



INITIATION WITHOUT HUMILIATION

Why Challenge Matters - and Why Breaking a Child Is Not the Same as Building Them

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

A child should not have to lose tenderness in order to gain strength.

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.

There is an old fantasy about strength that refuses to die.

If you want somebody to become resilient, make life harder. If they struggle, harden it again. If they cry, mock the crying. If they protest, call it weakness. Eventually, supposedly, the soft parts burn away and a stronger human being emerges.

Sometimes this is dressed up as tradition. Sometimes sport. Sometimes discipline. Sometimes masculinity. Sometimes simply “preparing children for the real world.”

The problem is that the real world already contains difficulty. Children do not need adults to manufacture humiliation in order to introduce them to reality.

THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

They need help discovering that difficulty can be carried without losing dignity, tenderness or belonging.

The purpose of initiation is not to prove that pain does not matter. It is to discover that difficulty can be met without losing oneself.

DIFFICULTY MATTERS

There is a trap on the other side of the argument too. If humiliation is harmful, adults can become tempted to remove all frustration, failure, competition, uncertainty and discomfort. That is not development either.

Capacity grows through use. Muscles need resistance. Skills need problems. Relationships need moments of disagreement in which repair becomes possible. Courage cannot develop in a world where every outcome has already been made safe and every disappointment prevented.

Children need hard things.

The important question is what kind of hardness.

A puzzle that refuses to yield. A hill that takes several attempts. Losing a game. Waiting for a turn. Speaking to a new group. Carrying a responsibility when it would be easier to wander off. Admitting the truth after causing harm. Staying in relationship while somebody is angry with you. Trying again after public failure.

These experiences contain friction, and friction matters. But friction is not the same as degradation.

The adult does not need to become the hardship. Reality is already capable of doing that job.

THE ROTTEN INITIATION

A rotten initiation confuses suffering with transformation.

Hazing is the clearest example: newcomers are humiliated, frightened or harmed in the name of earning belonging. The logic is seductive because it does create intensity and memory. People may emerge with fierce loyalty to the group. But belonging gained

THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

through shared humiliation can reproduce the very structure that harmed them: I endured it, therefore you should too.

The same pattern appears in smaller forms around children. “We all had to learn.” “Nobody comforted me.” “He needs taking down a peg.” “She’ll never cope in the real world if we keep making allowances.”

The adult turns their own unprocessed initiation into a developmental philosophy.

This is one reason generational patterns survive. Pain acquires meaning by being passed on. If my suffering was necessary to make me strong, then protecting you from the same suffering can feel like threatening the story I built around my own childhood.

A healthier approach does not deny that people can grow through painful experiences. Human beings are astonishingly capable of making meaning from difficulty. But surviving an experience does not prove the experience was the best teacher available.

CHALLENGE + CONTAINMENT + MEANING + BELONGING + RETURN

A more useful structure for initiation is not “make it hurt.” It is:

Challenge. Containment. Meaning. Belonging. Return.

The ****challenge**** must be real enough that the child cannot complete it entirely through their existing automatic response. Something new is required: patience, courage, honesty, physical skill, frustration tolerance, responsibility.

****Containment**** means the challenge has edges. Somebody competent is watching. The child is not abandoned to a danger beyond their capacity. There is a way to stop. The adult can distinguish discomfort from overwhelm.

****Meaning**** connects the difficulty to something worth doing. Carrying firewood to help the group has a different emotional shape from carrying it because an adult wants to prove who is boss. Losing gracefully matters because other people are entitled to joy too, not because sadness is forbidden.

****Belonging**** means failure does not exile the child. They remain inside the relationship while facing consequence. This is crucial. If every mistake threatens belonging, the child learns image management rather than responsibility.

And ****return**** means the crossing comes back into ordinary life. The new capacity becomes contribution. Courage is used to protect. Skill is used to help. Responsibility becomes part of participation rather than a private trophy.

THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

That structure contains difficulty without worshipping it.

CHALLENGE WITHOUT SHAME

A child refuses to join a performance because they are frightened.

There are many possible adult responses. We can force. We can let them disappear from every difficult moment. Or we can challenge carefully.

“I can see you’re scared. You don’t have to stand at the front. Come and stand beside me for the first song. Then you can decide whether you can do the next bit.”

The fear is respected. The child is still invited beyond it.

This is the difference between challenge and shame. Shame attacks the self: you are weak, pathetic, babyish, disappointing. Challenge addresses capacity: this is hard, and I think there may be more available in you than the fear currently says.

The adult is allowed to be wrong. Sometimes the child genuinely cannot carry more today. Good threshold work depends upon observation. If the child is becoming more organised as they approach the difficulty, the challenge may be developmental. If they are losing language, orientation, relational contact or bodily control, “pushing through” may simply teach them that adult ambition outranks their signals.

Initiation requires discernment from the initiator.

DISCIPLINE WITHOUT DEGRADATION

The word discipline itself has become confused. For some it means punishment. For others it is avoided entirely because punishment has been misused.

At its best, discipline is apprenticeship in responsibility.

You caused harm. We are going to face what happened. You will help repair it. You may not enjoy this. I am not going to humiliate you, and I am not going to pretend it does not matter.

A child breaks something in anger. An adult who shames may call them destructive, bad or ungrateful. An adult who avoids shame may rush to reassure so quickly that impact disappears. A disciplined response can hold both truth and belonging.

“You were furious. You threw it. It broke. I know you wish it hadn’t. We need to work out what can be repaired and what you can do next time anger gets that big.”

THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

The child is not spared reality. They are spared identity collapse.

This is consistent with broader developmental evidence that warmth and appropriate behavioural control work better together than either harshness or absence of structure. Children need connection *and* form.

In AA terms, Helper does not cancel Rebel; it teaches Rebel what power owes. Friend does not cancel Watcher; it ensures belonging does not erase truth. The balancing function protects wholeness from one-sidedness.

TENDERNESS IS NOT THE OPPOSITE OF STRENGTH

Some cultures of initiation treat tenderness as the thing that must be shed. Boys in particular may be taught that becoming strong requires becoming less reachable by pain.

But emotional numbness is not the same as capacity.

The person who cannot feel fear may take stupid risks. The person who cannot feel remorse cannot repair. The person who cannot receive tenderness may struggle to offer it. The person who experiences grief as humiliation must either hide it or convert it into another emotion that feels more permitted.

What if initiation did the opposite?

What if the child became capable of carrying *more* feeling without being ruled by it?

I can be frightened and still act. I can be angry and still choose not to harm. I can lose and remain connected. I can feel ashamed of what I did without concluding that I am unworthy of love. I can cry and continue.

That is not softness replacing strength. It is strength becoming spacious enough to include tenderness.

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THE ADULT MUST NOT NEED THE CHILD TO SUFFER

There is an uncomfortable test for adults here.

When we challenge a child, who is the challenge for?

THE FORGOTTEN INITIATIONS

Is it genuinely connected to a developmental capacity, shared responsibility or necessary boundary? Or are we irritated by dependence? Embarrassed by fear? Re-enacting something done to us? Trying to make the child prove an identity we value?

A father who keeps pushing his son into rougher play after the boy wants to stop may tell himself he is building resilience. He may actually be protecting himself from having a son whose sensitivity makes him uncomfortable.

A practitioner who refuses comfort because “she needs to learn separation” may be teaching independence. Or may be defending the timetable from the inconvenience of attachment.

The adult at the threshold has to be willing to examine their own appetite for toughness.

Challenge that serves the child often feels different from challenge that serves the adult's ego. It is quieter. More adjustable. Less invested in winning. It leaves room for information.

RETURN WITH MORE OF YOURSELF

The purpose of a threshold is not to create a harder person on the other side.

It is to create a person with greater access to themselves.

More able to face difficulty. More able to ask for help. More able to carry responsibility. More able to withstand frustration without collapsing into attack or avoidance. More able to remain tender without being defenceless.

That is why return matters. The child brings the gained capacity back into relationship.

They do not climb the hill so everybody knows they are superior. They discover that they can climb, and next time perhaps they help a younger child find the path. They do not learn to lose so that losing stops hurting. They learn that disappointment can coexist with generosity. They do not apologise because an adult has broken their pride. They learn that truth and belonging can survive the same room.

We do not need to make childhood harsher to recover initiation.

We need to make challenge more meaningful, boundaries more relational, and adulthood worthy of being crossed towards.

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