

The quintessence of a therapeutic environment

The 2nd essence: **Containment**

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Self and the use of self: a reflective exercise

First let us think about what it means to be a therapeutic child care worker.



The Five Essences

1. Attachment
2. Containment
3. Communication
4. Involvement
5. Agency



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The quintessence of a therapeutic environment

The Five Essences

1. Attachment - a culture of belonging
2. Containment – a culture of safety
3. Communication – a culture of openness
4. Involvement – a culture of participation and citizenship
5. Agency – a culture of empowerment

What is culture?

- Characteristics of a particular group



The quintessence of a therapeutic environment

Essence

- The most important part. An abundance of a quality as if highly concentrated

Culture:

- The characteristics of a particular group

The quintessence of a therapeutic environment

The five essences

1. Attachment - a culture of belonging
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Development need	Origin in	Culture	Structures	Rapoports themes (a)	Treatment phase (b)
Attachment	Primary bond, losses as growth	Belonging	Referral, joining, leaving	Permissiveness	Engagement
Containment	Maternal and paternal holding, intersubjectivity	Safety	Support, rules, boundaries		Stabilisation
Communication	Play, speech others as separate	Openness	Groups, ethos, correspondence	Communalism	Assessment, preparation,
Involvement	Finding place amongst others, interdependence	Living Learning	Community meeting agendas	Reality confrontation	Intensive therapy
Agency	Establishing self as seat of action, individualisation	Empowerment	Votes, decisions, seniority	Democratisation	Recovery

Notes: a) Original TC themes' were described by Rapoport (1960); b) as described in Kennard and Haigh (2009)

Containment is rooted in object relations theory

- Object relations theory is a psychodynamic approach to understanding human behaviour, relationships, psychopathology.
- As humans we are relationship seeking rather than pleasure seeking as Freud suggested.
- Therefore emphasis on human relationships
- Less emphasis on drives of aggression and sexuality as motivational forces.



Containment Bion

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Maternal Reverie

The sensitive mother takes in and holds on to the babies communication so that by receiving and reflecting on the raw feelings of physical and psychic pain the mother acts as a container.



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Maternal Reverie

If she is able to process the distress in her mind and respond in such a way as to modify and make the raw feelings more bearable this will bring comfort and importantly provide **a sense of being thought about**. Bion calls this the mother's 'capacity for reverie' (Bion 1962).



Image courtesy of Jomphong at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Container – Contained

- the smallest in size and vulnerability is kept safe by others able to provide protection and support.
- The child's inner and outer worlds are held by the mother, herself contained by *another* and others beyond.



Containment

Experiences of containment enable the development of thinking in order to manage experiences and emotion.

When individuals' experiences of containment are inadequate or significantly interrupted, cognitive and emotional development are affected.



Image courtesy of patrisyu at FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Container – Contained



“Containment is thought to occur when one person receives and understands the emotional communication of another without being overwhelmed by it, processes it and then communicates understanding and recognition back to the other person. This process can restore the capacity to think in the other person”

(Douglas, 2007, p.33).

Container – Contained

Kahn, (2005) describes this process as carers ‘absorbing’ the child’s experience of distress in order to better understand and meet the child’s needs. The carer does this by identifying and verbalising and in this way helps to make manageable those uncontainable feelings.



The structure of containment: rules and boundaries

“The structural features which embody the principle of containment, and make a therapeutic environment feel safe, are about support, rules and holding the boundaries. Support systems are important in providing a way in which disturbance is tolerated, distress is held and people are not left isolated and rejected when they are feeling desperate”.

(Haigh 2013 p.9)

The structure of containment: rules and boundaries

“Rules need to clearly establish what is permitted and what is not, considerable efforts will often be spent on bending, stretching and interpreting the rules and boundaries. The process by which rules are invented, changed and discarded also deserves attention, the sense of safety will be compromised if the rules are not held and owned by the community”.

(Haigh 2014 p. 10)

The structural features which embody the principle of containment:
Those things that help make the therapeutic environment feel safe

Rules that clearly establish what is permitted

Group exercise



Teams and organisations as containers



Containment for the containers:



Containing relationships between adults and children

Systems of staff support – supervision, staff meetings

Systems for organisational support – external consultants

Teams and organisations as containers

Children who have suffered isolation and a sense of abandonment will project their desperate feelings into the workers, making them feel isolated, useless and worthless; all the more important, then, for other members of a team to contain and help make sense of those feelings.

How do other members of the team contain and help the worker make sense of those feelings?



Task and anti-task

1. Isabel Menzies- Lyth (1988) - defenses against anxiety
2. Where the work is painful and stressful and there are high emotional demands
3. A pull towards defensive practice which may deaden the pain of the work but at the same time get in the way of team functioning and relationships with children.
4. Being clear about the primary task (that which the organisation must achieve in order to survive).
5. Anxieties associated with the task

Self and the use of self - a reflective exercise

First let us think about what it means to be a therapeutic child care worker.



Self and the use of self - a reflective exercise

What does it take to do this work?

What happens to us and for us when we are doing it?



Self and the use of self - a reflective exercise

What might help us to go on doing it?



Self and the use of self - a reflective exercise

What do we (as workers)
represent to the children
and young people?



Self and the use of self - a reflective exercise

Review the concept of emotional containment.

1. How does this relate to your work context – who are you containing emotionally?
2. How else does this relate to your work context – who is containing you emotionally?



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