

“A Very Good Girl”: Experiencing Primary School After Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse From an Adult Male

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is a global concern. Much national and international attention has focused on child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse which is technology assisted or that which happens between children. A high proportion of victims and survivors are girls abused by adult males who are or feel like family. These victims are under-represented in research. Although primary school staff have ideal opportunity to support them, victims rarely disclose sexual abuse experiences at school. I led this research as an insider researcher using heuristic inquiry to provide unique insights into women survivors' experiences of primary school having been sexually abused by an adult male within their family ecosystem. Heuristic inquiry holistically investigates a social phenomenon for which the researcher and research partners share intense personal interest (Moustakas, 2015). Using a best-practice model with a trauma responsive and relational ethic of care, I invited women survivors to share memories and create meaning of what primary school was like for them. Twelve survivor research partners provided rich, nuanced detail of how they experienced school, their protective factors and what might have helped them disclose. Reflexive thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews and follow-up communications revealed their trauma responses, their efforts to establish autonomy, how they masked what had happened to them and their strong desire to matter in contrast with the sense of not mattering instilled by the sexual abuse and familial responses. The recommendations generated can inform educators, practitioners in other sectors and policy makers to drive enhanced responses for victims.

Keywords: intrafamilial child sexual abuse, primary school, heuristic inquiry

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Introduction

This research highlights the real experiences of hidden, ordinary girls sexually abused in their home environment, by family, neighbours and friends. Women survivors of this type of child sexual abuse shared their memories of what it was like being at primary school following intrafamilial child sexual abuse. Although boys and young men are sexually abused, and girls and women can perpetrate abuse, I focused on survivors who were sexually abused as girls aged 12 or younger by men aged 18 or above. In England and Wales, Gekoski, et al. (2016) found this population to be largely ignored in research. In addition to this, evolving Department for Education (DfE) (2025) guidance continues to focus on sexualised behaviour between same aged children, extra-familial and technology assisted sexual abuse. This paper sets out the methodological decisions taken to best meet the aims of the research through heuristic inquiry as described by Moustakas (1990). It explains the ethical practice embedded throughout the research and offers an example of a creatively presented reflection as a way of processing and inciting further research epiphanies. The heuristic analysis of findings is explained and final composite depictions of the survivors' living experiences are shared. This research provides illuminating case studies aimed at teaching and school support staff as well as others involved in child protection, demonstrating likely exemplars of the living experiences of victims while encouraging practitioners to adopt the mindset "it could happen here" (DfE, 2025, p. 17).

Conceptual Framework

My world view, that the truth about any experience is relative to highly individual circumstances and the sense individuals construct from them, underpinned a constructivist ontology for this research. The aim to interpret individual essential meanings that survivors of intrafamilial child sexual abuse constructed from their memories of attending primary school drove an interpretive epistemology. As an experienced teacher, having taught in primary, further and higher education and managed outstanding special educational needs provision, I have always promoted nuanced, equitable practice. I consider myself to be anti-racist, anti-ableist and anti-sexist and believe that marginalisation is highly linked to invisibility. Although I chose a homogenous population for the research with living experiences similar to mine, it is important to note that among victims of child sexual abuse, people who learn differently and have physical impairments, people from different ethnic backgrounds, and boys are affected by intersecting marginalisation (hooks, 2015) and are more invisible than girl victims. This research was approached from a posthuman perspective which, as Braidotti (2023) described, attempted to challenge colonialism, disrupt marginalisation and create inclusion without privileging any group of people and without privileging humans over other beings or the environment.

To best interpret the essence of living experiences (living signifies that the experience is not time bound—it continues to have impact throughout someone's life) I decided to adopt qualitative research which Denzin and Lincoln had promoted to "make connections between lived experience, social injustices, larger social and cultural structures, and the here and now" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 309). I wished to produce new insight to disrupt the silence and silencing still associated with child sexual abuse (Gekoski et al., 2016; Taggart & Wright, 2026), to support prevention of abuse and to facilitate approaches that help child victims to cope with and overcome what has happened to them as soon as is possible.

Research Background

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2020) and World Health Organisation (WHO) (2017) have both categorised child sexual abuse as a global concern. Prevalence is difficult to establish as it is accepted that many victims only talk about their experiences much later, while some never tell anyone what happened (Jay et al., 2022; Manay & Collin-Vézina, 2021). Globally, it is estimated that 8% of boys and 20% of girls are sexually abused (WHO, 2017). The government in England and Wales have carried out a range of inquiries into differing aspects of child sexual abuse, for example, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) which targeted institutional responses to child sexual abuse. IICSA drew information from Karsna and Kelly's (2021) work which estimated 5% of boys and 15% of girls in England and Wales experience sexual abuse before the age of 16. IICSA called for evidence from survivors, 5,862 of whom consented for their testimony to contribute to the findings. The Children's Commissioner in England had calculated that two thirds of child sexual abuse happened in and around the family home with three quarters of victims being female (Longfield, 2015). Although IICSA was concerned with institutional response to child sexual abuse, half the volunteer participants were survivors of intrafamilial child sexual abuse (Jay et al., 2022) and, underlining the need for research on younger children's experiences, over three quarters of the IICSA survivor participants had been 11 years old or younger when they were first sexually abused.

Ethical Approach

The University of Birmingham funded this doctoral research and gave ethical approval for the study. The ethical approach taken was embedded throughout all stages of the research, being mindful of unknown survivors in any situation and avoiding harm through trauma responsive practice as advised in the "Survivors" Voices: Survivors Involvement in Research Ladder' (Chevous et al., 2019). Telling a survivor they are safe may make them feel more at risk and watchful (Schachter et al., 2009) so I attempted to make the research feel as unlike being abused as possible. This is in line with the evidence based Handbook on Sensitive Practice for Health Care Practitioners produced by Sneddon, et al. (2016) and other resources produced globally (eg. Quadara and Hunter, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014). I promoted autonomy through the use of transparent information, encouraging personal agency through ongoing consent, openness to questions and allowing time to decide on involvement. Prior to interviews, a relational dialogue built trust and without formally asking, established whether a support network was in place as well as providing signposting to available support. I avoided denying choice and the opportunity to be involved in research as this may also have caused harm. Being open about my experience as a survivor and requesting confidentiality helped develop the reciprocal approach I wished to take which was also enhanced by asking if the survivors wished to choose their own pseudonyms. The aim of the research, to improve understanding for school staff so they are better prepared to support and/or identify victims, resonated with volunteer survivors and in addition to this, being accountable through sharing activities undertaken to disseminate the findings helped to secure ongoing trusting research relationships.

Methods

In many ways my aspirations for the research aligned with phenomenology. I wished to gain understanding of how survivors interpreted the "meaning, structure, and essence" of their living experiences and to explore their understanding of the phenomenon of intrafamilial child sexual abuse: "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it,

and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2015, p. 115). However, I did not want to interpret the experience to a point where the survivors were excluded from the findings and the essence of the phenomenon related to the experience alone. I also considered my experience an integral part of the research and felt attempting to hide it from participants would be disrespectful. I wanted to be authentic and honest with participants in line with trauma informed practice (Chevovs et al., 2019; Quadara & Hunter, 2016; Schachter et al., 2009) and to include my own perspective as a valuable contribution to the research.

Choosing Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry was conceptualised by Moustakas (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). It is a qualitative methodology that must be driven and reflexively informed throughout by a researcher’s living experience of the phenomenon. It balances looking inwards with looking outwards and explores the essential nature of living experience with ten to fifteen co-researchers or research partners. Unlike in phenomenology, which reduces the essence of experience to a phenomenon and brackets out the individuals who experienced it: the individuals remain an important part of heuristic inquiry findings which generate “shared understanding of the core phenomenon, how it is sensed and experienced, and its significance to oneself, to others, and to the world” (Sultan, 2019, p. 9). I chose to use heuristic inquiry to collect data because it seemed a natural fit for the relational approach to researching with survivors that I wanted to use.

Moustakas (1990) outlined six phases for heuristic inquiry which are: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. These are flexible and iterative and can progress in any direction, although the initial engagement, with a socially and globally significant research topic, must originate from personal experience that the researcher feels compelled to investigate. A learning mindset is then required to immersively explore it. Stepping back from immersion for a while, described as incubation, enables subconscious growth and the development of tacit knowledge. While self-reflection and empathic dialogue with research partners enable new insight to emerge in moments of illumination (also known as epiphany). Meanings are explicated into reflexively explored and refined themes and are represented through individual then composite depictions which retain the essence of individuals’ experiences. Finally, creative synthesis is required to portray overall interpretations (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019).

I initially attempted to recruit research partners through a charity gatekeeper and one member of staff from the charity volunteered for the research. While discussing my developing research project in various settings and through engagement with wellbeing and survivor networks, an opportune, information rich sample was created (Patton, 2015). With updated ethical approval, I was able to approach these additional contacts and overall twelve research partners contributed to the research. I invited survivors to engage with in-depth semi-structured interview conversations, through written feedback and with follow up meetings. These conversations were intentionally relational and reciprocal and included self-disclosure with the aim of achieving: congruence, through open, honest, authentic interaction; unconditional positive regard, by valuing and accepting individuals as they are; and empathy by seeking meaning from each other’s perspectives (Rogers, 1980).

Results

Development of Findings

This paper shows how initial findings, reported at the IAFOR, Paris Conference of Education, 2026 (Goodyear, 2026), were developed beyond key points and themes into composite exemplar portraits of the research partners' experiences. These findings tackle the question: how did the female survivors of intrafamilial child sexual abuse interpret their living experience of primary school attendance?

Essential Meanings

The research partners reported how they had actively hidden at primary school. They avoided drawing attention to themselves and repeatedly referred to themselves as a "good girl" or "very good girl". Although with suitable conditions, school could provide a safe space or sanctuary, fear dominated the research partners' lives. Their experiences were internalised and manifested as shame leaving them feeling awkward, different, dirty, weird and disgusting. The following three themes were generated from research partners' testimonies:

How the survivors consciously or subconsciously attempted to assert some *autonomy* in their lives.

How much they were able to identify and present as their *authentic selves*.

How much they felt they *mattered* to the people around them. (Goodyear, 2026)

The research partners' interpretation of their living experience of being at primary school related to experiences of dissociation, hypervigilance and of appeasing people around them. Dissociation is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) as a typical result of traumatic experiences, where typical cognitive consciousness can become disrupted or suspended so the individual may lose all awareness of what is going on or feel detached from their body.

Harriet described her experience of being "really dissociated" as: "You know that jelly, you see around tadpoles? ... I'm in the middle. And then there's this wall of whatever ~ and then everything else ~ is happening on the other side of the jelly."

Hazel reflected on what being hypervigilant meant for her:

I was probably hyper vigilant. You know? Where is the next thing going to happen? Because, my amygdala, was still working on the danger. Where's the danger? My, my nervous system was still tuned into, I could get attacked at any moment, you know?

Becky was frustrated with how compliant she had been and remembered "those really horrible, horrible [sentence broken off] and trying to say sorry even though I hadn't done anything!" She also reflected: "I tried to be good. I tried to be good. I tried to do what I was told and go under the radar. And just kind of not be noticeable, really."

Exemplar Portraits

To finish this report, details of essential meanings from across the research partners have been combined to form three exemplar portraits. These are the final outcome of the heuristic inquiry analysis and present examples constructed as composite characters from the essences of what the research partners said. In reality, these experiences were common across the research partners and any one of them could have presented in these ways at different times.

The Dissociated Child

The first exemplar is the dissociated child whose coping response to the fear that she is consumed with is dissociation. What this means to her is that she feels numb or not really present, as if she is the dot in the middle of a ball of frogspawn jelly. Most of the time, everything around her happens outside the jelly. She is often confused about what is going on and what she needs to do because she misses conversations, instructions and messages to the extent that she is unaware even of whole school events like sports day. Running is one thing that breaks through the numbness giving her the freedom she craves with a great “whoosh” having been forced to sit still for so long in classrooms. But sports day only deepens her sadness: she does not have the right kit with her, and not knowing why her class are going to the school field, she is still clutching her pencil and rubber. She cannot fly across the grass as she would, showing her swiftness and agility and so even in this arena where she could naturally excel she is denied success.

She finds the classroom interminable. She is the last to “get anything” but the fear of making mistakes and of being noticed means she is desperate to get things right. She has a drive for perfection and cannot wait to achieve her pen license although this is unhelpful when she gets stuck going round in circles, erasing mistakes until her exercise book is full of holes. She is too terrified to be naughty and tries to be “good” while at the same time trying to learn how to be good as she is not really sure what that looks like. She goes to the back of any queue and quietly waits to be noticed. She is not even bothered by bullies because she’s so shut down but this dissociated child is lonely as well as frightened. She really wants to be connected with others but is unsure how to achieve this. Sometimes she is able to befriend other more vulnerable children but often she is alone. She feels invisible and has a terrible sense that she does not actually exist. She really wants to “feel loved and cared for” and when school staff are kind to her and try to understand the difficulties she is having, this is a “lifesaving quality”.

The Hypervigilant Child

The second exemplar is a girl whose fear is expressed through hypervigilance. She is not able to trust teachers to keep her safe. Linked to her anxiety and hypervigilance, she avoids skirts and dresses and refuses to brush her hair which is “about not wanting to be pretty”. She is occupied by watching for the next danger so, similarly to a dissociated child, she misses instructions and explanations. Because she also worries about drawing attention to herself and is frightened of getting anything wrong, she tries to work out on her own what is required. And because she can read well, she can usually make sense of class work leaving her feeling that her teachers are “a little bit rubbish” when they cannot or do not explain things. Her family are well known at the school but this can also be a barrier to learning, as it is demotivating when she is compared with other family members.

A time when many at the school had a tummy bug has led to her developing extreme anxiety about eating. She avoids foods prepared by other people which makes it difficult for her to engage socially

with children outside of school. This also prevents her from going on school visits because she's afraid she will be travel sick.

This hypervigilant child appears self-sufficient but is hiding her feelings and is also very lonely. She does not feel noticed and is certain no one at school would remember her. Watching for danger all the time means that she no longer feels carefree and is rarely seen smiling or laughing. At breaktimes she keeps herself out of the way to avoid attention from bullies and occupies herself by sitting quietly somewhere reading, drawing or making things from leaves and flowers she has collected. She feels she needs to control every aspect of her life to keep herself safe and this is "exhausting". She has been given medication for anxiety but this adds additional risk for her as she is in danger of losing all hope and attempting to harm herself.

The Appeasing Child

The final exemplar is a girl who feels powerless to deal with complex difficulties she experiences at home but who gains respite from being at school. She tries very hard and is able to achieve at school which gives her a sense of validation. She has a need to be noticed for doing things well and this is expressed by trying to please her teachers, being helpful and friendly. However, she finds it "excruciatingly horrible" if she is seen making a mistake which has led to lack of confidence in maths where she struggles to remember number facts and processes.

This child's anxiety causes regular, excruciating headaches, she is an overachiever because she is working so hard to compensate for her contrasting inner feelings. She feels secretive because she is hiding what has happened at home as well as her sense of shame and disgust. She feels bad and has taken the blame onto herself for what is happening to her. She is desperately afraid of "being found out" and must "just keep coping" somehow.

The appeasing child sometimes has good friends but her relationships are not secure. Sometimes other children physically hurt or ostracise her and she apologises even when she has done nothing wrong in an attempt to appease these bullies. Occasionally, she has become overwhelmed and lashed out and she has also been known to stand up for other vulnerable children and might fight to protect them. She really wants to feel normal and be accepted although inside she feels different, weird and dirty. However, she can escape negative feelings through physical activities like sports or swimming and through arts or creative writing where she can be in the moment and forget everything else.

Conclusion

The choice of heuristic inquiry in this research facilitated rapport between researcher and research partners and helped to avoid power imbalances in the research relationships. I believe the methodology facilitated transformation for me and the research partners. This was enabled through strong connections and trust created through mutual experience; by recognising intersectionality between complex layers of experience, being open and transparent and by accepting the truth of what was shared through mutual belief which avoided mistrust and was affirming and validating. I believe the approach created safe space to be heard and that taking time as the research partners tested how their comments would be received enabled them to share richer details from their lives.

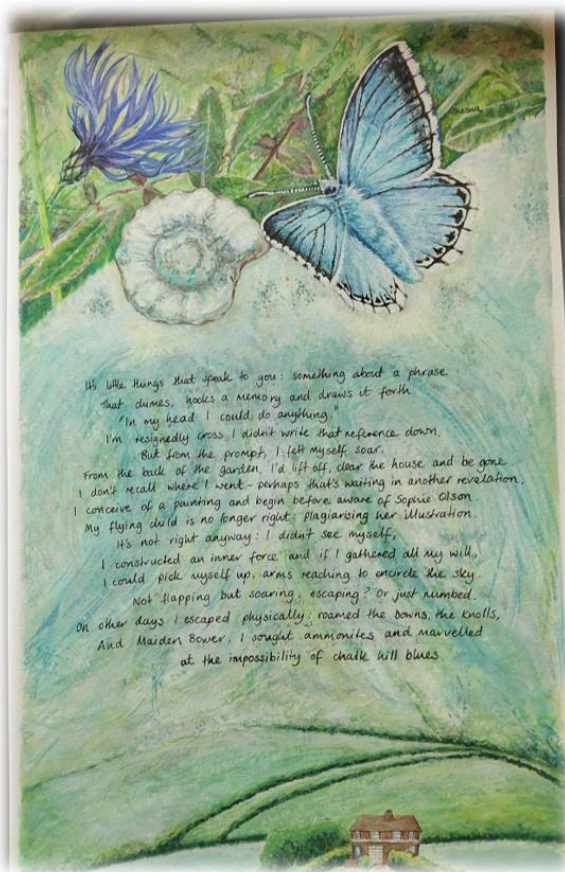
These results were not designed to be generalisable but the transparency and accuracy with which they have been reported should enhance their credibility and trustworthiness. The twelve research partners gave strikingly similar accounts of their experiences of school, demonstrating a shared

impact from intrafamilial child sexual abuse which led to them being exceptionally well-behaved and quiet. They had autonomy but they used it to actively hide what had happened to them. When synthesized into exemplar portraits, the experiences correspond with current understanding of responses to trauma: they presented as children who were dissociated, hypervigilant and appeasing. The conditions constructed within trauma-informed schools which nurture all individuals could act to break down shame and rebuild trust for victims even if they remain hidden. School cultures which value individuals and encourage children to thrive as their authentic selves may reduce the impacts of intrafamilial child sexual abuse and perhaps even create the conditions where victims are enabled to tell someone about it.

These results have been presented as exemplar portraits in the hope that the children portrayed will promote ongoing conversation and thus enhance the research's impact. I would like to finish with an example of illustrated reflective writing consistent with the heuristic inquiry phase of creative synthesis and a final quote to indicate how involving survivors in research can lead to positive growth. Sarah told me that since she began talking about her experience, she is living life in technicolour for the first time, she said: "I've been *existing* for 54 years of my life and now I'm beginning to *live*. In *technicolour*, rather than black and white" (Italics represent Sarah's emphasis).

Figure 1

Epiphany 3: Flying Child, 2025



Note: Number 3 in a series of illustrated pieces of reflective writing representing the experience of dissociation and referencing Katz, et al. (2020) and Olson and Walsh (2024).

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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