

THE NIGHT GARDEN



THE NIGHT GARDEN

# THE NIGHT GARDEN IN PRACTICE

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*How to Make Room for Symbolic Life Without Turning the Nursery Into Therapy*

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

**The Night Garden is not a place where adults decode children. It is a way of giving inner images somewhere to land while the child remains the owner of what they mean.**

A child arrives carrying a wolf.

Not literally. That would be a different risk assessment.

The wolf came in a dream, but by nine o'clock it is under the table, inside the block area and chasing three children across the garden.

The child draws it with six red teeth.

Builds it a cave.

Becomes it.

Then suddenly refuses to talk about it.

The adults have choices.

We can dismiss the whole thing as a bad dream.

We can turn it into a lovely adult-led wolf activity before snack.

We can become worried, start decoding the teeth and accidentally turn one interesting morning into a tiny case conference.

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Or we can make room.

That is the practical heart of the Night Garden.

Not analysis.

Not therapy dressed up in a tuff tray.

Not a new assessment category called "wolf tendencies".

A place, a language and a way of being with children when their inner images follow them into the day.

## NOT A DREAM CORNER

The Night Garden is not simply a sleep-themed area with moons, stars and a laminated picture of an owl.

It does not need to sit permanently in one corner of the room.

Sometimes it will be a table with clay and charcoal.

Sometimes a dark den.

Sometimes a box of figures beside the blocks.

Sometimes a drum in the garden.

Sometimes it is nothing more visible than an adult who does not rush to explain.

The provision is flexible because symbolic life is flexible.

Dreams arrive through images, but so do fears, memories, imaginary companions, repeated stories, grief, questions and characters children cannot quite leave alone.

The child who keeps building the same collapsing bridge may never mention a dream.

The child who becomes a villain every afternoon may be working with something they cannot yet name.

The child who draws doors inside doors may simply love doors.

The Night Garden holds all three possibilities.

It welcomes the image without turning it into evidence.

This matters because adults are meaning-making machines.

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Give us one black horse and a quiet child and, if we are not careful, we will have invented a theory before lunch.

The Night Garden asks us to slow down.

The image is real because the child is using it.

Its meaning remains open.

*The child owns the image. The adult makes room for it.*

## SYMBOLIC HOSPITALITY

A good early-years environment already offers physical hospitality.

There is somewhere to move, somewhere to rest, somewhere to build, somewhere to belong and somewhere to be alone.

Symbolic hospitality extends the same welcome to inner life.

It says:

You may bring the wolf here.

You may build the house that keeps falling down.

You may make the storm loud and then quiet.

You may become the witch, the baby, the dragon, the lost person or the person who finds them.

You do not have to explain yourself before you begin.

This does not mean every image is indulged without boundary.

A child can play the wolf without biting another child.

They can build a prison without trapping somebody who wants to leave.

They can explore death without frightening younger children who have not entered the story.

Hospitality is not the removal of structure.

It is structure generous enough to receive more than one kind of experience.

The adult protects bodies, consent, shared space and relationship.

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Within those boundaries, the image is allowed to breathe.

### BUILDING THE SPACE

A Night Garden does not need expensive resources.

In fact, resources that arrive with one fixed story can get in the way.

The best materials are usually ordinary things that can become more than one thing.

### MATERIALS FOR FORM

Clay, dough, charcoal, chalk, paint, wire, tape, boxes and large paper.

These give an image edges.

The monster can become a size.

The cave can have an entrance.

The storm can be black, blue, silver or covered in glitter because apparently even terror needs accessorising sometimes.

### MATERIALS FOR STORY

Animals, people, fabric, blocks, loose parts, small doors, beds, boats, bridges, trees and open-ended figures.

Avoid making every character too specific.

A plain wooden figure can become Grandad, the wolf, a rescuer or the child themselves within ten minutes.

### MATERIALS FOR EMBODIMENT

Capes, masks, cloth, ropes, hoops, drums, shakers and enough open space to run, stop, hide and return.

Some images cannot be worked with while sitting politely at a table.

They need feet.

They need breath.

They need a roar that begins and ends.

### MATERIALS FOR CONTAINMENT

Boxes, baskets, jars, envelopes, dens, nests, fences and containers with lids.

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Children often create boundaries around powerful material long before adults think to offer them.

The wolf goes in the box.

The letter is folded.

The cave gets a door.

The frightening puppet sleeps under a cloth.

Containment is not suppression.

It is the discovery that an experience can have a place without filling the whole world.

## THE ADULT'S JOB IS SMALLER THAN WE THINK

Adults are very good at improving children's ideas until there is almost nothing left of them.

A child makes a small grey animal.

We ask whether it is a wolf.

Then whether the wolf is angry.

Then whether the wolf needs a friend.

Then we fetch a book about feelings and wonder why the child has wandered off.

The Night Garden requires restraint.

The practitioner does not need to uncover the hidden truth of the image.

We need to notice what the child actually gives us.

The child says, "It lives under the sea."

We do not reply, "Do you feel hidden too?"

We might say, "It lives under the sea."

The child says, "Nobody can kill it."

We might ask, "What happens when it comes up?"

Or we might simply keep building.

A useful response usually does one of four things:

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It reflects.

It clarifies.

It offers possibility.

Or it stays quiet.

Silence is not a failure of practice.

Sometimes it is the only response that leaves the child enough room to hear themselves.

*Describe, do not decode. Follow, do not fish.*

### A FIVE-MOVE PRACTICE

The Night Garden can be held through five simple movements.

#### 1. RECEIVE

Notice what the child brings without deciding too quickly what it means.

"The wolves came back."

"You have built the same tower again."

"You are being Scar today."

Receive the image as communication, play, fascination or all three.

#### 2. REFLECT

Return what is actually present.

"The wolf is outside the cave."

"You made the thunder very loud."

"Scar is watching everybody from the high rock."

Reflection helps the child see the form without being told its meaning.

#### 3. OFFER

Offer materials, space, language or companionship that widen the child's choices.

"Would a bigger piece of paper help?"

"Do you want somewhere to build the shelter?"

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"Shall I be the person at the gate, or do you want me to watch?"

An offer is not a disguised instruction.

The child can refuse it.

### 4. FOLLOW

Follow the child's movement rather than your original theory.

The wolf may become friendly.

It may get larger.

It may disappear completely when a digger arrives.

Do not drag it back because you had planned an excellent emotional-literacy extension.

### 5. RELEASE

When the child is finished, let the image go.

Do not keep asking about the dream next Tuesday.

Do not display the monster for six months without permission.

Do not make the child become the setting's official grief project because one powerful story moved the adults.

Release protects the child from becoming trapped inside yesterday's meaning.

## USE THE AXES, NOT A SYMBOL DICTIONARY

The Archetype Approach does not need a list telling practitioners what wolves, storms, snakes or locked doors always mean.

They do not always mean anything in the same way.

A wolf may be frightening to one child, loyal to another, funny to a third and simply the best animal in the world to a fourth.

The six axes offer a safer planning lens because they attend to movement rather than fixed interpretation.

Movement and stillness.

Care and playful disruption.

Truth and harmony.

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Imagination and order.

Intensity and intellect.

Exploration and construction.

A child may create a storm that is all intensity and no stopping point.

We do not conclude that the storm symbolises unbalanced Energy.

We notice that the play might benefit from controllable sound, shelter, rhythm and an ending the child can choose.

A child may repeatedly run through an endless forest.

We do not diagnose an Explorer problem.

We offer maps, landmarks, a base camp, a bridge or a way home.

A child may build the same rigid castle and become furious when anyone changes it.

We do not announce that the Planner is in shadow.

We might protect the construction while gently inviting another material, route or character into the world.

The axes help us ask what experience might bring greater range.

They do not tell us what the image secretly means.

## FROM IMAGE TO INVITATION

A waking invitation grows from what the child continues, not from what the adult prescribes.

## THE CHASING CREATURE

The child may want to draw it, become it, build it a home, make a stopping signal or decide who is allowed to chase whom.

Possible provision includes controllable chase games, dens, boundaries, routes and clear endings.

The developmental movement may be from pursuit towards choice.

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### THE ENDLESS STORM

The child may use drums, water, weather paintings, shelter building, loud and quiet rhythms or a story in which the storm changes.

Possible provision holds intensity beside containment.

The child can begin the sound, alter it and stop it.

### THE LOST CHILD

The child may make a map, leave markers, invent a guide, build a village or create a homecoming song.

Possible provision joins exploration with construction and return.

### THE BAD GUY

The child may need the cape, the throne, the deep voice, the right to refuse and the power to decide what happens next.

The adult protects others from cruelty while allowing the child to rehearse authority, danger and presence.

The developmental movement may be from borrowed power towards owned agency.

### THE RETURNING PERSON

The child may build a bedroom, make a telephone, prepare food, draw a road between two places or simply report the dream and move on.

The adult does not decide whether the encounter was spiritual, psychological or "only imagination."

We make room for relationship and follow the family's language with care.

*Provision should widen the child's choices, not prove the adult's theory.*

## WHAT ADULTS CAN SAY

The language of the Night Garden is plain.

### WHEN A CHILD REPORTS A DREAM

"You dreamed about the wolf again."

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"What happened this time?"

"Would you like to tell me, draw it or leave it there?"

### WHEN AN IMAGE APPEARS IN PLAY

"That house keeps falling down."

"The baby is hiding under the bridge."

"You have made the dragon much smaller today."

### WHEN THE CHILD SEEMS FRIGHTENED

"That felt frightening."

"You are awake and I am here."

"Do you want to show me where it began and where it stopped?"

### WHEN THE CHILD WANTS POWER

"You want to be the one who decides."

"You can be the king. You cannot make other children stay in the prison."

"How can we keep the power in the story without hurting anybody?"

### WHEN THE ADULT DOES NOT KNOW

"I do not know what it means."

"What do you think?"

"We can leave it mysterious."

Adults are allowed not to know.

That may be one of the healthiest things we model.

## RECORDING WITHOUT MAKING A CASE FILE

Observations can preserve the child's symbolic life or flatten it.

A useful record stays close to what was seen and said.

"Maya drew a large black horse three times. She said, 'It comes when the sky is loud.' She smiled while making hoof sounds and invited Sam to build it a stable."

That gives us behaviour, language, affect, repetition and relationship.

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It does not pretend to know more than it knows.

An unhelpful record says:

"The horse represents Maya's need for freedom and shows an unbalanced Explorer archetype."

That is not observation.

That is an adult theory wearing a staff badge.

Record:

The child's exact words where they matter.

What the child repeatedly chose.

How the image changed.

Whether the child sought company or privacy.

The emotional quality you could actually observe.

The materials and experiences offered.

What the child accepted, rejected or transformed.

Avoid recording speculative meanings as facts.

Avoid using symbolic play as evidence of a diagnosis.

Avoid attaching one archetype to the child because of one dramatic image.

The observation should keep the door open.

## WORKING WITH FAMILIES

Dreams and symbolic images sit close to family belief.

Some families understand dreams spiritually.

Some psychologically.

Some through faith, ancestry or cultural tradition.

Some regard them as ordinary brain activity and want no fuss made at all.

The setting should not smirk at one family or preach at another.

We can ask:

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"She has mentioned the same dream a few times. Has she spoken about it at home?"

"What language do you use when she asks whether it was real?"

"Is there anything you would like us to know before we offer materials around it?"

"Would you prefer this to remain private?"

Families should know that the Night Garden is not therapy and not dream interpretation.

They should also know that children's exact words may need to be shared through safeguarding procedures if a concern arises.

Consent matters around photographs, personal objects, family stories and public displays.

A child's dream about Nan does not automatically belong on the corridor wall.

Beautiful display is not a higher value than privacy.

## **SAFEGUARDING IS NOT SYMBOLIC GUESSWORK**

This line needs to be hard and clear.

A dream must never be used to prove or dismiss a safeguarding concern.

A child drawing a monster is not evidence that abuse has occurred.

A child saying, "It was only in my dream," does not make a waking disclosure disappear.

If a child describes something that happened while awake, ordinary safeguarding procedures apply.

Listen.

Use open, non-leading responses.

Record the child's words accurately.

Do not investigate through play.

Do not repeatedly question the child.

Do not promise secrecy.

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Follow the setting's safeguarding policy and pass the concern to the designated person without delay.

Symbolic play, changes in behaviour and drawings can form part of a wider picture, but they require professional curiosity rather than amateur detective work.

Current early-years safeguarding guidance expects practitioners to remain alert to children's words, behaviour, feelings, role play and drawings.

That means noticing.

It does not mean decoding a red crayon into an allegation.

## WHEN TO LEAVE IT ALONE

Not every dream needs provision.

Not every repeated animal is a doorway to the unconscious.

Sometimes the child likes sharks.

Sometimes they watched a film.

Sometimes a story is repeated because repetition is delicious.

Sometimes the image has already done what it needed to do.

Signs that the adult should step back include:

The child changes the subject.

They refuse the offered material.

They say they do not want to talk.

The play becomes ordinary, flexible and no longer emotionally charged.

The image disappears.

Another interest takes over.

The adult is more invested than the child.

That last one catches us more often than we admit.

If the child is done with the wolf, do not drag it back by the tail because it made a cracking observation.

Release is part of respect.

## **WHEN EXTRA SUPPORT MAY BE NEEDED**

Nightmares and frightening play are common in childhood.

The presence of a recurring dream does not by itself indicate trauma, anxiety disorder or mental illness.

Look at the wider pattern.

Is the child becoming afraid to sleep?

Is distress intense or prolonged?

Has ordinary play narrowed sharply?

Are there marked changes in mood, eating, relationships, toileting, health or daily functioning?

Is the child repeatedly overwhelmed rather than gaining choice?

Has the family raised concerns about trauma, bereavement, anxiety or sleep?

If concern persists, speak with the family and follow the setting's usual routes for support.

This may include the SENCO, health visitor, GP, early-help services or an appropriately qualified mental-health professional, depending on the child and local arrangements.

The practitioner does not diagnose PTSD from a recurring tiger.

Nor do we leave a distressed family alone because the tiger looks symbolic.

Symbolic hospitality and ordinary professional responsibility belong together.

## **THE TEAM NEEDS A NIGHT GARDEN TOO**

The provision will only be as safe as the adults holding it.

Children's images wake things in us.

A drowning story catches one practitioner in the chest.

A cruel mother character enrages another.

A dead pet opens grief somebody thought was neatly packed away.

A child obsessed with villains activates an adult who equates goodness with obedience.

Teams need reflective space to separate the child's material from their own.

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Useful supervision questions include:

What did the child actually do and say?

What meaning did I add?

What feeling did the image create in me?

Am I trying to shut the play down because it frightens me?

Am I extending it because I find it fascinating?

What boundary is genuinely needed?

What balancing experience could widen the child's choices?

Can another practitioner see something I cannot?

The aim is not to make adults blank.

Blank adults are not reflective; they are furniture.

The aim is to know when our own story has entered the room.

*The Night Garden is held not by clever interpretation, but by adult steadiness, curiosity and restraint.*

## A NIGHT GARDEN PRACTICE HYPOTHESIS

The Night Garden offers a practical hypothesis rather than a finished clinical claim.

When children bring recurring inner images into waking life, and adults offer open-ended materials, movement, language, boundaries and companionship without imposing fixed meanings, children may gain greater agency in relation to experiences that previously felt vast or unfinished.

We might notice:

The child gaining more choice inside the story.

A frightening figure changing size, role or distance.

The child moving between becoming the character and observing it.

A chase developing a stopping point.

A lost character finding landmarks, helpers or a route home.

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The child inviting others into play without losing control of the image.

The image fading once it has found enough form.

The child choosing not to continue.

None of these outcomes should be forced.

A monster does not need to become friendly to satisfy the adult.

A dream does not need a positive ending.

The child may simply discover that the image can be approached, shaped, contained, shared or left alone.

That is already a shift in relationship.

## THE ROOM THAT DOES NOT DEMAND AN ANSWER

The wolf is still in the block area after lunch.

It now has a bed, a silver crown and a tiny wooden cup.

The child says it only bites people who enter without knocking.

The practitioner helps another child ask permission at the cave entrance.

No one decides that the wolf represents anxiety.

No one tells the child it is not real.

No one turns the cave into next week's whole-setting planning theme.

The adults hold the boundary.

The child holds the image.

The room holds both.

That is enough.

The Night Garden is not a method for dragging secrets out of children.

It is a way of ensuring that when something strange, powerful or unfinished does arrive, it does not have to remain homeless.

Some images need words.

Some need clay.

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Some need a run across the field.

Some need a box with a lid.

Some need an adult who can bear not to know.

And some need to be left in the dark until the child chooses to bring them out again.

*The child owns the image. The adult offers a place, a boundary and the freedom to leave.*

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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.