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at Middlesex University, focussing on contemporary social
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ON FAMILY

The School of Life

THE CHILD

EDEN



Sometimes I feel like I am trying my best, but it is just not good enough. I am constantly being told that I am not trying hard enough, when in reality no one knows the goals I have in my mind. Sometimes I just want to stop caring about what everyone else thinks. But I constantly worry about being judged.

I love my family a lot, and I know they love me, but it is hard sometimes. I feel like no one listens to me and I just want to say how I really feel. I love my brother and I wish he knew that. I do not mean to get mad or to be rude, and I wish I was a better sister. I also wish I could be a better daughter and a better friend.

I get shouted at to get ready for school and then by teachers at school and sometimes friends. Teachers say things like that I am underachieving. Then sometimes my coach tells me I need to try harder. But some days my legs really hurt. Sometimes it all feels too much. People never really know what you are going through. Everyone has their struggles and people just need to be a lot more open and caring.

I promise you I do try.



SHELL

My mum and dad were first cousins. They got married. Then when they came to this country, he became very abusive towards her. From a young age, 2 or 3, my mum would say that when my dad went to hit her, I'd try to get in the way, to protect her. I'm very protective of people even now.

I think I was about 15 when my mum finally got a divorce. It was a stigma within our culture to get a divorce, no matter how abusive your husband was. Very quickly her family pushed her to marry somebody else. My stepdad was not much better.

Mum had her first stroke when she was 34, which is very young. My stepdad would try to emotionally manipulate her, and I'd get defensive, so we'd have physical altercations as well. Eventually my stepdad kicked me out. I used to go back there, clean, give her a bath, and then leave again. My caring duties started from a young age. When I turned 16, my stepdad left, and I was her sole carer.

I was a troubled teenager. No one stopped to think, why am I troubled? I don't think any adult in my life ever did.

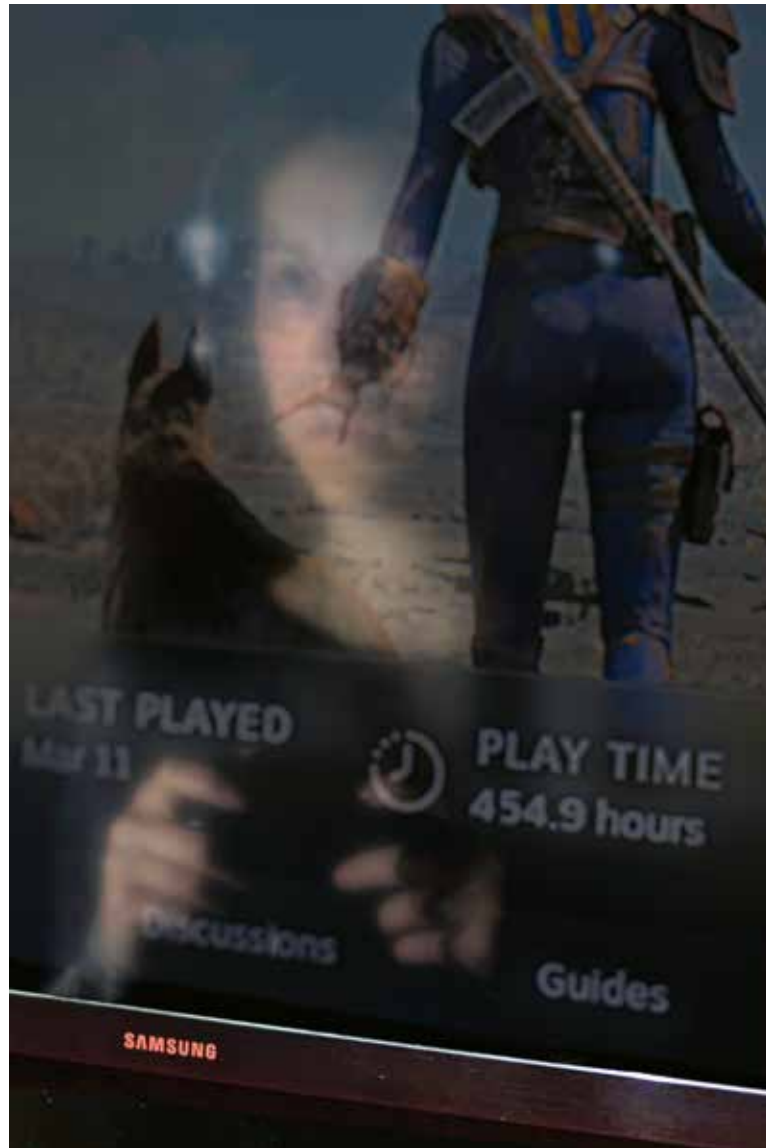


MARIA

When I first found out about Mum's diagnosis, I couldn't really comprehend what was happening. It wasn't until a week after her mastectomy that I actually found out the details of her cancer. It was such a shock – my mum, who's never ill or vulnerable or weak, was suddenly so ill. I was (and maybe still am) in denial about the whole thing. Of course, she's going to be okay, she's MUM and she's ALWAYS OKAY.

Living away from home means that I don't see her in that illness often; I'm not caring for her or taking her to the hospital. Seeing her struggle to drink water, sleep through the night, or even stand up from the side effects sent home how frail she was becoming and that she was really very ill. That's when I started to understand that my parents are ageing and there's no going back from there. It is heartbreaking.

I often feel so guilty for not spending more time at home with Mum, helping to care for her as she recovers, but work means I can't be away too long. I sometimes feel that I get in the way when I'm home – my family has a smooth system without me. It's also selfish, but coming back more than one weekend every few weeks would be too difficult. Leaving allows me to compartmentalise and to live in the current moment.



AMY

We feel like it's getting quite out of hand now. We used to be able to restrict what time and how much time he has on the screens. We'd say maybe a maximum of an hour a day. Then it spiralled and he would be playing it for three, four, five hours a day. We've realised that we can't go back from that now; he's just got used to that amount of access to screens. Although he does do other activities and we have days out together, and he can be distracted from it if we're out of the house, as soon as we get back, it's 'Can I go on the screen?'

I worry about the isolation. Everyone's doing their own thing in their own room and not interacting with me or their dad, not really talking to each other. If I want to get a decent conversation out of them at dinner time, I basically have to ask about their games. There's some other topics that we can talk about, but I'm being dragged into it because it's the only thing that they have any real passion about.



KATHY

I've always felt on my own, I had to be independent, responsible for myself. I absolutely hated boarding school, it's criminal. You might as well have no education, you know? Why would you do that to a child? What is the point of getting a fine set of GCSEs if you're going to spend the rest of your life so insecure and unconfident that you can't do anything with them anyway?

I used to seek out groups of people all the time. Growing up I felt like I was in a family unit for such a short time. I don't feel I was nurtured in any way. So, I've definitely gone overboard with my own family on that.

There's no greater joy than being a parent; it's a gift. I find it strange that you wouldn't want to be the closest person to your children. I love to spend time with them. I find it physically traumatic not to see them. Even now, knowing they're in the house makes me feel grounded. There's not much I don't tell my children.

It's been hard having that empty nest syndrome, feeling them leading their own lives. But they are great individuals who I am really proud of. Hopefully I've provided something better than my own childhood.

CONRAD



On school mornings, my parents can be a bit bossy and grumpy. But they normally get me to school on time. Maybe adults are grumpy because they are tired and have a lot going on. Dad goes to meetings all the time. I sometimes miss Dad when he is not home. Daddy is a woodworker; he builds stuff for people, like kitchens and cabinets, all of that stuff. I like seeing Dad when he is nice. I help him to train because he has a belly. We go to the basketball courts and have loads of fun. Sometimes we play on the Xbox, sometimes we go to town together, sometimes we go to the cinema.

I feel sad when I hear my mummy and daddy arguing. It's a bit tiring. I don't worry if they will stay together because I know that they love each other. They always say that they love each other, and they really do. No matter what arguments they have, they will never break up.

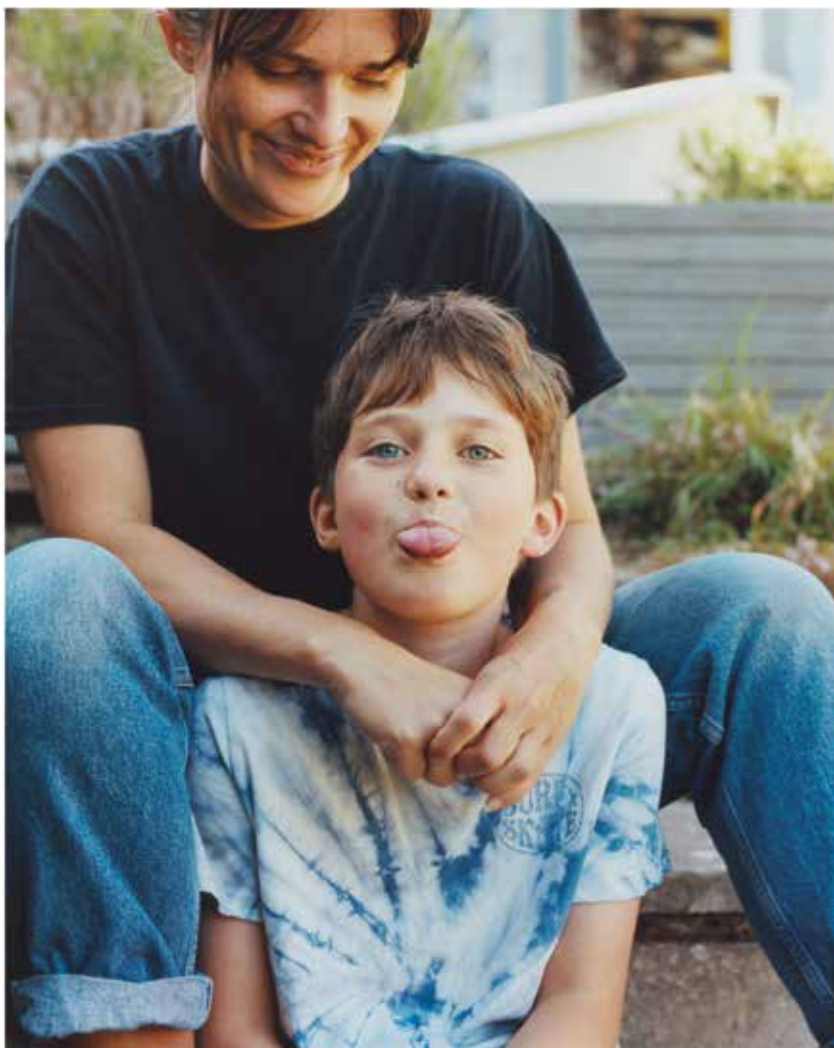
POLLY



Having been a member of AA for many years, I have come to understand that the core root of my addiction stems from early childhood experiences. For me, that means a childhood of being insecure, unstable and full of uncertainty. I remember living in a fantasy world: ‘if only I had different parents my life would be...’, etc. When I first got drunk at 13, I felt happy, and the fear melted away. I’d found the medicine to blot out my incessant insecurities. From that point on I chased that experience.

Over the years my obsession with drink overcame me. Through my 20s it was fun but with consequences – shame, embarrassment, injuries. Then, in my 30s, I had my kids thinking that would sort me out, but it only consolidated a deeper dependency. I continued to drink daily. The denial became stronger the more I justified my need to drink over my responsibilities. The consequences were a level of self-loathing that became a vicious cycle – ‘I’m a bad mother’, ‘I’m weak-willed’...

In my early 40s, I sought out AA meetings in my area. Over the course of many meetings, hearing other people’s experiences and identifying with them, the desire to drink left me. The first year was choppy, but each day I haven’t drunk, waking up with no shame and becoming present to my life, has given me hope and strength.



ALEX
(with C)

C's dad and I split up when he was 4. From early on, C was always more like a tomboy. And then at 4-ish, he started to say, 'I am a boy'. When he started school, that's when it went up a notch. All of his school friends were quick to say: 'you are a boy'. It took us a little while as a family; we did they/them pronouns for a while, it was like a bridge, I suppose, while he explored his gender. Then we switched into he/him pronouns and socially transitioned when he was 7.

C is 9 now; it's not a million miles away from puberty. I try to strike a balance between informing him about what's to come and not triggering body dysmorphia. We changed schools recently and I was talking to C about whether he wanted to go to this school without people knowing or with them knowing. He decided he didn't want secrecy, which I think is quite a toxic feeling for a kid to have. The school was brilliant. They did this thing where they simply said: 'C's starting, he was born a girl, now he identifies as a boy. Does anyone have any questions?' They got them to write down questions and they were all things like, 'What colour hair does he have?', 'What's his favourite food?' None of them were the kinds of questions that an adult would ever ask.

MICHAEL



I don't know much about my early life. My birth parents were only teenagers and they stayed together for about six months after I was born. My mother then met someone else. I have one half-brother and two half-sisters.

I was about 3 when I was taken away from my mother and put into foster care. There were some foster carers that were okay, and some that were not very good. One of the places was with a lovely lady, but I didn't stay there very long. I had a lot of anger issues at school; I remember hitting one of the other kids with a plastic swing ball bat just because he said he liked Digimon more than Pokémon. I was adopted when I was 8.

I don't know what my dreams are for the future; I'd like to start my own business but sometimes I just want to do nothing. If I am feeling depressed, I will find something to watch on YouTube so that I can cut off completely from any emotions when I feel they're getting too strong. It's difficult for me to have positive emotions. I have no clue how to control happiness as I didn't experience any when I was younger. I am, however, very good in a crisis.



ISMAIL

(with Yasin and Roqaiya)

I was born in Bangladesh, with five brothers and sisters. I'm the youngest in my family. All parents wanted their child to be an engineer or doctor or businessman. But I like art. And my parents never forbade me to do that. My sister used to take me everywhere in Bangladesh to take part in art competitions. I was determined. I went to a prestigious art school in Bangladesh and then I came to London in 2004 to finish studying. I love art because this is something that is coming from my feelings, from my inside. When I finished, I went to Edinburgh for a summer holiday and there I met a Polish woman and she fell in love with me.

We really love the environment being here in the UK. But what I had in Bangladesh, all the heritage, family affections, family love, my children are missing that. They don't have uncles, aunts, cousins, no one in the UK except me and my wife. My daughter speaks Polish but doesn't speak Bengali at all; my son is keen to learn. My mum especially really wants to talk to them. My children only met their Bangladesh family twice, but they don't know much about them because of the communication gap. I have to translate everything, but it's not the same. There's this little corner in my soft heart that always belongs to Bangladesh, even though I'm happy here.



VIK

I have four children, one of whom has autism and pathological demand avoidance, which means he cannot follow a demand, and everything can be perceived as a demand. Even as a baby he was different. As a toddler he started banging his head in frustration, and it became clear that he had no fear of danger and thought only of how he could get what he wanted.

Gradually, he started to hurt himself, destroy things and eventually hurt others. He started taking things off other people too. My husband and I went to every parenting class available over the years. I always believed all our children should be treated equally – but without thinking about it, our lives began to centre around my son.

Anything could set him off. Asking him to put on his shoes could result in a huge meltdown, with violence and swear words. It might take us up to an hour just to leave the house or we wouldn't make it out at all. As he got bigger it became more dangerous, resulting in me getting hurt and ending up in hospital. Once, I hadn't predicted his response accurately and wound up with a dislocated arm.

Our whole lives focus on safety and emergency contingencies for when de-escalation techniques do not work. All our other children know our safety plan, leaving the room and taking anything breakable or harmful, from cups to heavy objects. They know where the panic phone is for the police and how to use it. I am often having to fix up the house after his episodes.

LAURA

I was the oldest of three, a good academic child. From an early age there were a lot of expectations on me at home. I did well at school, went to university, then straight into a career in teaching. I felt like I was ticking all the boxes: husband, house, career... the next thing on the list was children. That's when things became more complicated.

It was difficult for me to get pregnant. I had polycystic ovary syndrome and had to take some very strong fertility drugs. It was all very traumatic and took a long time. When the kids eventually came, I felt like I had to get everything right and the pressures piled up. Eventually I had a massive breakdown. It was an absolute car crash. Things went wrong with my marriage, we started divorce proceedings, and I had trouble at work too.

I've learned over the last few years to let my expectations go and it's made life so much easier. In a way, the whole breakdown was a good thing because, almost for the first time, my mum and dad started looking after me. It wasn't their fault that they hadn't before – I'd never let them. I'd always been so independent and stubborn, and just hadn't allowed them to help me with anything. And yet, I actually really needed the help. It's just lovely now.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-EXPLORATION

What don't members of your family understand?

Where do you still need to heal?

How do you respond to the risks involved in loving someone who might wander off, not be interested – or one day die?

(If applicable) What disappoints you most about your children?

In what ways – if any – did your parents not love you enough?

What did you worry about in relation to family when you were a child? What particular anxieties did you have then?

What unfortunate aspect of your life now can be attributed to something from your past?

What makes you most joyful about family?

How has a parent failed you?

How is your psychology a response to that of your parents?

What did you learn about what it is to 'succeed' from your family of origin? How do you feel about these ideals?

How did you 'succeed' in the way your caregivers wanted you to? And how did you depart from their ideas of success?

What coping strategies – positive and negative – have you adopted in relation to the pressures of family?

When I want to cry about family it's because...