



# SCHOOL READY: THE FIRST HALF-INITIATION

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*We Ask Whether the Child Is Ready for School. We Should Also Ask What the Threshold Is For.*

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

We retained the transition and lost much of the initiation.

## 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.

By the summer before Reception, everybody suddenly becomes very interested in whether a four-year-old can operate a coat.

Can they use the toilet? Recognise their name? Open the lunch box? Sit and listen? Manage their belongings? Separate from Mum or Dad without half the building joining the emotional event?

These things matter. Practical independence genuinely makes a child's day easier. Communication, self-care, social confidence and the ability to participate in a group are real developmental achievements. The problem is not the coat.

## THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

The problem is how quickly “school readiness” can shrink into a checklist of behaviours that make a child easier for an institution to receive.

There is a bigger question hiding underneath it all.

Ready for what?

*If school is a threshold, readiness cannot mean only that the child has learned to fit through the door.*

## A DOORWAY BIGGER THAN A CHECKLIST

Starting school remains one of the few childhood transitions our culture marks clearly. There is a date. A building. Often a uniform. A new adult. New children. A goodbye at a gate. The child’s social world widens beyond the family and familiar early-years setting.

The Department for Education describes starting Reception as a significant milestone and its current transition guidance emphasises relationships between settings, schools and families, reciprocal visits, familiarity and meaningful sharing of information. That is important because it quietly corrects an old idea: readiness does not sit entirely inside the child like a battery level that adults can inspect.

Yet everyday conversation still tends to frame it that way. Is *\*the child\** ready? Can *\*the child\** listen? Can *\*the child\** cope? Can *\*the child\** comply with a larger group and a more formal rhythm?

Those are legitimate questions, but they are only half the threshold. If we think initiatorily, a community should not merely ask whether the child can meet increased expectations. It should also decide what increased trust, participation and belonging will now be offered in return.

The new school child is being entrusted with a wider world: other adults, other families, possessions carried from home, social decisions made beyond a parent’s immediate gaze, conflicts that cannot always be solved by the familiar person, stories brought home that adults did not witness, and a growing sense that “my life” now contains places where my parents are not present.

That is a profound shift in childhood, even when it happens in a classroom with plastic trays and somebody reminding twenty-nine children to find their water bottles.

## WHAT DOES THE THRESHOLD ASK?

A meaningful threshold always has two movements: the person becomes more capable, and the community recognises that capability by entrusting something real.

Imagine school readiness through that lens. The child is not simply learning to put on a coat. They are becoming someone who can increasingly notice their own needs and act upon them. They are not merely carrying a bag. They are beginning to hold responsibility for objects that travel between two worlds. They are not simply saying goodbye without tears. They are experimenting with the extraordinary human capacity to remain connected to somebody who is absent.

Even following a classroom routine can be understood differently. At its best, routine is not obedience for its own sake. It is participation in a shared rhythm: I am one person among many, and sometimes the group needs me to wait, remember, help, listen or move with everybody else.

This changes the emotional meaning of competence. “Can you do it without me?” is replaced by “What can you carry now, and what do you still need us to hold with you?”

That question is kinder, but it is also more demanding. It allows us neither to infantilise the child nor to pretend that needing support is failure.

## THE OTHER HALF OF READINESS

If readiness is relational, then schools and adults have to be ready too.

Is the room ready for the child who needs to move before thought settles? Is it ready for the Watcher who enters slowly and speaks after everyone else has already moved on? Is it ready for the Rebel whose first relationship with a new rule is to ask why? Is it ready for the Joker who uses humour when tension rises? Is it ready for a child whose language looks five while their regulation sometimes looks three, or whose competence disappears under the sheer sensory weight of a new building?

The EYFS itself resists some of the worst simplifications by keeping communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development as prime areas. Current guidance also stresses professional judgement rather than mechanical tracking. But institutions can still drift towards rewarding the child who is easiest to manage.

## THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

That is where the Archetype Approach offers a useful provocation. If one style of child fits the environment better than another, the answer cannot always be to reshape the child. Sometimes the environment is the one with a developmental task.

The Planner-heavy classroom may need more Explorer. The quiet, orderly adult may need to make peace with Mover. The practitioner who experiences every “why?” as a challenge to authority may need to borrow some Watcher before responding to Rebel.

The model must bend towards the real child, never the child towards the model. The same should be true of the institution.

## THE CURRICULUM BEFORE THE CURRICULUM

Before a child learns a single new phoneme, they are already learning what the wider adult world feels like.

They notice what happens when the room becomes loud. Does the adult’s body tighten? Does the voice jump suddenly in volume? Does irritation leak into the face? They notice what happens when somebody cries for home. Is tenderness still available when the schedule is inconvenient? They notice what happens when a child refuses. Does the boundary remain calm, or does the adult become personally offended by a four-year-old’s resistance?

This is not magical child mind-reading. Developmental research on social referencing shows that even infants use adults’ emotional signals to help organise their responses to ambiguous situations. Co-regulation research likewise shows that children’s developing self-regulation is scaffolded through relationships long before they can independently manage every state.

So the curriculum begins before the curriculum. Children are encountering authority, conflict, difference, dependence and belonging through adult bodies and relationships before those things become abstract ideas.

A calm “No, I won’t let you hurt him” teaches one kind of authority. A furious “How dare you?” teaches another. A teacher who can say “I got that wrong” demonstrates that adulthood can survive correction. A practitioner who remains warm while a child is furious demonstrates that disagreement need not threaten belonging.

These are not extras around education. They are part of what the threshold is educating the child \*into\*.

*Children do not only become ready for school. They borrow an image of the wider human world from the adults waiting there.*

## A CEREMONY OF TRUST

What would happen if we treated the months around school entry less like a final inspection and more like a gradual ceremony of trust?

Not necessarily a literal ceremony. No capes required, although four-year-olds would improve most official proceedings.

I mean a shift in emphasis. You can carry this now. You can ask another adult for help. You can look after something that belongs to the group. You can begin to solve a disagreement before I step in. You can walk into this room, find your own place and still know where home is. You can try something difficult, and if it overwhelms you we will not turn your need into a moral failure.

Children often love meaningful responsibility precisely because it makes their growing capacity visible. Giving out cups, taking a message, caring for a garden bed, helping a younger child, remembering the book bag: these are small acts, but they communicate that participation matters.

This is very different from choreographing compliance. An initiated child is not one who has learned never to inconvenience adults. They are one who is gradually entrusted with a more consequential place in the group.

## REGRESSION BELONGS AT THE THRESHOLD

The language of “ready” can make development sound binary: ready or not ready, capable or incapable. Actual children are far less tidy.

A child may march through the school gate on Monday and need to be peeled gently from a parent on Tuesday. They may independently dress at nursery and suddenly forget how sleeves work when the house is rushed. They may appear socially bold until their closest friend is absent.

Liminal periods are unstable by nature. The old arrangement no longer fits perfectly, while the new one is not yet secure. That wobble is not evidence that the threshold has failed. It is part of what thresholds are.

## THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

Adults can easily make the wobble worse by withdrawing support too quickly: “You’re a big boy now.” “You’re at school now.” “You don’t need that anymore.” There is often a hidden shame in these sentences. Growth becomes proof that earlier needs must be renounced.

But mature development does not require the child to despise the self they were yesterday. The secure message is different: You can do more now, and you are still allowed to need us.

## READY FOR MORE REALITY

Perhaps “school ready” could eventually mean something richer than competence at institutional routines.

Not finished. Not compliant. Not able to function without need.

Increasingly able to enter a wider world while carrying a little more responsibility for self and others. Increasingly able to seek help from more than one trusted adult.

Increasingly able to encounter difference without disappearing. Increasingly able to make choices, experience consequences, repair small ruptures and remain part of a group.

And perhaps the adults on the far side of the threshold deserve an equivalent readiness test.

Can we receive agency without mistaking it for defiance? Can we hold movement without treating the body as an inconvenience? Can we protect the group without humiliating the individual? Can we offer structure without making order the highest good? Can we ask more of children without giving them less childhood?

Starting school is already a transition. The deeper question is whether it becomes an initiation into richer participation or merely the first moment a child learns that being “ready” means becoming easier to process.

We have the chance to make it something better.

## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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