



After the Violence?

Everyday Life and Family Relationships among Children
and their Mothers at a Women's Refuge

PhD Dissertation 2021
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Introduction

I am sitting in the shared kitchen at the women's refuge where I am conducting my fieldwork. It is Thursday, late afternoon – around the time when the mothers usually start making dinner for themselves and their children. One mother, Tina, comes into the kitchen with her two-year-old son Nicholas. As Nicholas comes over and sits on the chair next to me, Tina tells me that he has been feeling unwell but seems fine now. Tina gives him a glass of water and sits down at the table. Nicholas looks at her and says, 'Dad'. Tina looks at him and takes a sip of coffee. Nicholas says, 'Dad' once again, and Tina replies, 'Dad isn't here', while shaking her head. 'Want Dad', Nicholas continues and starts whimpering. 'Yes. That's because he plays in a way that I don't', says Tina and looks at him. Nicholas says, 'Dad' and takes a sip of water. Then he turns to me and says, 'Dad work'. I ask, 'Is your Dad at work?' Tina looks at Nicholas and says, 'That's what we usually say. When you're here, then Dad's at work, and when you're with Dad, then Mum's at work'. Nicholas nods and says, 'Yes'.

The above situation played out at the women's refuge in Denmark, where I conducted the ethnographic fieldwork for this dissertation. The excerpt gives a glimpse into life at the refuge among the children and their mothers who were staying there, following the violence perpetrated by the children's fathers or stepfathers. The interaction between Nicholas and Tina illustrates one of the ways that children and mothers negotiated the disruption of everyday life and parental relationships that the move to the refuge entailed. While Nicholas displayed his yearning for his father, Tina first ignored him before stating that the father was not there. However, Nicholas was persistent and continued to bring up his father in the conversation. Their brief exchange shows how children and their mothers in the context of everyday life at the refuge practised family relationships in different ways – especially the relationship with the father. It also illustrates children's interdependence. While the children created their own independent practices and family displays, they were also dependent on their mothers to understand the situation, as well as navigate the institutional setting and family change that followed the move to the refuge. In this case, Nicholas had been told that his father was at work, and it was common throughout the fieldwork that the children had various degrees and forms