



THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DISCERNMENT

HEALING THE GARDENER

Why Reform Must Begin With Adults

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

A practitioner cannot lend discernment they do not possess.

The room has finally gone quiet.

A child who spent the morning shouting, running from adults and overturning other children's play has gone home. The practitioner sits at the edge of a small chair, shoulders raised, replaying the final confrontation.

"He knew exactly what he was doing," she says.

Perhaps he did.

Perhaps he saw the adult's frustration and pushed where the relationship already felt thin. Perhaps he discovered that disruption was the fastest way to become visible. Perhaps he was tired, frightened, over-stimulated, ashamed, powerful, confused or several of these at once.

But there is another question in the room.

What did the child awaken in the adult?

The question is not asked to excuse the child, dismiss the impact or turn every boundary into an investigation of the practitioner's childhood.

It is asked because the adult is part of the event.



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Their body, history, expectations, authority, fear, tenderness and unfinished places all enter the encounter. The adult does not stand outside the ecology of childhood like a neutral technician. They are one of its strongest conditions.

If reform begins only with new strategies for children, the deepest part of the system remains untouched.

The gardener is still carrying the same exhaustion, the same shame, the same pressure to appear in control and the same unexamined meanings into every new method.

A different script may be spoken.

The same inner authority may still be speaking through it.

THE ADULT INSIDE THE ECOLOGY

The previous article imagined the kindergarten as a walled garden.

The wall represented safety. The gate represented discernment. The soil carried the emotional climate. Water and sunlight held love and truth. Paths offered rhythm.

Pruning gave guidance. Compost transformed failure through repair.

None of these conditions exists apart from the adults who hold them.

The wall is strengthened or hardened through adult judgement.

The gate opens or closes through adult perception.

The soil is warmed or thinned by the quality of adult relationships.

Pruning becomes guidance or shame through the adult's capacity to separate the child's power from its harmful expression.

The gardener is therefore not simply a person delivering provision.

They are part of the provision.

A child may forget the carefully planned activity, yet remember the face of the adult who approached when something went wrong.

They may not remember the language of the behaviour policy, but their body will learn whether mistakes bring humiliation, whether anger frightens the adults, whether truth is welcome and whether repair can restore belonging.



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The adult teaches through tone, pace, posture, timing and the meanings they attach to the child.

This teaching continues even when no lesson is intended.

It is tempting to solve this by asking practitioners to become endlessly calm, perfectly reflective and emotionally available.

That would only create another impossible ideal.

Adults are not the regulated background against which children are allowed to be human.

They are human too.

They become tired. They misread. They protect themselves. They feel rejected by children they are trying to help. They carry private grief into public rooms. They reach the end of their patience and sometimes speak from a place they later regret.

Healing the gardener does not mean producing an untroubled adult.

It means creating the capacity and the conditions for adults to notice what is happening within them, remain open to correction and return to relationship when they lose their way.

WHAT THE CHILD AWAKENS

Children do not only reveal themselves in relationship.

They reveal us.

One child's silence may feel peaceful to an adult and rejecting to another.

One child's confidence may be experienced as healthy agency or as intolerable defiance.

One child's need for closeness may awaken tenderness in one practitioner and suffocation in another.

One child's endless questions may feel like curiosity on Monday and accusation on Friday.

The behaviour has not changed. The adult's capacity around it has.

Sometimes the child touches an old wound.



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The practitioner who was punished for disagreement may experience the Rebel as personal disrespect.

The adult who survived childhood by becoming useful may feel most comfortable with the Helper and unusually threatened by the child who refuses to contribute.

The adult who learned that noise brings danger may experience the Mover, Joker or Energy child as overwhelming long before the situation is objectively unsafe.

The practitioner whose own feelings were ignored may be deeply moved by a distressed child, yet find it difficult to hold a boundary because the child's pain feels unbearable.

The adult who was valued for achievement may become impatient with the Watcher, whose learning is real but not immediately visible.

None of this makes the adult bad.

It makes them involved.

The danger begins when involvement remains unconscious.

Then the adult's activation is experienced as proof about the child.

"I feel powerless" becomes "This child is manipulative."

"I feel judged" becomes "This parent has no respect."

"I cannot reach him" becomes "He does not care."

"I am overwhelmed" becomes "These children need firmer discipline."

The adult's feeling may contain useful information. But it is not the whole truth.

Discernment begins when the feeling can be heard without being crowned.

The adult's reaction may contain information, but it must not become the child's identity.

THE ARCHETYPES OF THE ADULT

The twelve archetypes do not belong only to children.

They move through every adult, every team and every institution.



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A practitioner may enter the work through the Helper, finding deep meaning in care, usefulness and being needed.

Another may lead through the Planner, creating dependable rhythms and noticing what will be required before others do.

A Mover may bring vitality to the outdoor space. A Watcher may perceive the child who has disappeared at the edge of the room. A Joker may release tension at precisely the right moment. A Rebel may challenge a policy that asks children to betray their dignity.

These are not professional personality types.

They are powers adults draw upon.

Each power can serve the setting, and each can become shadow when fear narrows it.

The Helper may begin to rescue, overfunction and quietly resent those who do not recognise their sacrifice.

The Planner may cling to the timetable when the living moment asks for adaptation.

The Friend may protect team harmony by avoiding a necessary truth.

The Rebel may treat every structure as oppression and struggle to remain accountable to shared decisions.

The Watcher may perceive deeply but delay action beyond the point at which a child needs protection.

The Joker may use humour to avoid vulnerability or make a struggling colleague the cost of group relief.

Energy may become intensity without listening. The Thinker may analyse the child from a safe distance. The Builder may value what can be completed over what needs to remain open. The Explorer may begin many changes and leave the team without enough form to carry them.

A reflective culture does not ask adults to suppress their strongest archetypal gifts.

It helps them recognise when those gifts have become the only tools available.

The adult who always helps may need to receive.

The adult who always organises may need to tolerate uncertainty.

The adult who always keeps the peace may need to risk a truthful disagreement.



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The adult who always challenges may need to help build what comes next.

Balance is not only the medicine for children.

It is the discipline of the adult.

THE ROLE AS A HIDING PLACE

Professional roles can offer service, purpose and belonging.

They can also become places in which unfinished needs hide.

The person who needs to be good may become the practitioner who can never admit a mistake.

The person who fears rejection may become the adult who needs every child to like them.

The person who once felt powerless may become attached to being the one who decides.

The person who learned to disappear may become endlessly accommodating until exhaustion turns into anger.

The person who could not rely on adults may become fiercely self-sufficient and struggle to ask colleagues for help.

The role then carries more than professional responsibility.

It carries a private promise.

If I am useful enough, I will matter.

If the room is controlled, I will be safe.

If nobody criticises me, I will be good.

If the children love me, I will not be abandoned.

If I know the answer, I will not be exposed.

These promises are rarely spoken. Yet they shape practice.

A child who refuses comfort may threaten the adult who needs to be needed.

A parent who questions a decision may threaten the adult who needs to be right.



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A colleague who notices a mistake may threaten the adult who believes belonging depends upon competence.

The role becomes brittle because too much of the self depends upon it remaining intact.

Healing does not require the practitioner to reveal every private history at work.

Nor should supervision become amateur therapy.

But adults need enough self-knowledge to recognise when the professional moment is carrying a personal weight.

Without that recognition, the child may be required to keep the adult's inner promise.

REFLECTION WITHOUT SELF-ACCUSATION

Many adults avoid reflection because they have experienced it as judgement.

A difficult event is reviewed only after something has gone wrong. Questions arrive with an answer already hidden inside them. The practitioner feels examined rather than accompanied.

In such a culture, honesty is dangerous.

Adults learn to defend the decision, minimise the impact, blame the child or repeat the language they think leadership wants to hear.

This is not because practitioners lack integrity.

It is because shame narrows perception.

When the self feels threatened, the mind begins protecting identity rather than seeking truth.

Reflective practice must therefore hold the same joining of love and truth that we hope adults will offer children.

Love without truth says, "You did your best," and never asks what the child experienced.

Truth without love says, "You handled that badly," and leaves the practitioner alone with humiliation.

Discernment asks something more spacious.

"You were under pressure."



"The child was frightened by your tone."

"Something in you became urgent."

"The boundary still mattered."

"Let us understand the moment and decide what repair is needed."

The adult is not declared innocent.

They are not declared irredeemable.

They are invited back into relationship with reality.

This is where accountability becomes developmental rather than punitive.

The aim is not to produce a convincing defence.

It is to enlarge the practitioner's capacity for the next encounter.

A reflective culture must make truth possible without making belonging conditional upon perfection.

SUPERVISION: BORROWING ANOTHER WATCHER

Children borrow discernment from adults.

Adults sometimes need to borrow it from one another.

A good supervisor becomes a temporary Watcher around a moment the practitioner cannot yet see clearly.

They do not rush to explain the child or diagnose the adult.

They help separate the layers.

What happened?

What did you notice in the child?

What happened in your body?

What meaning did you give the behaviour?

What did you fear would happen if you did not act?

Which boundary was genuinely needed?



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Which part of the response belonged to the pressure you were carrying?

What might the child have experienced?

What needs repairing?

What support would help you respond differently next time?

These questions slow the event down.

They return complexity to a moment that had become morally simple.

"He was deliberately difficult" may become "I felt publicly undermined when he laughed, and I became more interested in restoring my authority than understanding why the group had become unsafe."

"She was attention-seeking" may become "I had no attention left to give, and her need felt like an accusation."

"The parent was aggressive" may become "The parent spoke sharply, and I was already afraid that I had failed."

The revised account does not necessarily remove responsibility from the child or parent.

It restores the practitioner's own agency.

If the whole problem lives outside the adult, the adult has nothing to develop.

When the adult can recognise their part without taking ownership of everything, choice becomes possible again.

THE CULTURE AROUND THE PRACTITIONER

Individual reflection cannot compensate for an unreflective institution.

A setting may ask practitioners to co-regulate children while regulating staff through fear.

It may speak about curiosity while punishing uncertainty.

It may encourage repair with children while requiring adults to conceal mistakes from leadership or inspection.

It may celebrate wellbeing in public and build rotas that leave no space to drink water, think, breathe or speak honestly with a colleague.



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The contradiction enters the room.

Adults who are hurried will hurry children.

Adults who are watched for failure will become more concerned with appearances.

Adults who cannot question authority will struggle to teach children the difference between obedience and conscience.

Adults whose needs are treated as inconvenient may become less able to receive the needs of children without resentment.

This does not mean that every difficult response is caused by poor leadership.

Practitioners remain responsible for how they act.

But responsibility must be placed within ecology.

A plant may need pruning, yet the gardener must also ask about the soil, the weather, the space between roots and whether the plant has been watered.

A humane organisation asks both:

What does this adult need to take responsibility for?

What conditions are making responsible practice harder than it needs to be?

Without the first question, institutions become permissive.

Without the second, they become cruel.

WHEN THE SYSTEM REMOVES DISCERNMENT

Discernment requires a gap between event and response.

Many systems steadily remove that gap.

Ratios are stretched. Transitions are compressed. Documentation expands. Staff absence becomes normal. Adults carry several children's distress while trying to remain available to the whole group. Decisions that need thought must be made at speed.

The practitioner then reaches for certainty because there is no time for perception.

The child is labelled so the room can keep moving.



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The behaviour is fitted into a category because categories travel more quickly than stories.

A sanction is applied because consistency has been defined as doing the same thing rather than responding from the same values.

The adult may know that a different response is needed and still be unable to offer it.

This is not simply a training gap.

It is a structural wound.

No amount of compassionate language can create time that the timetable has removed.

No reflective worksheet can restore a workforce living in chronic shortage.

No behaviour philosophy can remain relational if every adult is required to prove productivity at the expense of presence.

Reform must therefore address workload, staffing, supervision, leadership, pay, preparation, continuity and the ordinary dignity of the working day.

The adult nervous system is not an unlimited public resource.

When institutions consume it without replenishment, children eventually meet the cost.

BOUNDARIES THAT PROTECT THE GARDENER

Care without boundaries does not become infinite care.

It becomes depletion.

Many early years adults are drawn to the work because they can feel need quickly. This sensitivity is a gift, but it can become an open gate through which every demand enters.

The practitioner stays late, takes emotional responsibility for every family, answers messages while resting, carries children home in thought and feels guilty whenever their own limits appear.

The Helper becomes the structure holding together what the organisation has failed to provide.

At first, this may look like dedication.



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Over time, warmth becomes thin. Patience becomes effortful. The adult begins giving from duty rather than abundance and may quietly resent the people they continue to serve.

A healthy boundary protects relationship from this hidden corrosion.

It allows the practitioner to say:

"I care, and I cannot carry this alone."

"This child needs support beyond what one key person can provide."

"I am not available after this time."

"I need another adult to take over before I respond sharply."

"This family's pain matters, but it does not belong inside my body all night."

"I have reached my limit, and the limit is information."

The boundary is not the opposite of compassion.

It is what allows compassion to remain truthful.

Children also learn from adults who possess limits without contempt.

They discover that care does not require self-erasure and that relationship can survive a no.

REPAIRING AUTHORITY

Adults sometimes fear that apology will weaken authority.

The opposite is often true.

Authority becomes false when it must pretend to be infallible.

A practitioner who cannot admit error teaches the child that power protects itself from truth.

A practitioner who repairs teaches that authority can remain strong enough to be corrected.

Repair may sound simple.

"I spoke too loudly. The boundary still mattered, but I frightened you. I am sorry."



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"I thought you were ignoring me. I can see now that you did not hear. I made a judgement too quickly."

"I told the group that you were being silly. I should have spoken about what happened without making you the problem."

"You hurt someone, and we still need to repair that. I also need to repair the way I handled it."

This does not reverse the roles.

The child is not invited to comfort the adult or decide whether the adult is a good person.

The adult takes responsibility and restores reality.

A repaired boundary may be stronger than an unrepaired one because it is no longer defended by pride.

The child learns that two truths can remain together.

Their action had an impact.

The adult also acted imperfectly.

Neither truth cancels the other.

This is moral education in living form.

Children do not need flawless authority. They need authority that can remain truthful when it is wrong.

FORMATION RATHER THAN TECHNIQUE

Much professional development is built around techniques.

Say this phrase. Use this script. Arrange the room this way. Follow these steps when a child refuses.

Techniques can be useful.

They give adults language when stress has narrowed access to their own. They can interrupt harmful habits and create a shared starting point across a team.

But a script cannot discern.



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The same words can be offered with warmth, fear, contempt, hurry or genuine curiosity.

"I can see you are angry" may be a true act of recognition, or a polished way of telling the child that the adult has already decided what the feeling means.

"I will not let you hit" may be a grounded boundary, or it may carry the unspoken message, "Your intensity disgusts me."

The phrase does not determine the relationship.

The person speaking it does.

This is why practitioners need formation, not only training.

Formation asks what kind of adult is being shaped through the work.

Can this person tolerate not knowing for a moment?

Can they hold a boundary without using humiliation?

Can they distinguish the child's feeling from their own?

Can they recognise the good beneath an archetypal shadow?

Can they revise a judgement without collapsing into shame?

Can they remain compassionate without rescuing?

Can they receive challenge without making disagreement a threat to belonging?

These capacities grow through practice, supervision, honest relationships and repeated return.

They cannot be downloaded in an afternoon.

They are cultivated.

A PRACTICE OF ADULT DISCERNMENT

When a moment becomes charged, the practitioner needs something simple enough to remember and spacious enough not to become another rigid script.

The following questions can create that space.

What happened?



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Begin with observable fact. What did the child do? What did the adult do? What can be described without attaching character or intention?

What happened in me?

Notice the body, emotion and urgency. Did I feel frightened, ignored, exposed, helpless, angry, tender or desperate to restore order?

What story did I add?

What did I decide the behaviour meant? Deliberate disrespect? Manipulation? Rejection? Poor parenting? A challenge to my competence?

What power was active?

Which archetypal energy appeared in the child, in me and in the wider group? What genuine good was each power trying to protect?

What was out of balance?

Did care lose its boundary? Did order lose flexibility? Did freedom lose relationship? Did harmony silence truth? Did intensity lose reflection?

What boundary was real?

Separate the necessary limit from the adult's need to feel in control. What had to stop? What had to be protected?

What is needed now?

Does the child need containment, movement, time, truth, repair, connection, space or another adult? What does the practitioner need in order to offer it?

What must be repaired?

Repair the child's action, the adult's response and any condition in the environment that repeatedly produces the same rupture.

This process may take thirty seconds in the room and thirty minutes in supervision.

The aim is not perfect analysis.

It is to prevent the first reaction from becoming the final truth.



THE CHILD IS NOT THE ADULT'S HEALER

There is a danger in speaking about what children awaken in adults.

The child can become romanticised as the one who reveals, teaches or heals the grown person.

Children do reveal us.

But they are not responsible for what is revealed.

A child should not have to remain dysregulated so an adult can practise patience.

They should not be praised for carrying a practitioner's tenderness, nor blamed for touching the practitioner's wound.

They should not be asked to forgive quickly so the adult can feel repaired.

They should not become the reason the adult finally feels needed, worthy or powerful.

The adult must take what has been awakened to another adult space.

Supervision, therapy, friendship, rest, spiritual practice, study and honest reflection may all have a place, depending upon what is needed.

The child's task is to be a child.

The adult's task is to take responsibility for the inner material that enters professional relationship.

This protects the child from becoming the container for an adult life they did not create.

HEALING THE GARDENER

Healing is not a final state in which the adult no longer becomes activated.

It is the growing capacity to remain in truthful relationship with activation.

The healed gardener still becomes tired.

They notice tiredness before turning it into a judgement about the children.

They still feel anger.

They learn to ask what the anger is protecting and whether it should lead.

They still make mistakes.



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They repair without making collapse or self-punishment the centre of the event.

They still have preferences.

They become curious about which children naturally receive their warmth and which require more conscious work.

They still need authority.

They use it to hold reality rather than secure identity.

The healed gardener is not endlessly soft.

They can say no, interrupt harm, challenge a colleague, name a pattern and act decisively.

But firmness no longer needs to make someone smaller.

The adult is rooted enough to remain distinct without becoming defended.

This is not individual self-improvement detached from social reality.

The gardener heals within a garden of adults.

Through leaders who tell the truth without humiliation.

Through teams where disagreement does not threaten belonging.

Through supervision that makes room for complexity.

Through working conditions that recognise human limits.

Through a professional culture in which reflection is ordinary, not a punishment reserved for failure.

The adult becomes more able to lend discernment because discernment is being lent to them.

RETURN TO THE ROOM

The practitioner returns the following morning.

The child arrives at the door, already moving quickly.

The adult notices the familiar tightening in her chest.

This time, she does not pretend it is absent.



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She places both feet on the floor.

She remembers the previous day without deciding that it must repeat.

The child runs towards the construction area and reaches for another child's structure.

The adult moves closer.

"You want to enter," she says. "I will help you enter without knocking it down."

The boundary is ready before the battle.

Later, she returns to the rupture from yesterday.

"I shouted when the room became difficult," she tells him. "I needed to stop the throwing, but I spoke in a way that frightened you. I am sorry. We both have something to practise today."

The child does not offer a profound response.

He looks at the floor, asks where the long blocks are and runs away.

Repair is not always a visible emotional scene.

Sometimes it is a small restoration of reality that the child carries without words.

The adult has not become perfect.

She has become more available.

The child is no longer required to hold the whole explanation for what happened between them.

A little more truth has entered the room.

A little less shame is needed to maintain authority.

The garden has not been remade through a new technique.

It has been renewed because the gardener was willing to be included in the work.

Reform begins here: not with adults who have finished growing, but with adults and institutions willing to remain teachable.

Only then can discernment be offered to children as a living practice rather than demanded from them as behaviour.



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The garden cannot be renewed without tending the gardener. Reform begins with adults who are willing to remain teachable.

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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