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Children's Experiences of Domestic Violence

**Understanding Agency
and Resistance Strategies**

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- (Un)trigger warning

General critiques of literature on children's experiences

- Pathologising – damage
- Primarily quantitative – questionnaire driven
- Quantitative measures - the vast majority were not completed by child
- Small number of qual studies
- Children's voice obscured and elided in research
- Child rendered passive, lacks agency or capacity to resist



What have we done?

- 100 semi-structured interviews with children and young people in 4 European countries
- Drawings, maps, photo elicitation
- 10 carer focus groups
- 10 professional focus groups
- Policy analysis
- Intervention

Project's Main arguments

- Complexity and context specific nature of children's coping
- Paradoxical resilience
- Intertwining of coping and “damage”

Our main terms of reference in this research

- Resilience – as process, relationality, subjective, complex, variable, located
- Agency – capacity to act, how to be, how to see the world, capacity to self-define.
 - Always constrained, never completely free
 - Corporeal, contextual
 - Affective
- Resistance – the capacity to ‘press back’

Managing Disclosure – Telling, and not telling as agentic strategies

- Knowing, telling and not telling
- The dangers of speaking out, the dangers of staying silent
- Stories are (consciously) managed by children

Violence is a lesson in learning to be quiet

- Children learn to attenuate their speech
- Learning to keep quiet to stay out of the way.

That which must not be named....

- Avoidance of naming violence as violence

Risky speech: the dangers of being heard...

Distrust of others, particularly professionals

.... And of not being heard

Isolation, not being listened to, not being taken seriously

Getting the story right....

Beth's story

- She hesitates to tell the story.
Double checks WHICH story we want to hear.
- Importance of telling the 'right' story.
- Learned to speak to an audience?

Ali's story

- The production of a version of the family history that is authorised and stable
- Variability in the story is untrustworthy

Managing Disclosure – Key Points

- Children and young people are active in managing their own life stories
 - Learned that speech is dangerous
 - Performative, therapeutised, managed speech
 - Ventriloquation
 - Tactical and strategic disclosures
 - Talking out as gesture of defiance
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- Implications of this for working with children and young people?

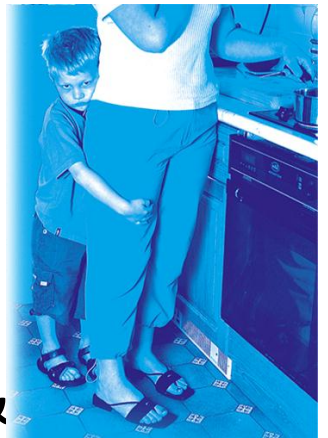
Working creatively with
emotions

Emotions in DV research

- Children affected by DV less likely to be aware of their emotions, less likely to be able to regulate emotions
- Children experienced distorted emotional processing, identifying anger more often than it is really present (Crick & Dodge, 1994).
- Intergenerational transmission – watch, learn, do.

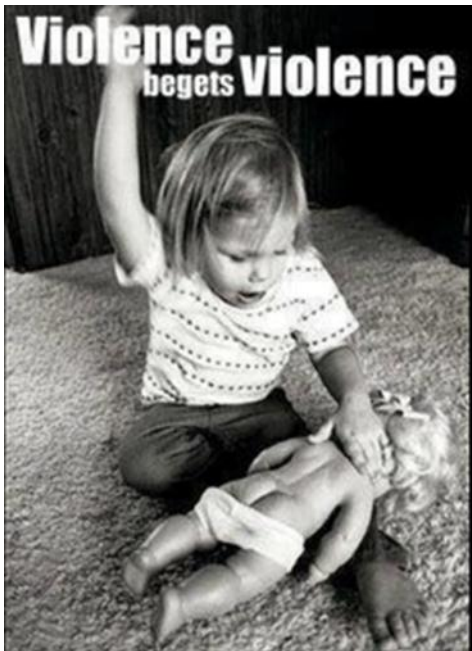


Emotion Coaching, DV



- When parents coach children with negative emotions like anger & sadness they have better peer outcomes – challenged in violent homes (Katz and Windecker, 2006)
- Parents less able to provide emotion coaching for ‘negative’ emotions for children, because they lack emotion skills themselves (poor understanding, dysregulation) (Katz et al, 2006)
- Parental stress in high conflict families results in parents who are emotionally unavailable (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Volling & Belsky, 1991).

- “If these interpretations are true, children exposed to acts of DV may not develop a clear understanding of emotion and may have difficulty regulating their emotional arousal.” (Katz, Hessler and Annest, 2007)
- **Deficits of emotional regulation and emotional competence**



Children who have experienced DV are assumed to be:

- less aware of emotions
- more emotionally dysregulated
- Level of emotional dysregulation predicted social difficulties, negative peer interactions, externalising and internalising issues
- Level of emotional awareness predicted friendship closeness and internalising problems.
- Emotion coaching as solution

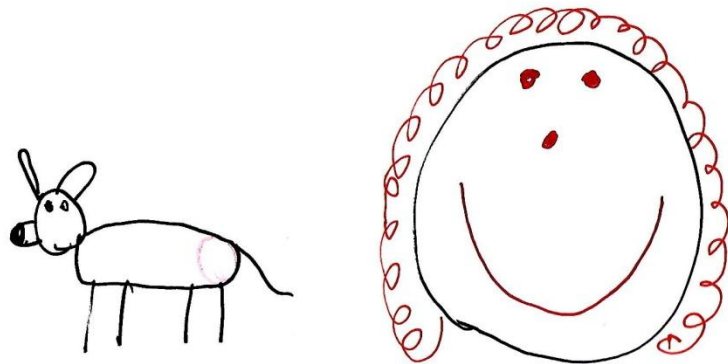
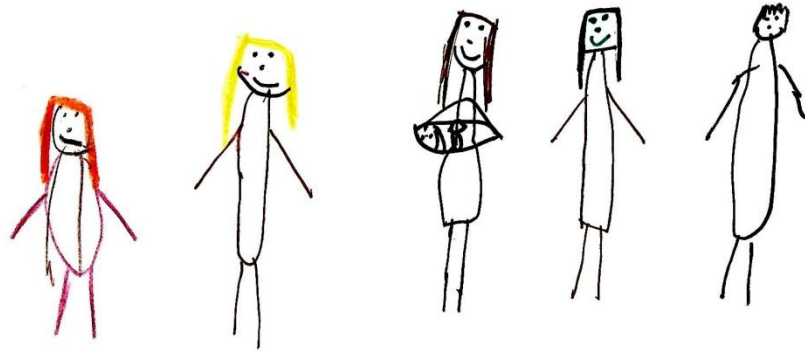
But....

- Emotional experience contextual, embodied, relational
- Dominant explanatory models of children and DV underestimate the complexity of children's emotional responses, because they decontextualise and individualise emotion as abstract skills
- Underestimate children's capacity for coping, for managing, for self comforting, for constructing an agentic sense of self
- Children's accounts are multilayered – their capacity for reflection, emotional labour and agency are embedded in practices and ways of being that we might find 'pathological' as observing, clinically trained adults – a paradoxical resilience

Emotion and subjectivity

Nancy - the youngest and the
scaredest.

Emotions, identity management,
and management of family
dynamics



Nancy, 10 years old

Emotion and subjectivity

Nancy

- Sense of difference, positioning through emotional self-labelling, as a way of managing family relationships and producing a positive sense of self
- Her more positive self identity, rooted in being 'the scarest' enables her to separate herself from violent, aggressive and loud family members. She constitutes herself as 'different' through this emotional self-positioning.
- Complex emotion work

Emotion, embodiment, subjectivity

- 'Managing emotion' here is far more complex than simple anger management.
- Embodied emotionality, the fear of getting 'bigger', older - Growing up is framed here as growing violent
- Staying 'small' and 'scared' enables her to dis-identify from perceived family characteristics of violence and aggression
- Being 'the smallest and the scarest' is a powerful subject position that protects her from the perceived inevitability of growing up to be violent
- BUT here she expresses a fear that, despite this she will 'start fighting' as she gets stronger and bigger and more able to stand up for herself.
- Subjectivity emerges from, and is immanent within interconnections of embodied social practice, and language (Blackman et al 2008) (other modes of self-expression – meaning making, symbol)

Body as site of distress and resistance

Lizzy – I go into my panic and I shake

Emotions, embodiment and relationality

- EMOTIONS as RELATIONAL EXPERIENCES
- Very vivid description of emotion.
- ‘Scary’ is about abandonment, losing a part of self that is constituted as self-other relationship.
- Physical experience.
- Feeling scared and ‘Feeling whole’ are relational experiences for her.
- Emotions negotiated in intersubjective encounters and these in turn are linked to subjectivity

Body as site of distress and resistance

Wounds, scars

Materiality, relationality, emotionality



- *Intertwining of relationality, emotionality and materiality*

Comfort and Self Soothing:

Dancing alone

Stress balls

Comfort and sensation

- Violence occurs in material spaces
- Control of space, control of bodies
- Affective and embodied
- Why do we look for evidence of 'resilience' in individual cognitive / affective processes?
- Children's management of abuse is not therefore always (or even mostly) verbal – they learn to cope by using the spaces around them, and their own bodies

- Young people are not passive witnesses to DV. They are reflexive, meaning making, and agentic in their experiences of their family
- Their emotional life in relation to DV is complex and multifaceted
- Accounts of their experiences are multi-layered and the emotional nature of their experience is not written 'on the surface'.
- Their experiences of DV are emotional experiences – they are not caught in behaviour arcs and 'skills' training is not a sufficient response from support services
- They are not 'lacking emotional competence', but their emotional responses and management of emotional experience cannot be understood in isolated or abstracted ways
- They experience emotion in embodied and relational ways
- Emotional experience and subjectivity intertwine

Use of space:
Mapping resistance

Constructing & Using Spaces

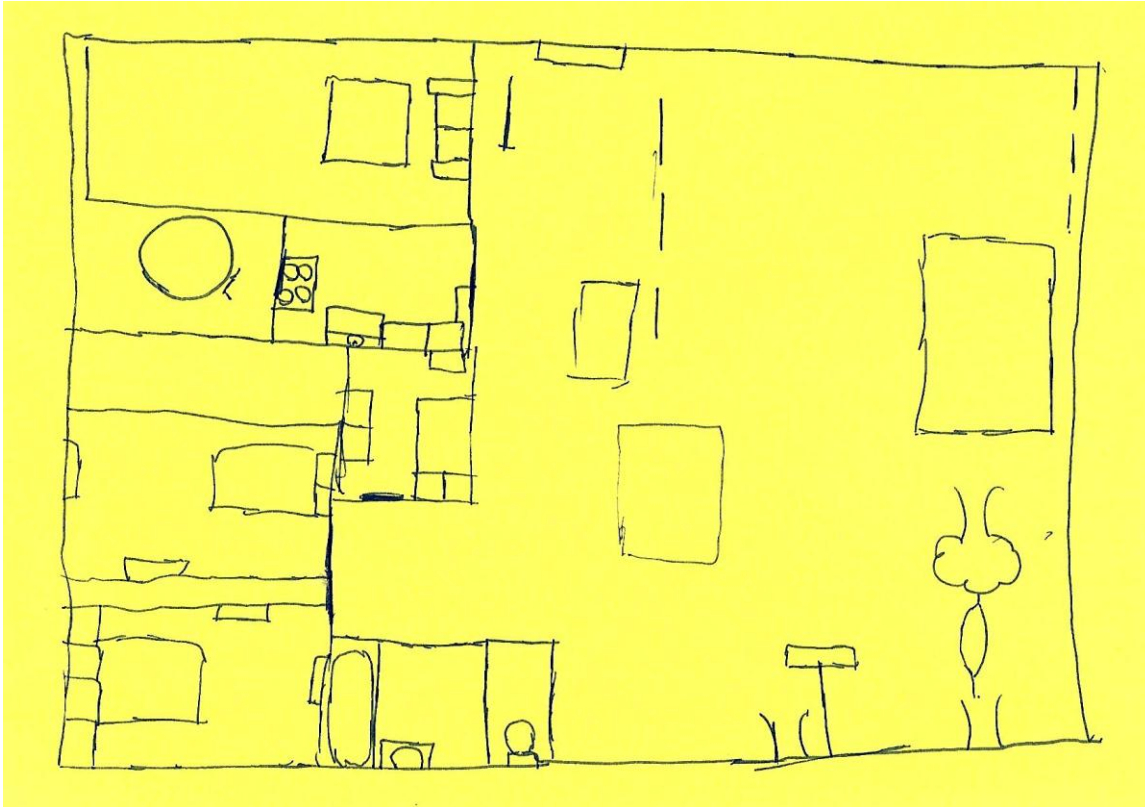
Defining & Using Space

- Creating his own spaces



Using Space: Dens and Hideaways

Defining & Using Space



Constructing & Using Spaces

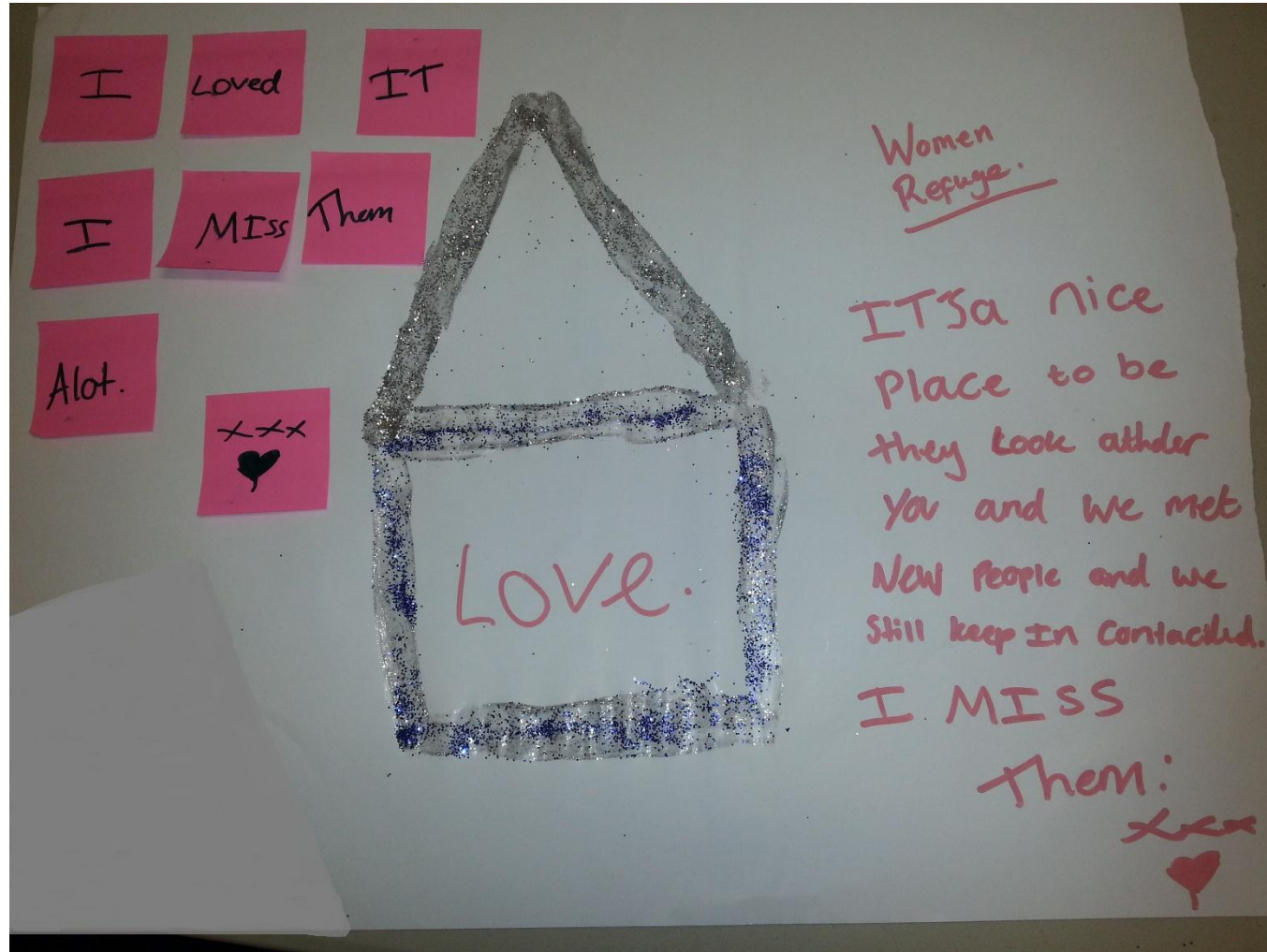
- ***Ideal childhoods, imaginary spaces***

Active monitoring and observation

Accesses place of safety prior to active observation:

“Just getting a drink”

The meaning of home



- Merleau-Ponty's body-subject
- Bodies are not (just) done to, they are not tools.
- Agency as embodied - acting-as-bodies
- Embodied resistances

Paradoxical Resilience

- Children's capacity for coping, for managing, for self comforting, for constructing an agentic sense of self
- This is often embedded in practices and ways of being that we might find 'pathological' as observing, clinically trained adults
- corporeal agency

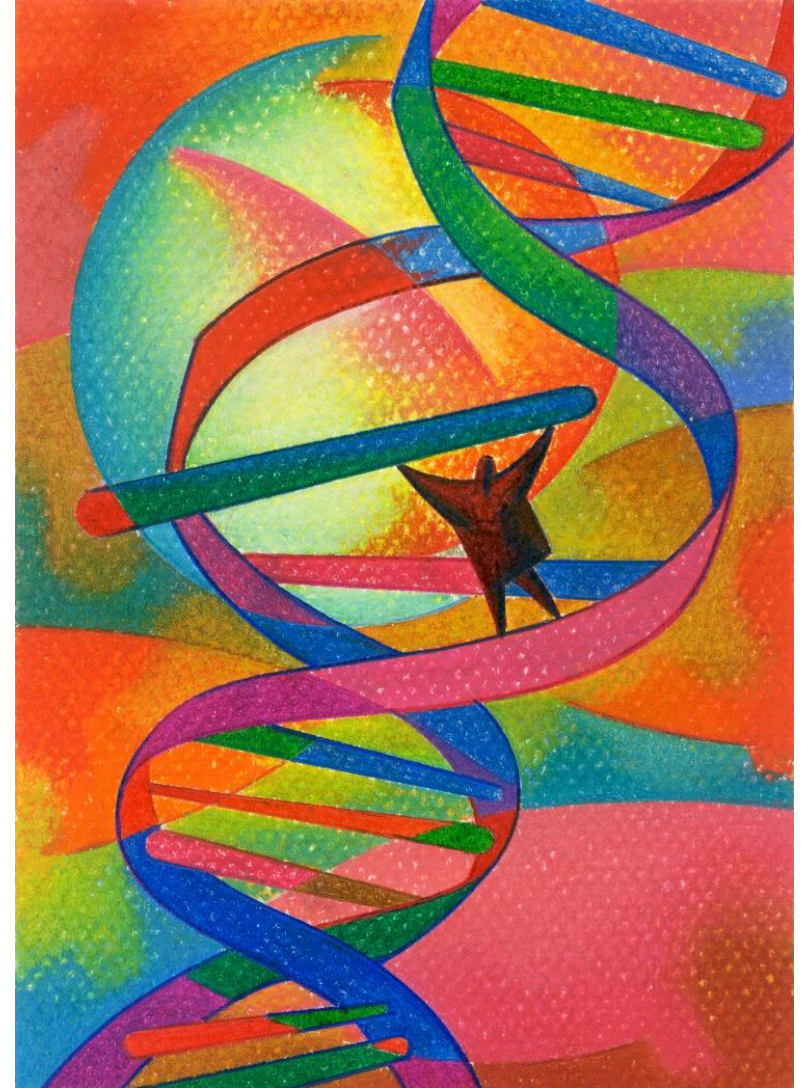
- Many of these young people's expressions of resilience are not 'prosocial' or particularly 'nice'
- In our drive for closure and happy endings we risk obscuring their expressions of resistance and resilience

Paradoxical Resilience



The double helix of children's experience of domestic violence

- Resilience and coping intertwine in children's experiences
- How they cope and how they are wounded cannot be seen separately from each other



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CHILDREN LIVING WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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(yes, that's a really handy, memorable address...)