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Understanding Children's Personal Lives and Relationships

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1
Introduction

Looking up from my desk, I glimpse a picture of a black and grey battle ship set against a vibrant blue sky with a glowing sun in the corner. It's been drawn and given to me by Laura, one of my research participants at Queen's Park Primary, whom I came to know well and like very much. The picture now takes pride of place on my office pin board. As on many occasions before, I'm transported back eight years, this time to a day when I visited Laura's family home after we'd been making 'family books' with her peers, Tom and Stephanie:

> Laura (age nine) rides her bike alongside me, telling me it's 'OK' for her to ride on the road, as she always does. We reach her house, which has an expansive driveway and a large inflatable Christmas archway by the door. Laura tells me to come in for a cup of tea. She opens the door. Joseph (age 11), who also knows me from school, is standing there, saying, 'What are you doing here?' in a gruff voice. He then laughs, and ushers me in with one hand. Stood beside him is Laura's younger sister Jane (age three), a round toddler wearing Winnie the Pooh pyjamas. Jane uses the same hand motion to beckon me in as Joseph did. Laura's nan appears at a door to my right. I murmur something about not wanting to impose and Nan tells me to come in for tea, but warns me, 'It's a mad house in here.' I go in. Laura asks what I would like to drink. I ask for a cup of tea and Jane stands there staring at me. She tells me to take off my coat. I do, and then she says, 'Take your shoes off!' Laura re-emerges from the kitchen where she's making tea: 'Sorry, yeah, we have to take our shoes off.' Jane tells me to put my bag down, so I leave it by the pile of shoes at the bottom of the stairs. I stand at the boundary of the hallway and the kitchen, chatting to Laura. The kitchen is modern

but small for the seven of them who share their home. Kelly, Laura's older sister, is also in the kitchen, cutting a Scooby-Doo cake. She asks if I'd like some. I decline. She says: 'I'm just trying to cut it into small pieces 'cause there's so many of us.'

Laura's nan invites me to come and sit down in the living room. They have their Christmas decorations up early and Nan says, 'Turn the tree on Joseph', and tells me, 'It's a fibre optic one.' 'This is all the decorations we're having,' said Joseph disappointedly. Jane, whom I had not previously met, perches her bum on the edge of my knee, wriggling her cheeks upwards, seemingly wanting to be lifted properly onto my lap. Chloe (age five) is running around the rectangular living room, excitedly whipping her pyjama bottoms up and down and exposing herself. Nan scolds her. Joseph grabs Chloe; he lies on the floor, lifts her into the air above him and she giggles. Jane steadies herself on my knee (she's really heavy) and demands, 'Take those off', referring to my glasses. I tell her, 'I can't see without them and if I take them off I won't be able to see you.' She looks bemused. Laura brings in my tea and I thank her, warning Jane that she may need to move off my lap whilst I drink hot tea, as I don't want to spill it on her. I drink my tea quickly, trying to avoid Chloe pushing my arm. Laura warns Chloe, 'Don't, Chloe, or you'll end up like I did with burns from tea!'

'Do you wanna see my website?' Kelly (age 12) asks me. 'Me and my friends put pictures of ourselves on there and stuff, but we don't put any of our personal details or anything.' She shows me the computer and her and her friends' web pages. On the screen is a picture of Kelly with her profile:

Name: Kelly (wouldn't you like to know)
Age: Twelve
Lives: Not telling ya.

Alongside this information are pictures of Kelly and her friends and of celebrities they admire. Whilst I'm kneeling by Kelly's side to see the screen, Jane reacquires her seat on my lap. I give my cup to Laura and thank her for the tea. Jane runs into the kitchen after Laura, followed by Nan who warns, 'There's hot things in there.' Laura runs back into the living room to ask me if she can show Nan her story about getting burnt which she included in her family book. [This is a story that involves Laura's Nan caring for Laura aged five following a burn from a hot drink.] I can hear Laura discussing the story with her nan in the kitchen. Nan corrects Laura's written account, which perhaps hasn't been well remembered by Laura.

> When Laura returns, I ask her about whether she'd remembered the story correctly. She says, 'I dunno, I thought it was right.' I offer her the chance to change it if she would like to, but she declines, accepting her version of the memory.
>
> (Extract from field notes on a research visit to Laura's home)

Children's contributions to family life, their embodied sibling interactions, their management of embodied and personal knowledge and the transmission and co-production of family memories are all key themes that appear in this extract and resonate with many of those that run throughout this book. Extracts such as the one above call for an approach that is able to bring together disparate themes from the social studies of childhood, family and personal relationships. In recent years, a new sociology of personal life has emerged which, with its focus on connectedness and embeddedness, biography, emotions, memory and bodies (see Smart, 2007), offers a framework for researching children's relationships that serves this agenda. This book appropriates and aims to develop the sociology of personal life approach to examine and illuminate children's personal relationships.

Using this approach and looking across data generated for two qualitative school-based projects which examine the perspectives and experiences of children aged 8–10 years old, the book sets out to identify the processes and practices through which children come to know others in their personal circles and through which they develop and maintain intimate connections across distance, in transitional or changed circumstances. In doing so, I uncover how children constitute significant personal relationships – both those that are emotionally close and more distant – and I consider what the role of shared biographical experiences is in making those relationships. I endeavour to reconstruct children's biographies, piecing together their ongoing narratives to create biographical accounts which will come to life through this book. These accounts reflect the society and culture in which these particular children are growing up and living out their relational lives. Lastly, I reflect upon the implications of these situated experiences and offer avenues for re-considering academic, practice and policy approaches to children's family and kin relationships and friendships, schooling and experiences at school.

Children's personal lives

Examining personal life is a relatively new approach to studying relationships; it is more all-encompassing than family and kinship studies.

It is offered as a means to address the greater fluidity in relationships, and encompass the range of relationships that may be recognised or claimed as family or like-family, both of which have led to the stretching and dilution of the concept of family (Jamieson et al., 2006; Smart, 2007). Personal life may include the study of the 'whole constellation of personal relationships' (Jamieson et al., 2006, 1.1) including 'all sorts of families, all sorts of relationships and intimacies, diverse sexualities, friendships and acquaintanceships' (Smart, 2007, p. 188). The benefit of studying personal life for the childhood researcher is its capacity to cut across children's friendships, peer relationships and romantic relationships, their family and kin relationships, and those acquaintanceships that children share with neighbours, friends of the family, teachers or others they come into contact with in their daily lives. The approach taken here is not a conceptual shift away from considering family, but one that encompasses both children's family relationships and other significant relationships children have – it is an approach that offers more tools for examining complex relationships, and which enables researchers to zoom in on family relationships and draw from the personal life 'toolbox' (Smart, 2007, p.30) to examine the way in which these relationships may function in their own right or in similar ways to other relationships people share. In previous work, I have used family 'practices' (Morgan, 1996) as the analytical focus in published research (Davies, 2011, 2012, 2013) examining how children make sense of and participate in everyday family practices and imaginings of family and kinship. I now want to consider children's experiences in a wider relational context, with a more extensive set of tools. It is perhaps only in this wider frame that the true significance of family relationships can become evident.

Examining children's personal lives involves engaging with conceptual approaches in the fields of childhood, family and personal relationships research, and identifying points of intersection between these fields, and conceptual tools from studies of personal life that will enrich understandings of children's relationships. Childhood studies traditionally focused on illuminating children's *agency*, hearing children's '*voices*' and emphasising the diversity of childhoods made possible by different social and cultural settings, and mediated by institutional arrangements. More recently, scholars have sought to develop understandings of childhood by overcoming a key weakness they identified, a socially (or biologically) reductionist perspective; they have examined the intersection between the social, cultural, biological, material and technological (Prout, 2005) in attempting to overcome the 'bio-social dualism'

(Lee and Motzkau, 2011, p. 7). A 'new wave' of childhood studies scholars (Ryan, 2012) has harnessed concepts such as 'hybridity' to capture the essence of contemporary childhoods (Kraftl, 2013) and to examine how the intersection of the social, cultural, biological, material and technological produce hybrid experiences that extend or limit children's capacity in the world.

Childhood studies has a wide remit, focusing on all aspect of children's lives, including their friendships and peer relationships as well as family relationships. Although there are exceptions, much of the research conducted into children's family relationships is undertaken by researchers who also research adults' family relationships. In childhood studies, children's friendships and family relationships are often examined separately from one another, but personal life opens up an analytical frame on children's relationships which takes accounts of all relationships that are significant or that matter in some way; this could encompass all relationships that are significant, although not necessarily close. A sociology of personal life recognises the potential significance of relationships outside of the family and kin group, and does not foreground family as the most important of all personal relationships nor deny the importance of family relationships (Jamieson et al., 2006; Smart, 2007).

Personal life also encourages a vertical and horizontal analysis which draws into focus relationships that exist across the generations in children's (and their families') pasts as well as relationships that are significant to children but which are unconnected to their family relationships (for example, relationships with teachers). Therefore, personal life elaborates how people feel (or simply are) connected to or disconnected from others (Mason, 2008). This allows the examination of the interplay between these various relationships in terms of recognising the qualities and practices that children identify as characterising their personal relationships or distinguishing one set of relationships from another.

Personal life, Smart claims, overcomes the ideological trappings of 'the family', which she suggests conjures up images of 'idealized white, nuclear heterosexual families of Western cultures' and implies 'degrees of biological relatedness combined with degrees of co-residence' (Smart, 2007, p.6). Family may well be a rather culturally specific formulation of how people are connected to one another, regardless of whether we take a local or global perspective. But others have argued that the language of personal life is not universally appropriate, because conceptions of the individual self do not exist globally. In some societies, people are

conceived of as members of communities, where the personal is insepa-
rable from the collectivity, and the 'question of whether the individual
is subsumed within the collectivity does not make sense' (Ribbens
McCarthy, 2012, p.78). My understanding of Smart's conceptualisation
of personal life is that it is not a question of whether or not the self is
part of a collectivity; the self is presumed to be embedded in the social,
the collective (to borrow Ribbens McCarthy's terms), and it is the ways
in which this individual is connected to others that are interrogated in
analyses that take personal life as a framework. Seeing the self as embed-
ded in personal relationships – which are 'key sites for the transmission
of social values, social integration or exclusion and … the reproduction
of equality and inequality' (Jamieson and Milne, 2012, p. 265) – means
that we can then consider the issue of social and financial 'resources'
and 'inequalities' that are important within many analyses of relational-
ity and which Ribbens McCarthy has feared would be lost in a focus on
personal life (2012, pp. 79–81). Far from personal life being a limiting
framework for examining and taking account of children's experiences,
it is argued that a focus on children and young people's personal rela-
tionships can tell us much about global social change. Jamieson and
Milne suggest that mapping the relational processes in any 'economic,
political and cultural system' is one means of 'evidencing and refining
claims about global changes' (2012, pp. 267, 273).

This notion of the individual person embedded in relationships
tends to characterise 'Euro-North American social science', including
symbolic interactionist and phenomenological approaches (Jamieson,
2011, 1.4), and resonates with approaches within the social studies of
childhood that emphasise children's interdependence (James and Prout,
1996; Mayall, 2000; Christensen, 2004a). Scholars working within this
tradition have focused upon children's scope for self-determination in
a social world which privileges adult power over children in law, policy,
and professional and family practice. For example, younger children
rely upon adults to facilitate their personal relationships and contact
with close others living outside the household (Jamieson et al., 2006;
Davies, 2013). A focus on embeddedness in personal life – the way in
which individuals are located in sets of interdependent relationships –
suggests that we do not operate as individuals, separate from others.
Examining the roots of this embeddedness in children's (or adults') rela-
tionships reveals their opportunities for and limitations to determining
their own personal lives. In examining these roots, we can see that self-
determination is mediated by children's relational pasts as well as their
presents, and by the imagined relationships that are culturally available

to them and to which they aspire. This presumes that relational stories, memories and material 'things' are all constitutive of people's pasts, and fundamentally connected to their present and ongoing biographies.

Locating children analytically within wider personal communities is important for making sense of how they form relational practices and ways of being (James, 2013). Seeing children as embedded not just in family relationships but also in wider community relations, and taking account of those influences on children's lives (Connolly, 2006), can powerfully challenge individualising narratives that, for example, attribute blame to families for children's behaviour or interactions with others, and can illuminate the role of institutions and particular cultures in producing these kinds of responses in children. It is also the case that schools – and possibly other institutionalised contexts – as well those who work with children in those spaces can secure important resources for them in particular times of need (Jamieson and Highet, 2013).

There are a number of areas of social life that have fallen 'below the sociological radar' – including sexuality, bodies, emotions and intimacy, all of which Smart suggests personal life should focus upon (2007, p. 29) and to which this book will contribute understandings. In establishing a separate field of personal life, Smart suggests that these areas of social life might be brought within mainstream sociological studies of relationships. In childhood sociology, sexuality and childhood have been something of a taboo, but the study of sexuality amongst primary-aged children as well as young people is now becoming more established, and this work has incorporated analyses of the gendered and sexualised body (see Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Renold, 2005). Whilst this book does not focus upon sexuality, it takes a great interest in children's embodied, sensed and interphysical experiences of their relationships. In 2000, Alan Prout published an edited collection, *The Body, Childhood and Society*, suggesting that childhood studies had, in adopting a social constructionist perspective, focused too heavily on discourse and overlooked the material body. Throughout the book, there are examples revealing the various ways in which the body mattered in children's relations with others. Since then, the body has received greater attention within childhood studies, but it remains marginalised. Explorations of sensory experience have the potential to reach beyond and further unravel bodily encounters and ways of knowing about how people experience their relationships through their senses – which senses are foregrounded and associated with love, fear or hate, for example. Investigating the sensory allows researchers to 'come closer' to the lived experiences of their participants (Pink, 2010, p. 23).

In studies of children's relationships, the senses are near ignored. The exceptions show the extent to which sensory references appear in, and are meaningful within, children's accounts of family, relationships (Mason and Tipper, 2008a, 2008b; Davies, 2012) and troubling family problems (Wilson et al., 2012). I suggest that the senses are an important element of this focus on the body and should be written into a sociology of children's personal lives.

Within the study of childhood, emotions and intimacy are sidelined even further than the body has been. Whilst intimacy has been considered within families (Gabb, 2010) and has been touched upon in exploring children's family relationships, it has rarely been a central focus within studies with children (Dunn, 2004), to the extent that we know little about what children's intimate practices look like across their relationships. This book aims to illuminate practices of intimacy, in sibling relationships in particular. Lastly, despite a burgeoning interest in the way in which children can be schooled in emotional literacy (or in critiques of this schooling), there has been a very minimal focus on children's emotions, including the everyday workings of children's emotional lives (James, 2013) as well as more troubling emotional experiences.

In mapping out both the overlaps between the foci of personal life and childhood studies, and more narrowly some sociological perspectives on childhood, I have endeavoured to persuade my reader that a personal life approach to children's relationships would fit with childhood studies' existing interests and areas for development, and may offer conceptual tools in order to develop knowledge and understanding about children's relational experiences.

The book's point of departure

My point of departure has been the sociology, anthropology and geography of childhood, in which there is a long tradition of listening to children (James and Prout, 1990; Alderson, 1993; Mayall, 1994; Morrow, 1998a), and of attending to and making sense of the spatiality of childhood and children's movements (Valentine, 1996; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2013). In this book, I assume that a grounded understanding of children's personal lives and relationships – produced by talking to and being with children – is important for challenging popular and political assumptions that become truths about childhood; these include the claim that childhood is 'in crisis' (Scraton, 1997). Children's family lives, friendships and

peer relationships are often referenced as part of this so-called crisis of childhood – usually with a focus on absent fathers, divorce, separation or bullying. Other notable features of this 'crisis' encompass the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood. The former refers to children and young people's purported unhealthy interest in material commodities. The latter refers to the overly sexualised society in which children are growing up and being exposed to clothing, magazines, bill-board advertising, music lyrics, TV and film that position children and young people as sexual beings and which glorify dangerous, promiscuous – and in some cases misogynistic – understandings of sex, the body and sexual relationships. The concern centres around how these potential influences, to which children and young people are exposed, are appropriated by children and young people within their own relationships. An overarching theme of this narrative is that children, like adults, are subject to individualising social forces and are affected by the disintegration of moral values (Layard and Dunn, 2009). Throughout the book, I reframe some of these popular assumptions based on the perspectives and experiences of children themselves, and revisit these assumptions in the conclusion.

My second assumption is that these truths or public stories about personal life matter for a range of reasons, and that policy, professional practices and services designed for children, their family, kin and friends should be examined carefully alongside the everyday experiences of children. These public stories, Jamieson argues:

> feed into both public and private lives when they coalesce into official views shaping public policies, laws and the distribution of resources … The most pervasive public stories are typically produced and reproduced by people occupying positions of power and authority, that is, they operate from and on behalf of powerful institutionalized structures.
>
> (Jamieson, 1998, p. 11)

Only by examining and illuminating gaps between the *everyday* and policy, professional practice and services can the propriety and potential effectiveness of the latter be evaluated and, I hope, improved. Similar arguments have been made in relation to the disparities between the ideology of the family and the diversity of experiences, routines and practices that constitute family life (Morgan, 1975; Bernardes, 1985; Gillis, 1997; Smart et al., 2001). Without grounded understandings of relational lives to challenge accepted ideologies of how family

(and, I would suggest, children's personal relationships more broadly) should be, there will be 'very real pressures on people to behave in certain ways, to lead their lives according to acceptable norms and patterns' (Gittins, 1993, pp. 71–2).

A third assumption made in this book is that there is value in knowing how children perceive and experience both the positive and not-so-positive personal life experiences. Whilst the book does not commence with a 'problems-lens', neither does it shy away from illuminating problems that children participating across the two projects are experiencing and reflecting upon in their own and imagined family and personal lives. These problems include: sibling rivalry and conflict; poverty and densely populated housing; maintaining contact and connections with non-resident fathers and a mother; bereavement and contact with relatives following a family death; corporal punishment; domestic violence and sexual predation; and bullying and peer conflict. In many cases, examining children's family and personal lives brought these issues to the surface; others were deliberately elicited as part of my sociological inquiry.

Examining children's framings of these family and personal problems offers clues as to the nature of these problems as experienced by children, and provides an indication of how these problems could be better responded to by those who live or work with children. Central to these discussions of problems is an acknowledgement that there is an artificial dichotomy, established in policy and also in some professional practice, that we may speak of 'ordinary' families and 'troubled families'; Ribbens McCarthy et al.'s (2013) collection of research studies undermines this dichotomy, revealing that 'ordinary families' experience troubles just as 'troubled families' have ordinary experiences too. Such a perspective underlines the importance of drawing attention to the structural and material circumstances of people when considering the types and nature of the relational problems that they are encountering.

Lastly, I assume that in order to highlight some of the hard-to-reach dimensions of personal life, researchers will need methodological and analytical tools that are sensitive to these dimensions. The book engages with and endeavours to build upon methodological advances in considering children's biographies and how these might alternatively be researched. It also attends closely to the study of the interphysical and sensory forms of relationality (Mason, 2008) – for example, the ways in which children deploy their bodies in physical interactions through touch and experience, and, more broadly, sense their relationships.

The social context for the book

The research projects drawn upon in this book have been undertaken, analysed and written up over the last decade. The UK, where both of the studies were based, has, like many countries across the globe, experienced a damaging recession. This recession has resulted in inflation, salary freezes and cuts to social welfare spending, which has meant that household incomes have been eroded. Many families living in disadvantaged circumstances have seen their living standards exacerbated and have experienced food poverty (Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; Taylor-Robinson et al., 2013). Regressive forms of taxation, such as that which came to be known as the 'spare room' or 'bedroom tax' applied to housing benefit claimants, has also thrown many people who were in already precarious circumstances into worse situations. All of this has served to undermine the UK's commitment to meeting its child poverty targets (Bradshaw, 2014). Since the start of the recession, it is speculated that child poverty has increased substantially, and is estimated at 3.5 million children (Alzubaidi et al., 2013).

Cuts to public expenditure more generally across education and health, including children's services, have impacted upon children, meaning that budgets for provision for special educational needs, pastoral care within schools, counselling, and therapeutic and after-school play services have been substantially limited. This context is important, because both of the projects were undertaken in low socio-economic geographic areas that reflect the experiences of the majority, although not all of the children (and their families) who participated in the research.

The two projects

In the next section, I set out the two projects in more detail, offering a full account of the research participants and the socio-economic context of the schools involved in these two interlinked projects, *Constituting Family* and *Keeping Each Other Safe*.

Constituting Family

Constituting Family: Children's Normative Expectations and Lived Experiences of Close Relationships (hereafter, CF) was an ESRC-funded study (PTA 030-2003-01291). CF focused on the ordinary experiences of family life, and how children constitute family and personal relationships and practise intimacy and connectedness. The study was concerned with

how children examine and use normative ideas about family to assess and actively constitute their family and close relationships. The school-based qualitative project invited children from two year-groups to 'opt into' the research (Alderson, 1995, p.31). I recruited 24 children, 15 girls and nine boys aged 8–10 from a small primary school (which totalled approximately 130 pupils) in the Midlands, UK. This school is referred to as Queen's Park Primary. All names, including those of the children, their family, kin, friends and teachers, are pseudonyms, except for my own.

Fieldwork took place over 19 months from 2006 to 2008 for one to two days per week at the children's school, and involved observations, two sets of semi-structured interviews with these children (in pairs) and children's drawings of 'my family'. A sub-sample of children were visited in their family homes, and the same children participated in making 'family books' in after-school sessions held at school, in which children wrote about significant family events, memories and stories.

The majority of the children were white British (N=20), and a minority were British South Asian (N=4). To my knowledge, all of the children's families were heterosexual, and represented a range of family forms including 'nuclear', single parent/carer families, 're-constituted families', (families whereby each partner has children from a previous relationship, and the families are conjoined), step-families and shared care (often called shared or co-parenting) families. The children had experienced parental separation, divorce and/or bereavement (N=16), and/or had experienced a parent re-partnering (N=13); they had acquired new half and/or step-siblings (N=13), and had a non-resident sibling or parent (N=15), which provides some indication of the fluidity and complexity that characterised the children's family and personal lives. It was notable that despite a great deal of family diversity in this sample, the majority of the children's families had low mobility and had resided in or around the town of current residence for generations and had relatives living locally. This meant that children knew one another and one another's families well. Eleven of the participating children in CF had siblings and five had cousins who also attended Queen's Park Primary school. Based on observations of their own family and personal lives, and those of their cousins, friends and peers, children were aware of a variety of family types and relationships. This knowledge provided a context for children's sense-making of family and personal experiences and practices.

Many of the children's material circumstances shaped their opportunities for contact with non-resident family and kin. Queen's Park

Primary school and the majority of children's homes were located in the bottom third of the most deprived areas in England, as measured by the contemporaneous Index of Multiple Deprivation. Statistics from this index show that the area was characterised by high levels of child poverty, overcrowded housing and high numbers of children living in households where no adult was employed. Many families within this 'super output area' (the immediate locality around the school) were recipients of a range of housing and/or council tax benefit. These statistics form a backdrop to the children's accounts of their personal circumstances, but for the purpose of the study, I was more interested in how these broader socio-economic contexts mediated children's experiences of social (Ridge, 2002), family (Moxnes, 2003; Haugen, 2005) and personal life.

Keeping Each Other Safe

Keeping Each other Safe (KEOS) is the second project from which data is drawn for this book. KEOS, which was funded by King's College London (2010–2011), investigated children's problem-solving strategies when faced with relational dilemmas. The project used narratives from CF to generate vignettes about relational problems: experiencing peer conflict at school; living with a violent step-father who subjects the children to corporal punishment and is violent towards the children's mother; and a step-father transgressing what might be regarded as appropriate bodily boundaries. The vignettes, which address serious and emotionally sensitive issues, were developed in order to offer subtle accounts of these issues for use in the interviews. Vignette-based interviews were conducted with 20 children, in pairs with a peer or friend. This research also involved one-off interviews with four teaching staff including three teachers and a learning mentor, as well as field notes made over the duration of the project (approximately four months). As in CF, the children participating in KEOS were aged 8–10, and were interviewed in their South London primary school, which in this book I call Halestone Primary.

This school was selected through advice from a professional who had contacts at the school and felt this low socio-economic context and the nature of the issues that the school was dealing with would provide a suitable context in which to discuss how children deal (hypothetically) with problems they might encounter in their family and relational lives. The vignettes were presented to children in paired interviews in which children were asked to consider the problem and how the fictional children in the vignette could, or should, respond. The children were also invited to comment on how they would respond to such problems.

KEOS examined children's intra-generational networks of support, in particular, the extent to which children perceived themselves, and children more generally, as able to help and provide emotional and practical support for one another. This project explored further children's perceptions of their own agency to resolve relational issues in their family and peer relationships. Through asking children to whom they could turn for support, and to whom they would and could provide support, rich data was generated about the people at the centre of children's personal lives. Through mapping out children's (un)supportive networks, the analysis elicits children's close connections to and disconnections from others who form part of their relational lives – friends and peers, parents and siblings, grandparents, teachers, and, in fewer cases, aunts and uncles, neighbours and family friends. In doing so, it contributes to and expands upon the 'connectedness thesis' (Smart, 2007, p.189) as applied to children's contemporary personal relationships.

Fifteen girls and five boys opted to participate in KEOS, and just under half of the children were black and of African and Afro-Caribbean heritage (N=9). The remainder were: white British (N=6); northern European (N=3); South American (N=1); and Middle Eastern (N=1). Data were not collected on these children's family relationships, as schools did not keep records on such contextual details, and in a one-off interview with the children, I deemed it too intrusive to ask whether their parents were together, separated or divorced, single parents or re-partnered. Some of these details came to light in the interviews, and where this is relevant, I note it in my analysis of their accounts.

The four teaching staff interviewed were asked about their observations of children's problem-solving in friendships and peer relations, because it was presumed that teachers might observe this in practice in the context of school. The teachers were selected on the basis that they had particular roles relating to the promotion of children's wellbeing within the school, which meant that they had reflected upon children's interactions as part of this role. Whilst the teacher interviews are not used extensively throughout the book, they are drawn upon to contextualise and enrich my analysis of children's accounts.

There were higher rates of family mobility amongst the children who participated in KEOS; many did not have older generations of their family living in the UK or extended family members living close by, as was the case in CF. A local government report on the borough in which Halestone school was located reveals this area to be the 14th most deprived district in England and one of the most densely populated areas of the country, with more than twice the average London

population density. The report shows that 20 per cent of residents rent from a housing association and 30 per cent are in receipt of tax credits. These statistics offer an insight into the areas in which the participating children lived and may not necessarily relate to the specific children involved in the study. For the purposes of this book, these details are included to situate children's personal relationships in the social and economic context of their wider communities; children's own perspectives on and experiences of their personal lives, and the impact these factors have on their relationships, are also given weight. Where these socio-economic contextual issues are relevant, they are referred to in my analysis of children's accounts.

As noted above, both projects involved children aged 8–10 (sometimes regarded as middle childhood). Almost two decades ago, Borland et al. wrote that this 'in-between period' in children's lives is 'relatively neglected' (1998, p.7). Since then, there has been much more written both on middle childhood as a time in children's lives, but also on middle-childhood experiences of family, friendships and peer relationships during this time (Thorne, 1993; Morrow, 1998; Renold, 2005; Mason and Tipper, 2008a; Christensen and Mikkelsen, 2013). I am cautious about making developmental assumptions about how children might relate to others or engage in relationships during middle childhood, but there may be some particularities of middle childhood – for example, the way in which children engage affectionately with siblings or the time at which children develop aspects of their identities. Borland et al. studied parents' and children's perspectives on middle childhood and suggested that parents, reflecting back on their children's earlier childhood interactions, expressed that in middle childhood, children were 'more able to understand and respond to the needs of others which promoted reciprocity in their relationships with adults' (1998, p.22). Yet earlier research suggests that children in the early years demonstrate a capacity for emotional empathy and understanding (Thompson, 1987).

The origin of children's accounts

Throughout this book, the extracts taken from children's accounts are accompanied by a reference to indicate whether they have derived from the project *Constituting Family* (CF) or *Keeping Each Other Safe* (KEOS). This reference also informs the reader of how the data extract was produced – for example, through a paired interview or through observational field notes. My intention is to share with the reader the types of data that have been produced through different methods.

In order to offer the reader biographical accounts of children's relationships, the children's names are included in the index for the reader to examine the extracts relating to a single child together if they so wish. It was impossible to generate the in-depth biographical accounts for children in the project *Keeping Each Other Safe*, due to the very short time-scale of the project (which I discuss further in Chapter 3), but their names are included in the index nonetheless.

Book outline

In Chapter 2, I discuss the conceptual developments that have assisted my thinking around children's personal relationships as well as existing empirical findings on children's intimate, embodied and sensory connections to friends, peers, siblings, family and kin in a range of circumstances and contexts. These concepts and findings are the springboard for further elaboration on children's personal relationships throughout the book.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodological debates that are pertinent to those researching children's (and in some cases, adults') personal lives. Specifically, I focus upon how various dimensions of personal life, notably children's (relational bodies; sensory experiences; shared biographies; memories; emotions; confidences, secrets and disclosures), can be brought into focus in an ethical way, drawing upon empirical examples to illustrate my points.

In Chapters 4 to 7, I discuss further the original empirical findings from the two projects. In Chapter 4, existing concepts from sociology (notably sensory relationality) are extended and used to develop new understandings of children's sibling relationships – in particular, how children engage in, interpret and navigate intimate practices of sibling care, communication, play and fights with siblings.

Chapter 5 explores children's negotiations of transitions in their family lives and how they seek to maintain connections to family and kin through family stories, photographs and evocative keepsakes. This chapter shows the value that children attribute to the materiality of their personal relationships, and suggests that whilst photographs and keepsakes may be a way of sharing biographies, they may also re-charge connections with close others too.

Chapter 6 explores children's responses to three fictional scenarios about corporal punishment, domestic violence and predatory sexual behaviour, all perpetrated by a child's step-father. It demonstrates the kinds of touch that children found (un)acceptable or (in)appropriate,