



STRENGTH THAT DOES NOT FRIGHTEN

What Children Learn When Power and Tenderness Live in the Same Adult

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

Strength can be safe.

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 large man kneels to fasten a small child's shoe.

Nothing dramatic happens. He does not announce a philosophy of masculinity. He does not explain that strength and tenderness can coexist. He simply lowers himself, takes the tiny muddy trainer in his hands and ties the laces while the child leans against his shoulder.

The image matters because children do not first encounter "strength" as a concept. They encounter bodies, voices, faces, hands, boundaries, movement and atmosphere. They discover what power feels like when it comes close.

For some children, male strength has been associated with warmth, play, protection and steadiness. For others it has been associated with absence, volatility, ridicule or

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fear. Many children simply encounter very few men in their everyday caring environments at all.

So the question is not whether men should perform a louder, harder masculinity in early childhood. The question is much more interesting.

What happens when a child meets strength that does not require them to become small?

A powerful body that knows how to become gentle teaches something words cannot quite teach: strength does not have to frighten you.

NOT A PERFORMANCE OF MASCULINITY

It is tempting to make this conversation silly very quickly. Boys need men. Men need to be strong. Nurseries need more rough-and-tumble. Problem solved. Add beard oil and a woodworking bench.

No.

Children do not need men performing a caricature of masculinity any more than they need women trapped inside one. Physical size is not moral character. Loudness is not confidence. Dominance is not authority. Emotional silence is not regulation.

The more useful idea is ****embodied capacity****: the ability of an adult to carry power, emotion, responsibility and relationship without becoming brittle.

A man may communicate that through physical strength, but he may also communicate it through patience, steadiness under pressure, practical competence, humour, courage in apology, willingness to protect, ability to receive affection, or the capacity to hold a boundary without turning it into a contest.

Women embody these things too. Nothing in the argument depends upon reserving strength for males or tenderness for females. The particular question here is what children experience when these qualities are visibly integrated in men, especially because many cultural images still split masculinity in awkward ways: powerful or caring, tough or emotionally open, commanding or nurturing.

A child does not need another lecture about how men can be gentle.

It is far more convincing to meet one.

WHAT DOES STRENGTH DO AFTER IT IS WRONG?

One of the clearest ways children discover what power really is comes after the adult makes a mistake.

A man loses his temper. His voice lands too hard. The child freezes. A few minutes later he has a choice.

He can defend himself. “Well, you shouldn’t have pushed me.” He can minimise. “I wasn’t shouting.” He can retreat into wounded authority. “Nobody respects me in this house.”

Or he can return.

“I was angry, and I spoke to you in a way I don’t want to speak to you. The boundary still matters. I was still wrong in how I handled it. I’m sorry.”

What has the child just learned?

Not that adults are perfect. Something better.

They have learned that strength can survive accountability.

This is profoundly important because children are always building an image of what power does when challenged. Does it double down? Does it rewrite reality? Does it punish the person who exposed the mistake? Or can it remain standing while admitting fault?

A child who sees a strong adult apologise receives a model of authority that is not dependent upon invulnerability. That makes later responsibility more imaginable. If the adult can be wrong and remain worthy, perhaps I can too.

WILD AND GENTLE

Many children delight in adults who can become properly alive with them.

Chasing. Wrestling. Building something enormous. Running through rain. Roaring as the monster. Throwing children onto cushions. Racing to the tree. Laughing loudly enough that the room changes shape.

There is developmental value in this kind of activation when the play remains attuned. Research on father-child play, including rough-and-tumble play, suggests that high-quality physical and challenging play can be associated with aspects of self-regulation,

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social competence and emotional development. But quality is the key word. Physical play is not beneficial merely because everybody is sweating.

The powerful lesson comes from the transition.

The adult can be wild and then stop.

A child says “enough” and the adult’s body changes immediately. Someone gets hurt and the game pauses without accusation. Excitement rises and the adult can bring the group back. Strength does not become possessed by its own momentum.

That teaches regulation at a bodily level. Intensity can be inhabited without becoming captive to intensity.

In Archetype Approach language, Energy learns that Joker can shift state. Mover remains answerable to Thinker. Rebel’s power remains in relationship with Helper. The point is not to intellectualise the wrestling match while it is happening. The point is to recognise what kind of human pattern is being rehearsed inside it.

Vitality becomes trustworthy when it can stop without humiliation.

A MAN WHO CAN CRY

There is a persistent confusion between emotional openness and emotional flooding.

Children do not necessarily need adults to disclose every feeling in full volume. Being emotionally available is not the same as making children responsible for adult states. A parent who repeatedly collapses into the child and needs the child to soothe them is not modelling healthy vulnerability.

But neither is the adult who treats grief, fear or tenderness as threats to identity.

A man who cries when somebody dies and remains able to care for the people around him teaches that sorrow can be carried. A man who admits fear before doing something difficult teaches that courage does not require pretending the body is calm. A man who says, “That hurt me,” without turning hurt into retaliation teaches that feeling can be named before it becomes force.

This matters for boys because many still receive direct and indirect pressure to distance themselves from vulnerable emotion. It matters for girls because the men they encounter help form expectations about whether male emotion will arrive as language,

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absence or explosion. It matters for every child because integrated adults widen the available image of what adulthood can be.

The goal is not a new performance in which men prove enlightenment by crying on schedule.

The goal is range.

Can this adult be fierce when protection is required, tender when fear is present, playful when life needs loosening, still when grief needs room, and accountable when they have caused harm?

That is strength with more doors in it.

BOUNDARIES THAT DO NOT HUMILIATE

A child also learns about strength from the way an adult says no.

A frightened adult may become controlling because the child's resistance feels like loss of authority. A dominating adult may enjoy the moment of forcing compliance. A conflict-avoidant adult may give way until resentment finally erupts.

A grounded adult can do something else.

"No. I'm not letting you hit him."

No threat. No speech about being a good boy. No public dismantling of the child's character.

The body moves between the children. The limit is real. The relationship remains real too.

This is why the combination of warmth and structure matters so much across developmental research. Children generally do best not in environments of cold control or warm permissiveness, but where responsiveness and clear behavioural limits coexist.

The language varies across research traditions, but the human shape is recognisable: I care about you enough to remain connected, and I care about reality enough not to pretend everything you do is acceptable.

Strength becomes safe when it protects the relationship from both chaos and domination.

THE CHILD WHO IS WATCHING THE MAN

Imagine a child who has mostly experienced adult male bodies as distant or unpredictable. A new practitioner starts at the setting. He is tall. Loud laugh. Strong hands. The child watches him for weeks before seeking much contact.

Then one afternoon another child falls badly and begins to scream. The man moves quickly, but when he reaches the child his whole body softens. He kneels. His voice drops. He does not make jokes, demand toughness or panic. He stays.

The watching child has not received a lesson in masculinity.

But something may have been added to their map.

A large body can move quickly towards distress without becoming dangerous.

A deep voice can become gentle.

Power can come closer when somebody is frightened.

We should be humble about how much meaning any single child assigns to such a moment. Children are not symbolic machines waiting for adults to read them correctly. But repeated experiences matter. Expectations about people are built from encounters.

That is why representation in early childhood is not only about children seeing adults who share visible identities with them. It is also about seeing different ways of inhabiting those identities.

STRENGTH AS CAPACITY

Perhaps we need a better definition of strength around children.

Not hardness.

Not emotional absence.

Not the ability to make other people submit.

Strength as ****capacity****: how much reality can this person carry without needing to dump it into somebody smaller?

Can I carry my anger without making you afraid of me? Can I carry your anger without becoming frightened of you? Can I carry responsibility after I am wrong? Can I carry grief without pretending it has made me weak? Can I carry power without using

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humiliation to prove I possess it? Can I carry tenderness without experiencing it as a threat to myself?

This kind of strength is not male by definition. But children deserve to see men embody it.

Particularly boys who are gradually asking what kind of men they might become.

Particularly girls who are gradually learning what male power may feel like in relationship.

Particularly children whose earlier experiences have taught them that strong people are the people you watch most carefully.

A child should not have to choose between safety and strength.

The adults around them can show that the two belong together.

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