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A letter to my co-researchers

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Abstract

This paper, presented as a love letter to co-researchers, is a reflection on the utilisation of various diary-based methods to represent the day-to-day lived experiences of parents (co-researchers) living with child-parent violence initiated by 4–11-year-old children. The diaries were used as a helpful tool for parents to share their everyday lives utilising a variety of modes and tools. These modes and tools resulted in a multi-sensory exploration for the researcher who had the opportunity to see, hear, and read the stories of co-researchers as they went about their everyday lives navigating child-parent violence.

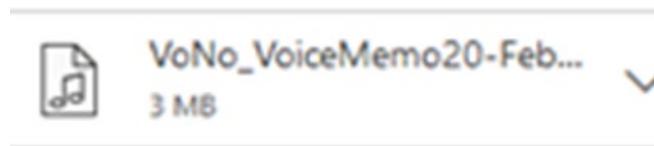


Figure 1: A diary submission in voice note form

Dear co-researchers,

Thank you. From every fibre of me. Thank you.

When I asked for help with my doctoral research, I don't think any of us knew what was coming, how entwined I would find myself in your lives. Diaries are intimate things, and our relationships with our children even more so; in asking parents to keep diaries of their experiences of living with explosive and controlling behaviours from 4–11-year-old children, I thought I was, perhaps, asking too much. I didn't expect so many of you to agree to share the most important and intimate aspects of your lives.

In sharing your voice notes (Fig. 1), your video diaries (Fig. 2), your letters, and photographs, you have shared so much of yourself with me. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to get to know you and your families in the most incredibly personal way.



Video.mov

2 MB



Figure 2: A video diary submitted by a mother

I knew very early that I wanted co-researchers, not participants. I knew that you would have more knowledge about your families than ever I could; I wanted you to record and report on anything that you felt was important or relevant to your life and your family. Diaries are incredibly intimate, and often secret, belongings, holding the most personal, emotional aspects of our selves (Gibson, 1995; Morrell-Scott, 2018), and I'm so grateful you chose to share yours and be vulnerable with me (Fig. 3).

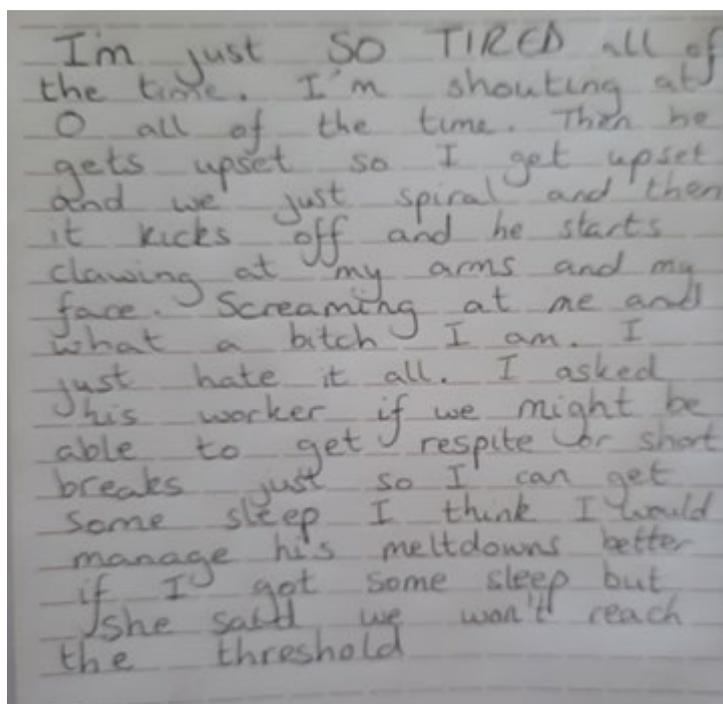


Figure 3: A photograph of a written diary where a mother expresses her vulnerability

I asked you to focus not necessarily upon so-called 'child-parent violence' but on anything that mattered to you and your family. You were leading the data wherever you wanted to, using whichever mode of diary-making was useful to you. I never expected this level of intimacy and honesty, or to see, hear and feel the difficulties you would face, but I knew very quickly how much strength I would see. I know you all wince when you see 'violence' in my work, when you see the reports that I write, and the documents that I share. And yet you stick with me, working and recording, reporting your lives and experiences, trying to understand your children so that you can understand how to help them. I've watched you try to teach them to manage their emotions and reduce their violent outbursts; I'm so proud to know you. I'm so grateful that you all allowed me to become entangled in your stories and immersed in the sensory experience that it was to see, hear, and touch your lives through these diaries. Your stories entered my thoughts at every turn; I would think of you as I walked my dog and watched families playing, wondering if they were experiencing the same as you, behind closed doors.

I'm sorry that some of you feel guilty, that you blame yourself for your child's outbursts. I'm sorry that you put the biting, the spitting, the kicking down to postnatal depression, or having a nanny, or abandonment, or poor parenting. If I have learned anything through these diaries and this process, it is that none of these experiences are your fault. It is not the fault of your child either. This is not about fault, or blame, or judgement. You have all done so much research into the development of children, reflected on so many interactions, sought (and fought) for help wherever you can find it—this cannot be about you failing your children, because, as I've become entangled in your stories, it is clear to me you have parented well beyond expectations. Meeting some of your children (mostly virtually) has been the greatest honour, and you are all so gentle, thoughtful, and considerate—please do not carry this guilt.

I've learnt so much about good parenting from all of you, each of you in a unique way: how to be a little more patient with my son, how to be kinder to myself and others; but also that parenting isn't self-sacrifice and can be about learning to know yourself, and accept yourself. I have learnt to model self-care and self-love; to complain when there needs to be complaint; and to celebrate the successes, no matter how small. I have learnt to throw away societal expectations of what children should be and what a good parent looks like, to see all of your flaws as a family and accept them, as we are all a work in progress.

We have so many plans of what to do next to make sure other families don't struggle and suffer the way you have all had to struggle. I am excited to see what comes of it, but I'm very sad I won't see any more diaries, or hear your voice notes, or get lost in your videos. There will be no more 4am voice notes reporting on your exciting news, or unexpected email to celebrate a success. There will be no more 'off the record' phone calls to talk about boys and mothers-in-law, or the latest parenting hurdle. All our conversations will be 'off the record' now.

We started as co-researchers and ended as friends, and I hope this message goes some way to show how much you mean to me. Every single one of you.

With love,

Nikki

References

Gibson, V., (1995). An analysis of the use of diaries as a data collection method. *Nurse Researcher*, 3(1), pp.66-73.

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Nikki Rutter is an ESRC funded doctoral researcher often found in 'the attic' within the department of Sociology at Durham University. In her research she combines participatory paradigms and Glaserian Grounded Theory to explore child and parent interpretations of child-parent violence when it is initiated by 4–11-year-old children. **Twitter:** [@RutterNik](https://twitter.com/RutterNik) **Web:** <https://www.ninedtp.ac.uk/nikki-rutter/> **ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7671-506X>