



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

FALSE AUTHORITY

When Adult Interpretation Becomes the Child's Reality

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

Authority becomes false when the adult's interpretation is no longer answerable to reality.

A cup of blue paint water lies on its side. A dark stream is moving across the table and dripping onto the floor.

The adult turns towards the child standing nearest to it.

"You knocked that over."

"I did not," the child says.

"Do not lie to me. You need to take responsibility."

The child protests again. The protest is heard as further evidence: now they have spilled the water, lied about it and argued with an adult.

A few minutes later, another child quietly explains that their sleeve caught the cup as they reached across the table.

The first child had been telling the truth.

What happened in that moment was more than a simple mistake. The adult possessed the power to establish the official version of reality, and the child was expected to surrender their own perception in order to preserve it.



This is the beginning of false authority.

False authority is not the same as firmness. It is not created merely because an adult sets a boundary, gives an instruction or makes a judgement. Children need adults who can lead, decide and protect.

Authority becomes false when its interpretation no longer remains open to truth.

WHEN POWER DECIDES WHAT IS TRUE

In the first article in this series, I described how children borrow discernment from adults before they can develop it within themselves. The young child depends upon us to name events, hold complexity and show what matters.

That dependence gives adult interpretation enormous weight.

The adult does not simply have a view. In the life of a child, the adult often has the power to make that view become the world.

If the adult says the child is rude, selfish, manipulative, lazy or deliberately difficult, the description does not remain outside the child for long. It begins to organise how other adults approach them, how future behaviour is interpreted and eventually how the child understands themselves.

The official story gathers evidence around itself.

A child already described as aggressive is watched for aggression. A child described as attention-seeking is met with suspicion when they reach for connection. A quiet child described as good may be overlooked precisely because their distress does not disturb the room.

Each new moment is drawn into the existing interpretation.

False authority begins when the adult no longer asks whether the story remains true. The adult role becomes a shelter from correction.

This can happen through harshness, but it can also happen in gentle language. An adult may speak softly, use therapeutic words and still require the child to live inside an interpretation that cannot be questioned.

The problem is not tone. The problem is unaccountable meaning.



FEELING IS INFORMATION, NOT FACT

Adults feel children deeply.

We feel ignored when they do not answer. Challenged when they refuse. Embarrassed when they become loud in public. Powerless when our strategies do not work. Rejected when they turn away from comfort. Anxious when their development does not follow the path we expected.

These feelings matter. They may tell us something important about the relationship, the environment or our own history.

But a feeling is not yet a fact about the child.

"I feel disrespected" is different from "You are disrespectful."

"I feel manipulated" is different from "You are manipulating me."

"I feel out of control" is different from "You are trying to control me."

The first statement names the adult experience. The second places the cause and meaning inside the child.

Discernment asks us to preserve that distinction long enough to look again.

The Watcher in the adult notices the tightening chest, the rising heat, the urgency to win or the desire to withdraw. It does not shame these reactions. It simply refuses to turn them immediately into a verdict.

The adult may still conclude that the child acted deliberately or caused harm. But the conclusion is reached through observation, context and relationship rather than through the force of the adult reaction alone.

The adult may hold more power, but power does not make an interpretation true.

WHEN ANXIETY BECOMES MORALITY

False authority often grows from anxiety rather than cruelty.

Adults are responsible for many things at once: safety, time, routines, other children, inspection, progress, parental expectations and the emotional weather of the room. Predictability can begin to feel like survival.



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Under pressure, what makes the environment easier to manage can quietly become what we call good.

The still child appears respectful. The compliant child appears kind. The sociable child appears secure. The organised child appears mature. The child who asks little appears resilient.

Meanwhile, movement becomes disruption, refusal becomes defiance, humour becomes insolence, intensity becomes aggression and withdrawal becomes non-participation.

The moral language hides an environmental preference.

Within the Archetype Approach, every setting has an archetypal climate. Some environments naturally favour the Planner, Friend and Helper. Others make more room for the Explorer, Mover and Imagineer. No environment is neutral.

The danger begins when the preferred qualities of the adults are treated as the correct shape of the child.

A Planner-led room may mistake spontaneity for disorder. A highly relational culture may treat solitude as a problem. An adult who values harmony may experience the Rebel as disloyal. A quiet, reflective team may read the Joker or Energy child as excessive before asking what life they are bringing into the space.

This does not mean every expression should be allowed. A child may be lively and still need to learn that others cannot be hurt. A child may value truth and still need to speak without humiliation. A child may need solitude and still require support to remain connected.

But the boundary should serve a genuine good, not merely the comfort of the dominant temperament.

When adult anxiety becomes morality, the child learns that goodness means making powerful people feel settled.

COMPLIANCE IS NOT GOODNESS

Compliance has a place in childhood.



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A child sometimes needs to stop because the road is dangerous, leave because the building is closing or follow an instruction before there is time for a long explanation. Shared life depends upon cooperation.

But compliance is a behaviour. It is not the highest form of goodness.

A compliant child may join in with cruelty because the group expects it. They may hide the truth to protect an adult. They may surrender a boundary because somebody with more status insists. They may become skilled at reading authority while losing contact with conscience.

A non-compliant child may be protecting something true. The Rebel may refuse an unfair demand. The Watcher may resist joining before they understand. The Friend may object when somebody is excluded. The Thinker may question an explanation that does not make sense.

None of this means refusal is automatically wise. The child who says no is not automatically right, just as the adult who gives the instruction is not automatically right.

The developmental task is larger than deciding which person wins.

We are helping the child learn how freedom meets responsibility, how truth meets relationship and how an inner conviction can remain open to reality.

If goodness is reduced to obedience, children learn to ask only: Who has the power? What answer will keep me safe? What must I appear to be?

Discernment asks different questions: What is happening? Who is affected? What is worth protecting? What response is truthful, loving and free?

ROLE IS NOT WISDOM

The role of parent, teacher, practitioner or leader carries real authority. It gives the adult responsibility for decisions the child cannot yet carry.

But a role does not confer infallibility.

False authority protects the status of the adult by making correction feel dangerous. It fears that saying "I was wrong" will weaken the boundary, invite chaos or cause the child to lose respect.

Usually, the opposite is true.



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When an adult can say, "I decided too quickly," the child learns that truth matters more than pride.

When an adult says, "I misunderstood what you meant," the child learns that relationship can survive correction.

When an adult says, "The boundary still stands, but I should not have spoken to you that way," the child learns that authority and accountability can live together.

An apology does not erase the difference between adult and child. It teaches the child what mature authority looks like.

There will be moments when an adult must say, "I cannot explain all of this now. I need you to follow me because I am responsible for keeping you safe." That is not automatically false authority. The adult is naming the reality of the moment and the responsibility of the role.

It becomes false when "because I am the adult" is used to close every question, protect every mistake and make the child responsible for the adult's certainty.

A DESCRIPTION IS NOT A CHILD

Professional language can help adults notice patterns that would otherwise remain confusing.

Words such as dysregulated, avoidant, impulsive, anxious or sensory-seeking may open routes towards support. Developmental frameworks, diagnoses and archetypal language can all help us organise what we see.

But every description carries a danger.

A useful pattern can harden into an identity.

The child who seeks attention becomes "an attention-seeker." The child who struggles with demands becomes "demand-avoidant" in every interaction. The child who has hurt others becomes "aggressive." The child who learns differently becomes the limit described in a report.

Once the label becomes the child, new information struggles to enter.

Even the Archetype Approach could become false authority if it were used this way.



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The child is not the Rebel. The child is not the Joker, the Watcher or the Helper. These are living patterns within a whole person. They help us notice movement, need and possibility; they should never become a new set of walls.

A framework should make the child more visible, not make the adult more certain.

A framework should widen the adult's sight, not replace the child with a category.

WHAT TRUE AUTHORITY OFFERS

True authority is not weak, vague or endlessly negotiable.

It can stop harm, hold a limit and make a decision. But it remains answerable to reality, relationship and the development of the child.

It observes before it concludes. It distinguishes what happened from what the adult fears it means. It names boundaries without turning the boundary into an identity. It remains open to new information. And when it is wrong, it repairs.

This form of authority gives the child something sturdier than adult certainty. It gives them an encounter with truth that can survive examination.

WHAT THIS SOUNDS LIKE

Instead of "You are angry," the adult might say: "I think you may be angry. Tell me if I have got that wrong."

Instead of "You did that on purpose," the adult might say: "The cup was pushed and you were beside it. I need to understand what happened."

Instead of "Stop arguing with me," the adult might say: "You may disagree. You may not speak in a way that hurts. Tell me what you think happened."

Instead of "You are only doing this for attention," the adult might say: "You are working very hard to reach me. I want to understand what you need, and we still need a safer way to ask."

Instead of using a diagnosis or archetype as the explanation, the adult might say: "This pattern may help us understand part of the moment. Let us keep looking at this child, in this relationship, today."



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The language is not a script to make every interaction gentle. Its purpose is to keep observation, interpretation and identity from collapsing into one another.

There are also times for directness: "I will not let you hit." "That statement was untrue." "You need to return what you took." "We are leaving now."

True authority can be clear because it is not spending its energy defending an unexamined story.

THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO REALITY

Return to the spilled paint water.

The adult has a choice.

They can move quickly past the discovery, perhaps saying that the first child was still rude in the way they protested. The original interpretation can be protected by finding a new offence.

Or the adult can return the child to reality.

"You told me you did not knock it over, and I did not believe you. I decided too quickly because you were standing closest. I was wrong. I am sorry."

The adult may still speak later about how both people can respond when they feel wrongly accused. But the repair begins with truth.

In that moment, the child learns something larger than who spilled the water.

They learn that their perception matters.

They learn that power can correct itself.

They learn that an adult can bend without breaking.

They learn that authority is not the ownership of reality, but a responsibility to serve it.

False authority asks the child to abandon what they know in order to preserve the adult. True authority helps the child bring perception, feeling, responsibility and relationship into a more truthful whole.

That is the kind of authority from which conscience can grow.

Once obedience is no longer our highest good, education must ask a harder question: What is worth wanting?



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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