrogate, rehearse a story or repeatedly ask the child to demonstrate through toys.

The Night Garden is not an investigation room.

A child's play can be received with care without being treated as forensic evidence.

## THE CHILD WHO CANNOT CORRECT US

The deepest ethical point is simple.

A verbal child can sometimes say, "No, that is not what I meant."

The baby cannot.

The toddler may have only one word and a gesture.

That silence does not make adult interpretation more reliable.

It makes adult restraint more important.

We should be suspicious of any framework that becomes more certain as the child becomes less able to challenge it.

The Archetype Approach is meant to protect living complexity, not replace one set of labels with prettier ones.

The child is not a puzzle placed in front of the adult expert.

They are a person in development, communicating through the means currently available to them.

Our work is to widen those means.

Movement.

Stillness.

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Sound.

Gesture.

Material.

Imitation.

Play.

Relationship.

And eventually, perhaps, story.

We offer forms without forcing content.

We lend words without stealing authorship.

### **A NIGHT GARDEN HYPOTHESIS**

The Night Garden proposes a cautious hypothesis.

Before children can narrate dreams or inner conflicts, some emotional experience may continue into waking life through bodily state, repeated action, sensory preference and emerging symbolic play.

When adults provide stable relationship, rich materials and space for repetition without imposing fixed interpretation, young children may gain more flexibility, agency and communicative range around experiences they cannot yet describe.

That is a hypothesis, not a fact already proved.

Several questions would need proper study.

Do patterns after distressed waking differ from the child's ordinary repetitive play?

Does child-led variation increase when adults join without directing?

Can careful observation distinguish sensory or schema-based repetition from patterns linked to emotional events, or are those categories too entangled?

Does offering movement, enclosure, sound, construction and return reduce distress or simply enrich play?

How can practitioners record preverbal communication without turning speculation into identity?

Can the six axes guide broader provision while keeping meaning open?

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What happens when we respect the body as a carrier of experience without pretending it speaks in a code adults already know?

The two-year-old covers the wooden figure again.

Gone.

They wait.

The adult waits too.

The figure returns.

The child smiles and pushes it into the adult's hand.

Perhaps the night has entered the game.

Perhaps not.

Either way, something has entered relationship.

And relationship is where the child will gradually find movement, form and words.

*Perhaps the first task is not to discover what the child is saying, but to become a place where saying can slowly become possible.*

## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. 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.