



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

BORROWED DISCERNMENT

How Children Learn What Is True, Good and Worth Doing

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

Before children can reflect for themselves, they borrow the adult's interpretation of reality.

A child enters the room. An adult says good morning. The child looks down, walks past and says nothing.

"He is being rude," somebody says.

Perhaps he is. Perhaps the child has deliberately withheld a greeting. Perhaps a social boundary is needed, or this is a moment in which the child should be helped to recognise another person.

But none of that is contained within what we actually saw.

What we saw was a child who did not speak.

Rudeness arrived afterwards. It came through the adult's interpretation of the moment: through expectations, memories, cultural assumptions, emotional state and an understanding of what a greeting means.

This distinction may seem small, but it sits at the centre of childhood. Children do not encounter the world as bare fact. They encounter a world already interpreted by adults.

They learn not only that something happened, but what kind of thing it was. They learn whether silence is thoughtful or disrespectful, whether movement is joyful or disruptive, whether refusal is courageous or naughty, whether tears are honest or manipulative, and whether caution is wisdom or weakness.



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Long before children possess the maturity to examine these judgements for themselves, they absorb them. They borrow our discernment. And when our discernment is clouded, they borrow that too.

THE WORLD ARRIVES INTERPRETED

Adults often imagine that we simply respond to children's behaviour. In reality, we respond to what we believe the behaviour means.

A child knocks over a tower. One adult sees carelessness. Another sees jealousy. Another sees curiosity. Another sees a child testing gravity. Another sees a tired child reaching for contact in the only way currently available to them.

The physical event may be the same. The world built around it is not.

This does not mean that every interpretation is equally true. Nor does it mean adults should become so uncertain that they can no longer guide, protect or set boundaries. Children need adults who can act.

But wise action begins with recognising that an interpretation is an interpretation.

The reflective adult is able to say: "This is what I saw. This is what I felt. This is the meaning I am beginning to give it. Is there another way of understanding what may be happening?"

That small pause creates space between the child and the adult's first conclusion. Without it, feeling quickly becomes fact.

"I felt ignored" becomes "You are disrespectful." "I felt out of control" becomes "You are deliberately challenging me." "I felt embarrassed" becomes "You have behaved shamefully." "I felt worried" becomes "You cannot be trusted."

The child then receives more than a boundary. They receive an identity.

They do not simply learn that a particular action had an effect. They begin to learn who they are in the eyes of the adults around them: rude, difficult, attention-seeking, too sensitive, bossy, lazy, good, helpful, clever or easy.

Even apparently positive identities can become narrow rooms. The helpful child may learn that belonging depends upon usefulness. The quiet child may learn that goodness means having no disruptive needs. The clever child may learn that uncertainty threatens love. The easy child may learn that being loved means requiring very little.

This is why the distinction between observation and interpretation matters. Observation says, "The child did not answer." Interpretation says, "The child is rude." Observation says, "The child left the group." Interpretation says, "The child does not care." Observation says, "The child laughed when another child fell." Interpretation says, "The child is cruel."



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The interpretation may eventually prove partly true. But when we treat our first interpretation as unquestionable fact, curiosity disappears. And when curiosity disappears, the child disappears with it. All that remains is the behaviour and the story the adult has placed around it.

Children inherit meanings, not only rules.

THE ADULT AS THE BORROWED WATCHER

Within the Archetype Approach, the Watcher represents the human capacity to pause, observe and notice what lies beneath the surface. The Watcher does not rush immediately into action. It creates a little distance between the event and the response.

For the young child, this capacity is still forming. The child is often inside the experience.

They do not always stand outside their anger and say, "I notice that something in me feels threatened." They are angry.

They do not calmly observe, "My Joker has appeared because the atmosphere feels tense and I am trying to loosen it." They make the joke.

They do not explain, "My Rebel is protecting my sense of agency because I feel controlled." They refuse.

This is not a failure of character. It is part of being young.

The adult therefore becomes a borrowed Watcher. We hold the space the child cannot yet hold alone.

We notice the clenched hand before it becomes a strike. We recognise the hesitation beneath the refusal. We see the fear hiding inside control. We understand that laughter can appear beside shame, that anger can guard sadness, and that a child who pushes others away may still be asking whether they belong.

We lend the child a wider view. This is one of the quiet purposes of relationship.

The adult does not merely stop the action. The adult helps the child see the action, the feeling beneath it, the effect it created and the choices that remain.

"You wanted the block. You were angry when it was not available. You pushed. Pushing hurt him. I will not let you push. We can find another way to show what you need."

Within those few sentences, the adult separates the child from the behaviour without removing responsibility. The child is not made innocent of the action, but neither are they reduced to it. They are held inside a larger truth.



WHEN GUIDANCE BECOMES PROJECTION

Children need interpretation. A completely neutral childhood is neither possible nor desirable. Adults must help children understand danger, kindness, fairness, consent, responsibility and repair. We introduce them to a world of meaning because human life cannot be lived without meaning.

The question is not whether adults should interpret. The question is whether we can recognise when guidance has become projection.

Guidance helps the child see more clearly. Projection asks the child to carry something the adult has not yet examined.

An adult who was punished for speaking back may experience a child's honest disagreement as a threat. An adult who survived by being useful may praise the Helper in one child while overlooking their exhaustion. An adult who fears disorder may treat the Planner as mature and the Explorer as irresponsible.

An adult who was shamed for being loud may feel unusually activated by the Mover, Joker or Energy child. An adult who learned to hide emotion may regard tears as excessive, manipulative or weak.

The child then enters an old story that began before they arrived. Their behaviour awakens an unfinished place in the adult, and the adult responds as though the child created it.

This is why reflection is not an optional extra in work with children. It is part of safeguarding the child's inner life.

We must be willing to ask: Why does this behaviour trouble me so deeply? What conclusion did I reach before I became curious? Am I protecting a necessary boundary, or protecting my own image of authority? Is the child being asked to repair harm, or merely to relieve my discomfort? What from my own childhood has entered the room?

These questions do not weaken adult authority. They cleanse it. Authority becomes more trustworthy when it can examine itself.

THE GOOD BENEATH THE BEHAVIOUR

Every archetypal power reaches towards something valuable.

The Rebel reaches towards freedom, truth and justice. The Friend reaches towards belonging. The Helper reaches towards contribution and care. The Planner reaches towards order and safety. The Explorer reaches towards possibility. The Builder reaches towards form and completion.

The Imagineer reaches towards meaning and new worlds. The Thinker reaches towards understanding. The Mover reaches towards embodied life. The Joker reaches towards play,



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flexibility and release. Energy reaches towards intensity and full participation. The Watcher reaches towards perception.

The problem is rarely that the original good is bad. Difficulty begins when one power becomes frightened, isolated or overused.

Freedom without relationship may become defiance. Belonging without selfhood may become people-pleasing. Care without boundaries may become control or self-erasure. Order without flexibility may become rigidity. Play without attunement may become humiliation. Intensity without containment may overwhelm the room.

When adults see only the shadow expression, we often try to remove the power itself.

We attempt to break the Rebel rather than teach freedom with responsibility. We silence the Joker rather than help humour become kind. We restrain the Mover without creating meaningful movement. We praise the Helper while failing to notice that the child no longer knows how to receive. We celebrate the compliant Friend without asking whether harmony has cost them their truth.

The Archetype Approach begins elsewhere. It asks: What power is present? What good is this power trying to protect or obtain? How has that good become narrowed? What balancing power would help it return to relationship with the whole?

The task is not to remove the child's power, but to help that power find its rightful place.

BALANCE RATHER THAN CORRECTION

Sometimes an action must stop. Safety matters. Other children matter. Shared spaces require boundaries.

But stopping an action is not the same as meeting the developmental need beneath it. If the response ends at suppression, the child may learn only that a part of them is unwelcome.

Balance offers another path. Movement may need stillness, but the child also needs places where movement is honoured. Care may need playful disruption, and play may need care. Truth may need harmony, while harmony may need the courage of truth. Imagination may need order, and order may need imagination. Intensity may need intellect, while intellect may need embodied intensity. Exploration may need construction, and construction may need the freedom to explore.

The balancing opposite does not punish the active archetype. It completes it.

This changes the adult's inner question. Instead of asking, "How do I make this behaviour disappear?" we ask, "What would help this child recover balance?" Instead of asking, "How do I show them who is in charge?" we ask, "What does responsible guidance require here?" Instead of



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asking, "How do I make them comply?" we ask, "What can this child understand, practise, repair and gradually carry within themselves?"

Balance does not mean permissiveness. It means that the boundary is offered in service of development rather than domination.

WHAT THIS SOUNDS LIKE

A child does not answer a greeting. Rather than immediately saying, "Do not be rude," the adult might say: "I noticed you did not answer. You may need a moment. When you are ready, I will help you greet them." The social expectation remains, but shame is not used to force it.

A child laughs after somebody falls. Rather than deciding the child is cruel, the adult might say: "You laughed when she fell. Sometimes laughter comes when something feels surprising or uncomfortable. She is hurt, so let us check what she needs." The impact is named, while curiosity remains possible.

A child refuses to put on their coat. Rather than entering a contest of power, the adult might say: "You do not want the coat. The weather is cold and we are going outside. You may put it on yourself, or I can help you." The Rebel is not granted control of the whole situation, but neither is the child's agency ignored.

A child knocks down another child's construction. The adult might say: "You wanted to join, and you knocked it over. He worked hard on that. I will not let you destroy his building. First we will make this safe. Then we can find a way for you to enter the play." The action is stopped, the harm is recognised and repair is required. The child is still understood as a person seeking something.

In each of these moments, the child receives more than an instruction. They receive a way of looking.

THE SLOW BIRTH OF AN INNER WATCHER

At first, the adult carries the pause. The adult says, "Let us stop." The adult names what happened, holds the feeling without allowing it to govern the whole moment, protects the boundary, offers another possibility and returns the child to relationship.

Over time, the child begins to participate.

"I was angry." "I thought she was taking it." "I wanted them to laugh." "I did not know how to join." "I was scared you would say no." "I wanted to be first."

These statements are not excuses. They are signs that the child is beginning to see their own inner movement.

Later, a further shift becomes possible. The child may begin to notice the power before it acts.



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"My Rebel is getting big." "I need to move." "I am trying to make a joke because I feel awkward." "I want to help, but I do not really want to say yes." "I need to watch before I join."

Here the archetype is no longer the whole identity. The child is becoming able to witness it. They are beginning to understand that an inner power can be real without being allowed to rule every decision.

"I am angry" slowly becomes "anger is moving through me." "I am the child who refuses" becomes "something in me is protecting its freedom." "I must help" becomes "my Helper is active, but I also need a boundary."

The child is not separating from their vitality. They are developing a relationship with it. The borrowed Watcher is becoming an inner capacity.

THE SECOND LOOK

The child still did not say good morning.

Perhaps a greeting was needed. Perhaps the adult was right to return to the moment and help the child recognise the person before them. Perhaps the child needed time. Perhaps they were anxious, absorbed, tired, uncertain or resisting an expectation. Perhaps several of these things were true at once.

Discernment does not require the adult to abandon judgement. It asks the adult to make judgement more honest.

First, see what happened. Then notice what you added. Remain curious about the power beneath the behaviour. Hold the boundary without shrinking the child. Offer the balancing experience. Make repair possible.

This is slow work. It rarely looks dramatic. It takes place in doorways, at lunch tables, beside block towers, during coat struggles, in car journeys and in the tired minutes before bedtime.

But these small moments gradually form the child's relationship with reality. Through us, they learn whether a mistake means they are bad; whether anger can be understood without becoming sovereign; whether authority can be trusted; whether truth can be spoken; whether goodness is something deeper than pleasing powerful people; and whether they can look honestly at themselves and remain worthy of love.

The child first borrows our eyes. For that reason, the work begins not with perfect children, but with adults willing to look again.

The question is not whether adults shape the child's reality, but whether we have examined the reality we are asking them to inherit.



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.

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