

Developing a Holding Environment

This 24-month project took a co-productive approach with the members of Seamab, a residential care and education service for children, to render physical restraint less or even unnecessary.



Human Learning Systems

Co-production drew on ideas from Human Learning Systems (Brogan et al., 2021) and the metaphor of a murmuration of birds became useful in understanding the complexity in developing a holding environment.



Concepts...

The foundations of our work were emotional containment (Bion, 1962), holding environments (Winnicott, 1965), and children's human rights (Wang et al., 2026). We know that children need adults' helps to develop self-regulation, and so the KTP focused on developing psychological safety across the service. It sought to empower adults and children at Seamab to use self awareness in their work, and to manage stress in a safe and emotionally secure manner. In doing this, we explored how these practices can help decrease the need for physical restraint.

Friends and partners...

The academic supervisors for the project were Laura Steckley and Elaine Webster, whose research guided the efforts at Seamab. Additionally, we collaborated with



and implemented the Reflection and Action Learning Forum (RALF) model to enhance reflective practice within Seamab.



Key Takeaways

- attention to parallel processes is key
- psychological safety between adults must also be scaffolded
- processes must be embedded as 'part of the furniture'.

Impacts

- a 6% reduction in staff turnover (as compared with the same period the previous two years) during the project's final 8 months; an over 50% reduction in staff injuries during incidents with children during the second half of the project.
- an over 50% reduction in the number of physical restraints in the second year of the project as compared with the first, with fewer physical restraints in the final quarter than the same six-month period for each of the previous four years.



How the work coalesced..

Following the what was important to Seamab members, the work focused on the following 'nests' of work:

- Maintaining reflective spaces;
- Crisis work and the 'team around the team';
- Repairative work;
- reshaping the work of the Reducing Incident Committee, incl. using a children's rights lens

