

Emotional Containment

What is Emotional Containment?

Emotional containment was first developed by Bion (1962). It describes the processes of emotionally helping people to bring about support and change. This support can benefit all children, and is particularly helpful for children who experience social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs.

Bion described the process of the mother hearing her infant's distressed cries and responding with nourishment eg a nappy change, holding, rocking or whatever is needed — but most importantly, a response that is soothing and provides comfort, which is fundamental to development.



The mother takes in the baby's communication, digests it and feeds it back in manageable bitesize pieces, which does not overwhelm the baby further, but instead soothes them.



Essentially, he claimed that the mother absorbed the anxiety, distress and other uncomfortable feelings, and gave them back to the infant in a more manageable form. Interestingly, neuroscience has confirmed this, from charting this process using brain scanning technology.

Attachment theory recognises this and explains that these early processes are fundamental to the development of trust and the ability to form and maintain relationships. Bion is essentially talking about the exact same processes (the Arousal/Relaxation Cycle).

Looking at these early processes from a containment perspective, the infant goes from a state of unbearable pain, discomfort, fear or confusion to a state of comfort and of everything being manageable again. The parent 'takes away' the unbearable, or uncontainable, and replaces it with more manageable feelings and experience. Through this process, which starts at birth and happens again and again, over days and weeks, months and years, the infant develops the ability to think in order to make sense of and manage raw experience and emotion.

It is important to remember here that when we are first in this world, we have no way of distinguishing ourselves from the world around us and no way of understanding our own emotions and experiences. The ability to think about these things, and for this to help us make our way in life, comes about as a result of those early processes of containment which is supported by the adults around us. This is so fundamental and necessary to human development, yet we easily take it for granted.

What do I need to understand so that I can help a child to learn?

Many of the children in our settings, and their families, have faced difficult circumstances that they have to manage to the best of their abilities. At times, this can create significant disruptions which can affect a parent's ability to provide consistent emotional containment to their child, and their capacity to feel contained when overwhelmed. As a result, the child's development of thinking, particularly the thinking that enables them to manage and make sense of things, may have been compromised, limited or absent.

Long-term, if unsupported, children may:

- have difficulty or an inability to recognise their own emotions
- develop emotional dysregulation and the inability to feel their emotions when overwhelmed
- have disruptive sleep and eating patterns
- develop compulsive behaviours or be vulnerable to addiction
- experience panic attacks
- experience anxiety
- develop low self-esteem
- undeveloped ability to express their own needs
- feel undeserving of having their needs met
- develop a negative sense of self and a global view of their self-worth
- develop separation anxiety

Children who feel uncontained may communicate this through a range of communicating behaviours. This can be described as 'falling to pieces'.

The purpose of emotional containment can be described as **helping to hold them together**, which can sometimes feel instinctive to want to provide, whilst at other times children may communicate in a way that tries to push you away from them.

Children, who have received a lack of containment, can find the uncomfortable feelings that get triggered by a situation (whether this is perceived or the true event), more intense due to the pain of 'unsoothed', unresolved feelings from the past that also get triggered. In addition, their underdeveloped ability to manage these more intense feelings will also make it more likely for them to become overwhelmed and distressed.

How can I help the child in school?

For children who may have experienced such disruption it is important for them to experience **reparative emotional containment** as a way of repairing, mending and enhancing this emotional development.

Teachers and support staff, working with these children, can help them to experience consistent emotional containment in order to fulfil these difficulties by 'talking it out rather than acting it out'. Providing a safe environment where pupils can have the frequent opportunities to make sense of

painful emotions and experiences and can begin to develop the capacity to trust and experience reparation.

Containment work, however, is complex and demanding and it requires persistence and perseverance. It is about providing the children with space, support, safety and clear and consistent boundaries to keep them and others safe. It is not about creating a constricting environment in order to keep behaviour under control.

It is an ongoing process, rather than a goal to be achieved. The processes of containment happen primarily within the context of relationships. While some individual relationships may have the power to 'hold' in such a way that fosters the kinds of development related to containment, it is the network of relationships that provide the overall containing function.

Emotional containment is about:

- ✓ keeping the child in mind,
- ✓ providing a safe physical environment,
- ✓ routines, predictable structures,
- ✓ developing warm reciprocal relationships
- ✓ clear expectations,
- ✓ consistent positive behaviour management strategies and scripts

... that support the communication between the child and the other (both adults and other children).

For these components to be containing consideration must be given to how they contribute to a safe environment – one that isn't too fixed and inflexible, but also one that isn't too flexible and chaotic. The ideal environment is one where the structure is established and evolved to nurture and to hold boundaries; one where practitioners are emotionally available and resilient, where they can convey the sense, "We can deal with what you throw at us and give it back to you in a form that you'll be more able to handle."



Take a look at:

[Emotional Support in School](#) which describes Emotion Coaching (Gottman & Declaire, 1997).

Delaney, M (2009) ***Teaching the unteachable: What teachers can do when all else fails***. London: Worth Publishing.

Bomber, L & Hughes, D (2013) ***Settling to Learn*** – settling troubled pupils to learn: why relationships matter in school , London, Worth Publishing.

Adapted from Laura Steckley <http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cyconline-nov2010-steckley.html>
[Accessed: 21/2/2016]

References:

Bion, W R (1962) *Learning from Experience*, London, Karnac.

Bion, W (1961) *Experiences in Groups*. New York: Basic Books.

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