



THE BOY WITHOUT A THRESHOLD

What Happens When Childhood Has Milestones but Few Initiations

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

Initiation is the gradual entrusting of a human being with more 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.

A boy climbs onto a wall that is slightly too high. An adult calls him down. Five minutes later he is back up. He jumps, lands badly enough to make everybody flinch, laughs, and climbs again.

From the outside it can look like pointless risk. A child who has been told. A boundary being tested. A familiar little battle waiting to happen. But there is another possibility worth holding beside it. Perhaps the child is not only asking, “Am I allowed?” Perhaps he is also asking, “Can I?” Can I get up there? Can I judge the distance? Can I feel the flash of fear and still move? Will you trust me? Will you stop me if I genuinely cannot see what I am doing?

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Childhood is full of these small edges. We notice the behaviour because behaviour is what arrives in front of us. Yet beneath some of these moments sits a developmental question about capability. The child is discovering, in their body and in relationship with us, how much of reality they can now carry.

Initiation is not childhood being smashed apart. It is childhood being trusted with a little more of the world.

TRANSITION IS NOT THE SAME AS INITIATION

Modern childhood is full of transitions. Birthdays. Nursery. Reception. New classrooms. Exams. Secondary school. Adolescence. Leaving home. There is always another date, another uniform, another door. But a transition only tells us that circumstances have changed. An initiation communicates something more demanding: something new is now being asked of you, and something new is now being entrusted to you.

Arnold van Gennep's classic account of rites of passage described a recurring movement through separation, transition and incorporation. Victor Turner later gave particular attention to the middle space: liminality, the strange territory in which the old status has loosened but the new one has not yet become secure. This does not mean that modern children need us to reconstruct historical rites or borrow ceremonies from cultures that are not ours. Some traditional initiations were sustaining and beautiful; others were coercive, painful or exclusionary. The point is not nostalgia.

The useful question is simpler. How does a community communicate to a growing human being: "We see that something has changed in you. You can carry more now. We will expect more of you, but we will also trust you with more."

A birthday can happen without that recognition. So can starting school. So can puberty. The body and the calendar move regardless. What may be missing is the relational moment in which development is noticed and given meaning.

WHEN MILESTONES BECOME ADMINISTRATIVE

There is a peculiarly modern habit of measuring childhood through competence while stripping competence of significance. We ask whether the child can fasten a zip, write their name, sit on the carpet, travel independently, pass an exam or manage money. These are useful capacities. But their meaning is often procedural: can the child now function within the next system?

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Initiation asks a different question. What can this person now be trusted to participate in?

The distinction matters because capacity grows best when it is connected to consequence and belonging. A child who learns to use a real tool under guidance does not simply acquire a motor skill. They experience that the adult believes their hands can become trustworthy. A child given responsibility for feeding an animal does not merely complete a task. Something alive depends, in a small and supported way, upon their remembering. A child allowed to walk ahead on a familiar path discovers both freedom and the obligation to remain aware of where the group is.

These are tiny thresholds, but perhaps childhood is mostly made of tiny thresholds. We do not need drums on a mountain every Tuesday afternoon. We need adults who notice when yesterday's level of dependence no longer quite fits today's child.

WHEN THE CULTURE DOES NOT HOLD THE EDGE

Children do not stop seeking edges because adults fail to name them. They may simply find rougher versions elsewhere: climbing higher than yesterday, racing, daring one another, testing profanity, staying out later, pushing a joke beyond safety, withholding information from adults, joining groups with their own private rules, seeing how far a boundary bends before someone notices.

This is particularly visible in adolescence, but its roots are much earlier. Even a three-year-old can be fascinated by "I do it myself," and the sentence contains more than inconvenience for a tired parent. It is a declaration of emerging agency. A five-year-old who insists on carrying something heavy may be testing strength. A seven-year-old who suddenly wants to go into the shop alone may be rehearsing a wider social independence.

None of this should be romanticised. A child running into a road is not performing an ancient rite. A dysregulated child destroying a room is not necessarily asking to be initiated into anything. Distress, impulsivity, sensory overwhelm, imitation, trauma, developmental difference and ordinary bad judgement remain real. The minute one beautiful theory explains every behaviour, it stops helping us see.

But there is an opposite mistake: reducing every reach beyond the familiar to non-compliance. Sometimes the developmental question underneath "No" is not "How do I win?" but "Am I allowed to become somebody who can decide?" Sometimes the

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question underneath “Watch this” is not “Will you admire me?” but “Can I trust my own body?”

THE EDGE IS A RELATIONSHIP

Research on risky play gives us useful language here. Risk is not identical to hazard. A risk is something the child can, to some degree, perceive, evaluate and negotiate; a hazard may be invisible or beyond their developmental capacity to judge. Climbing a tree, moving at speed or rough-and-tumble play can contain genuine uncertainty while still allowing the child to participate in the assessment. A rotten branch twenty feet above the ground is a different proposition.

A 2015 systematic review led by Mariana Brussoni found generally positive associations between risky outdoor play and several health and behavioural outcomes, while also being clear that the evidence ranged in quality and should not be turned into simplistic slogans. That nuance matters. “Children need risk” can become every bit as thoughtless as “children must never be at risk.” The adult still has to look.

And the child is looking at us too.

They are learning something from the way we inhabit uncertainty. If we panic before examining the situation, they may borrow the message that the world is more dangerous than it is. If we swagger and push them beyond their own signals because we want to prove they are tough, they may learn that courage means disconnecting from fear. Neither response develops judgement.

The more interesting adult stance is: I am here. I am watching properly. I will not remove every challenge, and I will not abandon you to one you cannot yet hold.

THE ADULT AT THE WALL

This is where initiation becomes relational rather than heroic. The child at a threshold needs freedom and containment at the same time. Too much containment and capability never has room to become visible. Too little and freedom becomes abandonment.

The Archetype Approach gives us one language for noticing that tension. Rebel seeks agency; Helper asks what agency is responsible for. Explorer moves towards uncertainty; Planner builds enough structure to return from it. Mover acts through the body; Thinker reflects upon consequence. Energy intensifies experience; Joker keeps intensity flexible enough to change course. The point is not that a child on a wall can be

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neatly diagnosed as “a Mover-Explorer.” That would be exactly the kind of cleverness that misses the child. The point is that development often asks us to help one capacity recruit another.

The impulsive leap may need Watcher before Mover. The fierce “I can do it” may need Planner before Explorer. The thrill may need Friend: who else is affected by what I am about to do?

This is what a good threshold adult quietly teaches. Yesterday I held this entirely for you. Today we can hold it together. Tomorrow, if your judgement grows, I may step further back.

The adult does not disappear at the threshold. The adult changes the nature of their presence.

MORE REALITY, NOT LESS CHILDHOOD

Conversations about initiation can go wrong very quickly when adults secretly want children to become tougher, quieter or less needy. That is not the project. Childhood does not need to be bullied out of existence. A child does not become more mature because adults withdraw tenderness, manufacture hardship or shame dependence.

Healthy initiation gives reality in developmentally honest measures. Real tools with guidance. Real responsibility that matters. Real opportunities to contribute. Real physical challenge with competent supervision. Real consequences that teach rather than degrade. Real freedom that grows with demonstrated capacity. And crucially, a real way back when the child discovers that they were not quite ready today.

Regression is part of development. The child who confidently sleeps away from home one weekend may need a parent beside them the next. The child who can usually manage conflict may collapse after a long day. A threshold is not a door that locks behind the child. It is a new piece of territory becoming available.

This matters because the aim is not invulnerability. The aim is a wider range of participation. The child learns: I can meet difficulty without losing myself. I can become more capable without becoming less loved. I can try, fail, repair and remain inside the human circle.

THE QUESTION BENEATH “WATCH THIS”

The boy is back on the wall. This time the adult walks over rather than shouting from across the playground. The surface is dry. The landing area is clear. The height is challenging but not absurd. The child is excited, not frantic.

“Show me how you’re going to get down.”

That sentence changes the moment. It does not grant permission blindly, and it does not steal the judgement from him. It invites him into it.

The child looks. He had planned to jump straight down. Now he notices a lower section. He moves sideways, crouches and jumps from there. He lands, turns around and grins.

Something very small has happened. No certificate. No badge. Nobody announces that he has crossed from one social status to another. Yet he has been asked to participate in reality rather than simply obey or ignore it. His body, fear, judgement and relationship with the adult have all been part of the crossing.

Perhaps this is where a modern understanding of initiation can begin. Not with a programme for manufacturing tough children, but with a culture of noticing when more capacity is arriving and meeting it with meaningful trust.

And perhaps some of what we call boundary testing is exactly that: the child checking whether the boundary is real enough, warm enough and intelligent enough to help them discover who they are becoming.

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