

Contain to Retain:

THE POWER OF SUPERVISION IN EARLY YEARS

In the midst of the early years staffing crisis, with high turnover, emotional burnout, and low morale, one phrase is gaining quiet power: “**Contain to retain.**” But what does it really mean?

At its heart, this phrase draws on psychoanalytic theory, particularly Bion’s concept of containment. Originally developed to understand how caregivers help babies process overwhelming feelings, the idea of containment has powerful implications for how we support the adults working in early years settings too.

In Bion’s theory, a baby projects raw emotions—fear, confusion, frustration—onto a caregiver. When the caregiver responds calmly, holds these feelings without becoming overwhelmed themselves, and returns them in a manageable form, the baby learns to regulate their own emotions. This emotional “holding” is what helps children grow and thrive.

Now imagine this in the context of a nursery or preschool. Early years staff are constantly containing the emotions of children and families. But who is containing the staff?



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That's where reflective supervision comes in. When offered regularly and thoughtfully, supervision provides a safe, trusted space for practitioners to offload, reflect, and feel held. It becomes a container in itself—a place where staff can make sense of their experiences, reconnect with their purpose, and feel valued.

This emotional support isn't just a nice extra. It's essential. Staff who feel supported are more resilient, more engaged, and more likely to stay. In short, when we contain, we retain.

If we want to respond meaningfully to the staffing crisis, we need to do more than focus on recruitment. We must build a culture of care and containment within our teams—starting with high-quality, emotionally-attuned supervision.



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