



How attachment and containment shape emotional regulation and resilience from infancy to community care

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Abstract

This literature review explores how early attachment, beginning in the infant–mother relationship, shapes a child’s ability to regulate emotions and form secure relationships. The concepts of containment and holding are important to supporting both infants and youth, as they provide a safe and stable environment where difficult emotions can be processed and resilience can grow. These ideas go beyond the family to community and school settings, where trusted adults can also create safe spaces for adolescents to share concerns and build trust. Studies such as Choaibi and Thomas (2021) demonstrate how youth practitioners use holding and containment to create secure attachments and emotional well-being, while Fehrenbach et al. (2021) show that the Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) framework can reduce trauma symptoms and strengthen functioning in vulnerable youth. Together, this review demonstrates the value of containment and holding as key supports for healing and resilience in both family and community-based programs.

Literature Review

Containment and holding describe creating secure spaces where emotions can be explored and regulated. Holding provides security, whereas containment reflects the caregiver’s ability to absorb, process, and manage overwhelming emotions without becoming overwhelmed themselves.

Early Attachments Foundation

- Insecure maternal attachment (anxious, avoidant) is linked to maladaptive regulation and reduced responsiveness (Vagos et al., 2023).
- Higher maternal attachment anxiety is associated with missed cues, restricted exploration, greater conflict, and more intrusive caregiving, whereas lower anxiety predicts stronger bonding (Vagos et al., 2023).
- Early attachment patterns influence how children later form interpersonal and romantic relationships.

Trauma, Co-Regulation, and Containment

- In high-risk families affected by trauma, these bonds are especially vulnerable.
- Caregivers’ unresolved trauma can derail co-regulation and lead to “failed protection” (McIntosh et al., 2023).
- Infants need containment; knowing caregivers can hold them with safety and trust. This helps infants process distress without overwhelm and supports early communication and emotional development (McIntosh et al., 2023).

Holding and Containment Beyond the Family

- Trusted adults in schools or communities can also provide these conditions.
- School-based practitioners create secure environments for sharing and emotional support through authentic, informal conversations (Choaibi & Thomas, 2021).
- The study done by Fehrenbach et al., 2021 implements the ARC framework in a non-profit community-based setting. The program was designed to be flexible and accessible, and serves youth facing poverty, abuse, and welfare system involvement.
- The ARC framework is a trauma-informed framework that provides holding and containment through counseling, builds secure caregiving relationships, strengthens youths’ ability to regulate emotional states, and supports the development of competencies such as problem-solving, identity formation, and effective communication (Fehrenbach et al., 2021).
- Fehrenbach et al. (2021) found improvements in trauma symptoms and social, emotional, and behavioral functioning.

Practical Applications

Holding means creating a safe space inside our minds where feelings can be felt without overwhelm. Think of how a cat loves to sit in small boxes. To cats, the box is their safe space. With practice, we can create this in our minds. To babies, safety is created when caregivers respond to our emotions steadily through presence and repair. As adults, we can bring that same steadiness inward by noticing our feelings and holding them with compassion. With practice, the mind is a place we can safely revert to when feeling overwhelmed.

Reflect:

1. Recall a time someone’s steadiness helped you feel safe with your feelings
2. What did that feel like in your body?
3. If you can, also recall a time when you didn’t feel held. What was that like?
4. How might you offer that steadiness to yourself now?

Exploring Holding

Reflect:
Recall a time someone's steadiness helped you feel safe with your feelings

What did that feel like in your body?

If you can, also recall a time when you didn't feel held. What was that like?

How might you offer that steadiness to yourself now?

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