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What Do Arts-Based Methods Do? A Story of (What Is) Art and Online Research With Children During a Pandemic

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Abstract

This comic draws viewers behind the final product and into the *process* of arts-based research. Specifically, we focus on research produced over Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on a study of asthma caregiving, we illustrate how a 10-year-old study participant, Becca, and researcher Hannah connected in embodied, sensory and material-spatial ways across digital space through the making and unmaking of art forms using simple sensory-sculptural materials (pipe cleaners, play-doh, balloons). We consider what arts-based methods *do*: for the participant, the researcher, their relationship, and ethical knowledge production. And we show what research processes can look like as unpredictable, messy and patient communing.

Keywords

arts-based methods, asthma, childhood, pandemic

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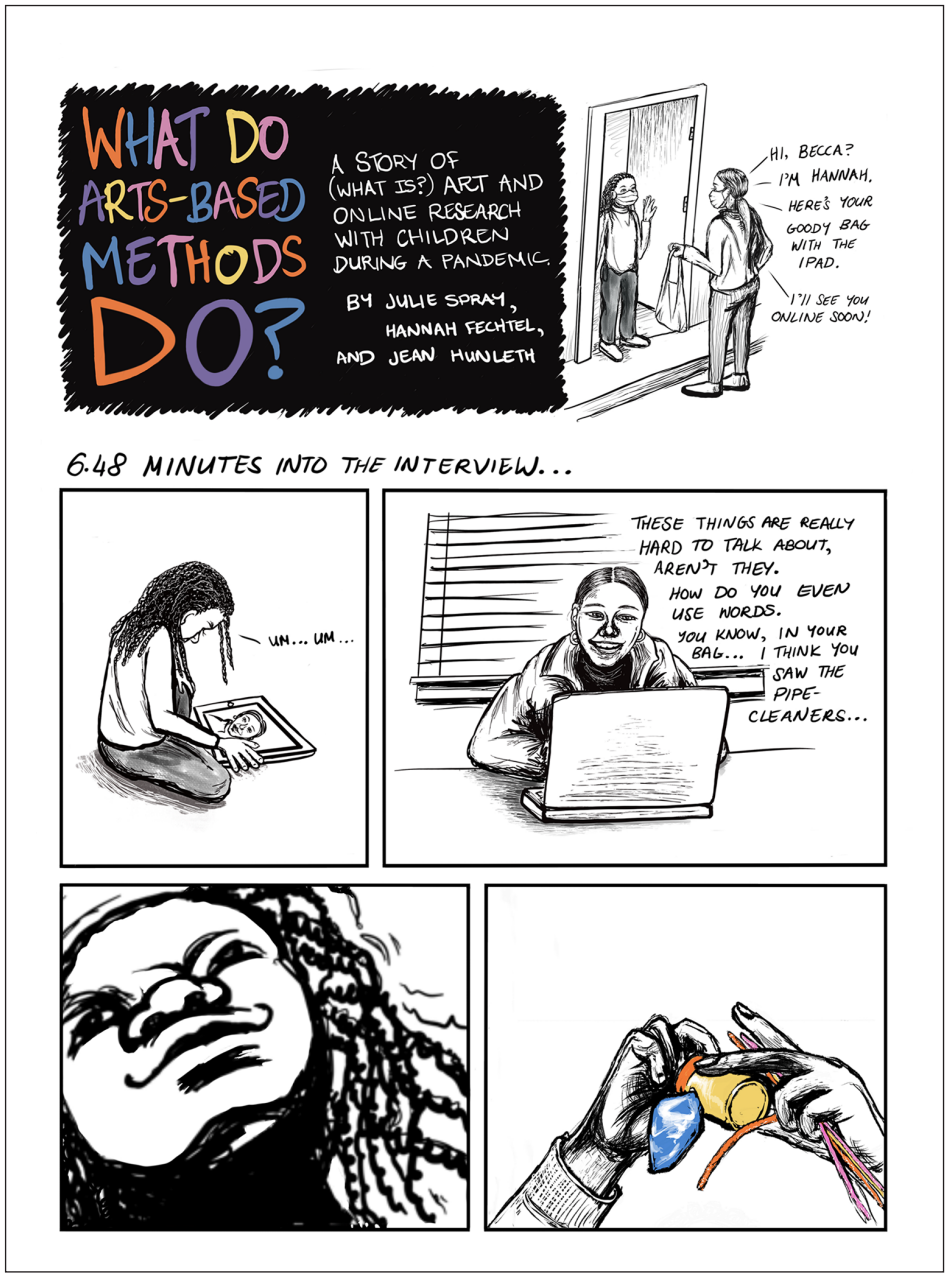
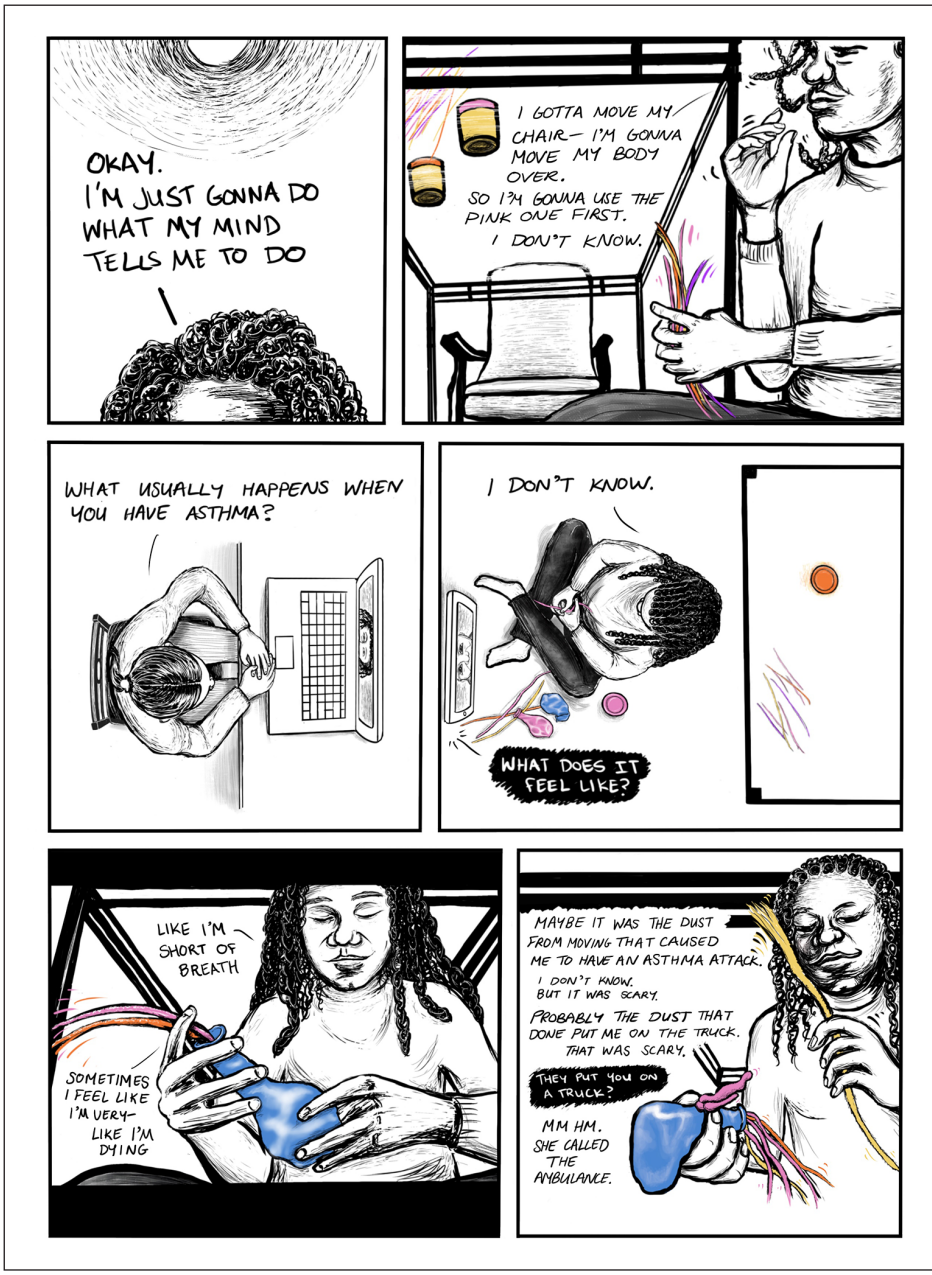
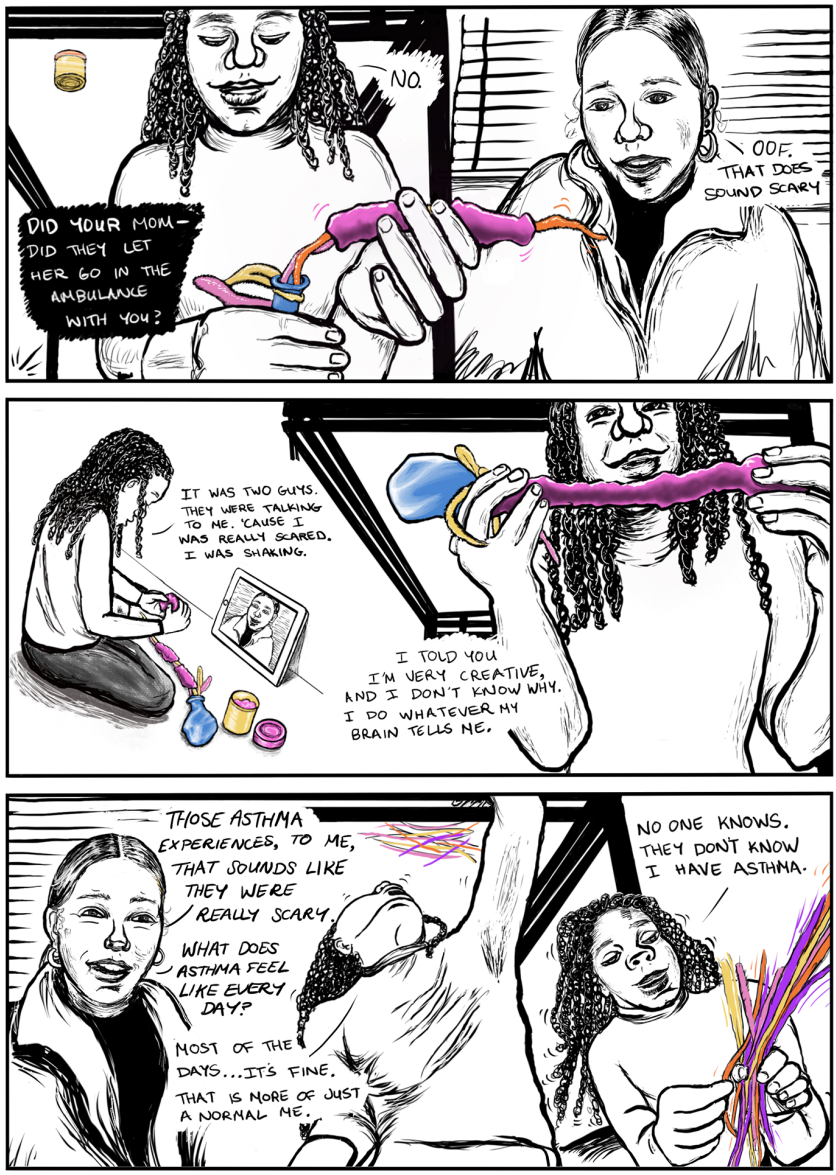
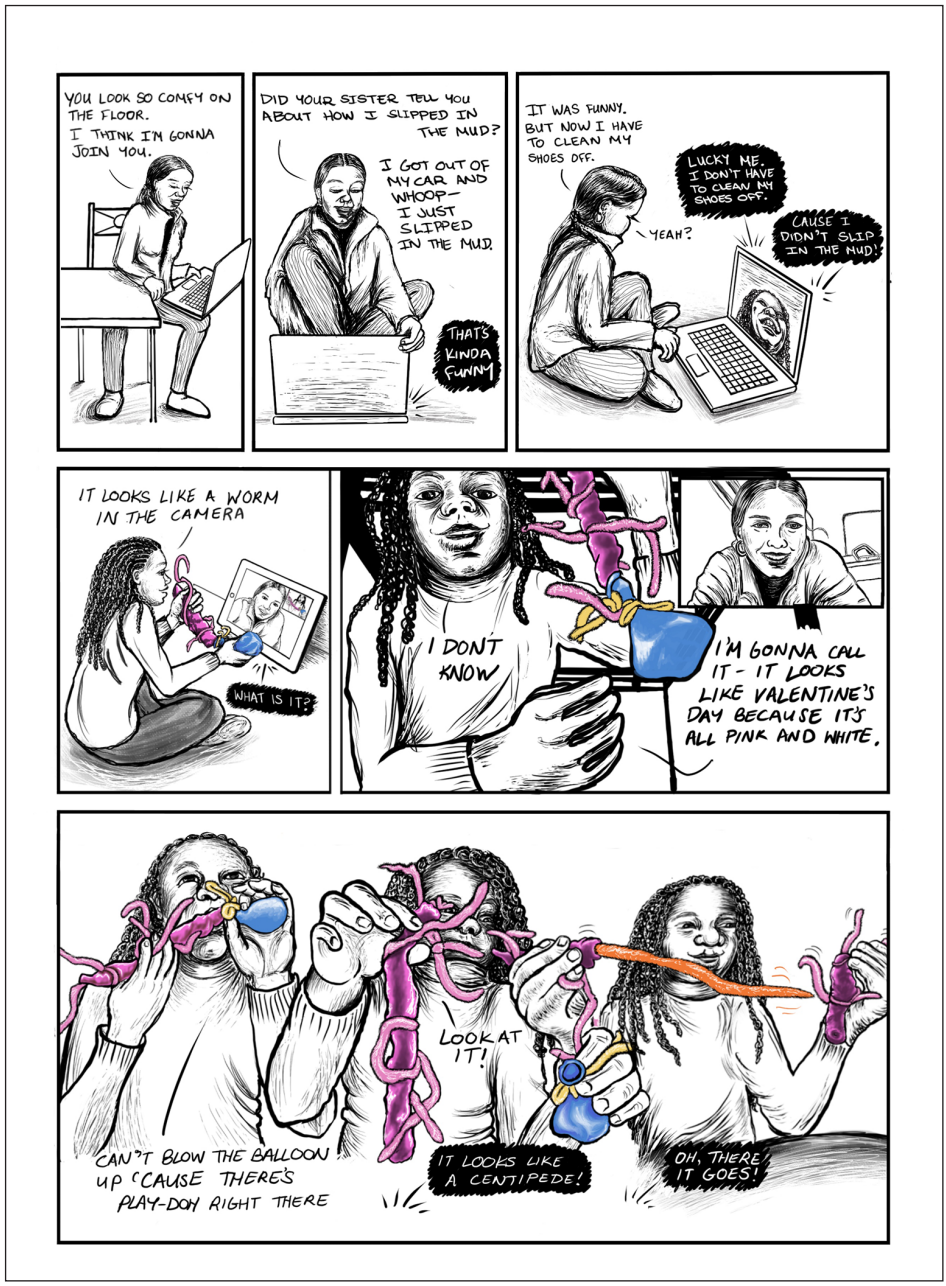
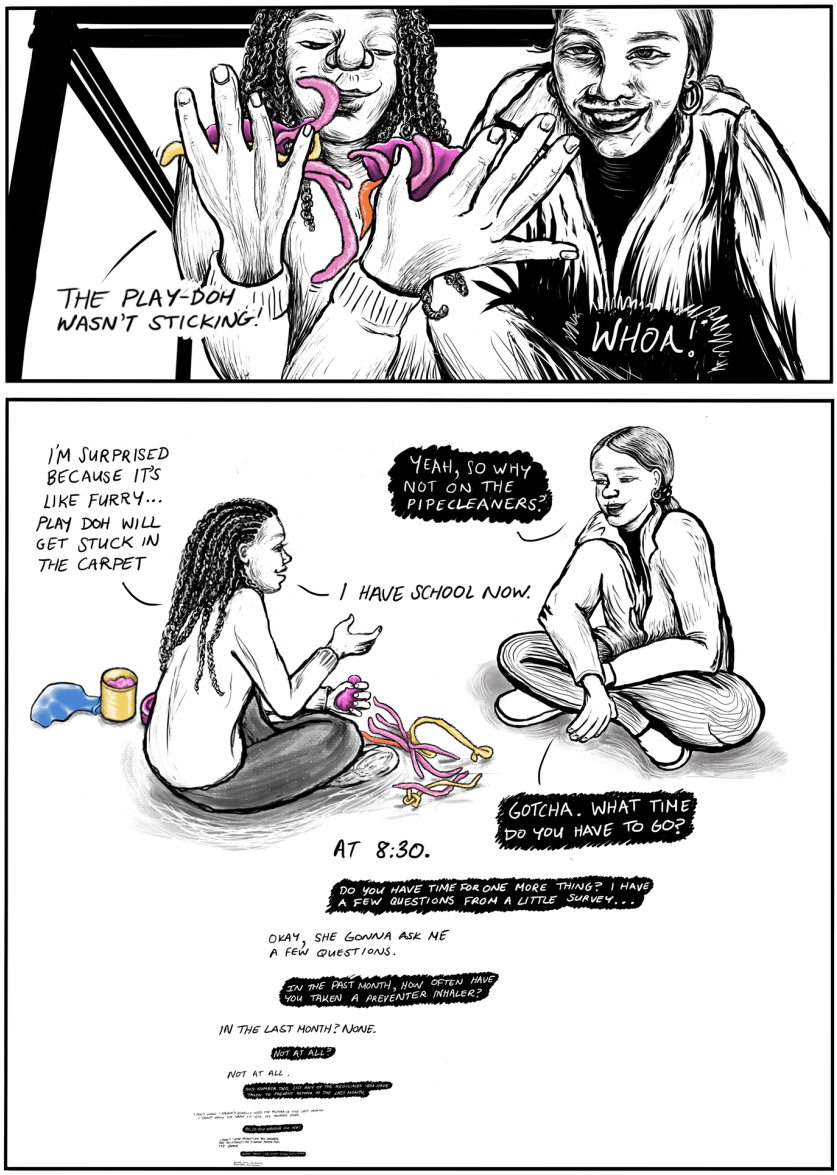

WHAT DO ARTS-BASED METHODS DO?
A STORY OF (WHAT IS?) ART AND ONLINE RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN DURING A PANDEMIC.
BY JULIE SPRAY, HANNAH FECHTEL, AND JEAN HUNLETH
HI, BECCA? I'M HANNAH. HERE'S YOUR GOODY BAG WITH THE IPAD.
I'LL SEE YOU ONLINE SOON!
6.48 MINUTES INTO THE INTERVIEW...
UH... UM...
THESE THINGS ARE REALLY HARD TO TALK ABOUT, AREN'T THEY. HOW DO YOU EVEN USE WORDS. YOU KNOW, IN YOUR BAG... I THINK YOU SAW THE PIPE-CLEANERS...


WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO BE MAKIN'?
YOU COULD PROP ME UP AGAINST A WALL OR SOMETHING
MAKE SOMETHING THAT SHOWS ME WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE ASTHMA
IT IS A LITTLE HARD... DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DO IT?
I DON'T KNOW. THAT'S HARD.
NOPE. BUT I'LL TRY.


OKAY.
I'M JUST GONNA DO WHAT MY MIND TELLS ME TO DO
I GOTTA MOVE MY CHAIR— I'M GONNA MOVE MY BODY OVER.
SO I'M GONNA USE THE PINK ONE FIRST.
I DON'T KNOW.
WHAT USUALLY HAPPENS WHEN YOU HAVE ASTHMA?
I DON'T KNOW.
WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?
LIKE I'M SHORT OF BREATH
SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE I'M VERY— LIKE I'M DYING
MAYBE IT WAS THE DUST FROM MOVING THAT CAUSED ME TO HAVE AN ASTHMA ATTACK.
I DON'T KNOW. BUT IT WAS SCARY.
PROBABLY THE DUST THAT DONE PUT ME ON THE TRUCK. THAT WAS SCARY.
THEY PUT YOU ON A TRUCK?
MM HM. SHE CALLED THE AMBULANCE.


DID YOUR MOM— DID THEY LET HER GO IN THE AMBULANCE WITH YOU?
NO.
OOF. THAT DOES SOUND SCARY
IT WAS TWO GUYS. THEY WERE TALKING TO ME. 'CAUSE I WAS REALLY SCARED. I WAS SHAKING.
I TOLD YOU I'M VERY CREATIVE, AND I DON'T KNOW WHY. I DO WHATEVER MY BRAIN TELLS ME.
THOSE ASTHMA EXPERIENCES, TO ME, THAT SOUNDS LIKE THEY WERE REALLY SCARY.
WHAT DOES ASTHMA FEEL LIKE EVERY DAY?
MOST OF THE DAYS...IT'S FINE. THAT IS MORE OF JUST A NORMAL ME.
NO ONE KNOWS. THEY DON'T KNOW I HAVE ASTHMA.


YOU LOOK SO COMFY ON THE FLOOR. I THINK I'M GONNA JOIN YOU.
DID YOUR SISTER TELL YOU ABOUT HOW I SLIPPED IN THE MUD?
I GOT OUT OF MY CAR AND WHOOP— I JUST SLIPPED IN THE MUD.
THAT'S KINDA FUNNY
IT WAS FUNNY. BUT NOW I HAVE TO CLEAN MY SHOES OFF.
YEAH?
LUCKY ME. I DON'T HAVE TO CLEAN MY SHOES OFF.
CAUSE I DIDN'T SLIP IN THE MUD!
IT LOOKS LIKE A WORM IN THE CAMERA
WHAT IS IT?
I DON'T KNOW
I'M GONNA CALL IT - IT LOOKS LIKE VALENTINE'S DAY BECAUSE IT'S ALL PINK AND WHITE.
CAN'T BLOW THE BALLOON UP 'CAUSE THERE'S PLAY-DOH RIGHT THERE
LOOK AT IT!
IT LOOKS LIKE A CENTIPEDE!
OH, THERE IT GOES!


THE PLAY-DOH WASN'T STICKING!
WHOA!
I'M SURPRISED BECAUSE IT'S LIKE FURRY... PLAY DOH WILL GET STUCK IN THE CARPET
YEAH, SO WHY NOT ON THE PIPECLEANERS?
I HAVE SCHOOL NOW.
GOTCHA. WHAT TIME DO YOU HAVE TO GO?
AT 8:30.
DO YOU HAVE TIME FOR ONE MORE THING? I HAVE A FEW QUESTIONS FROM A LITTLE SURVEY...
OKAY, SHE GONNA ASK ME A FEW QUESTIONS.
IN THE PAST MONTH, HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU TAKEN A PREVENTER INHALER?
IN THE LAST MONTH? NONE.
NOT AT ALL?
NOT AT ALL.

This comic draws viewers into the *process* of virtual arts-based research. Art, from an audience perspective, tends to be about finished products, and this can often be the case in research too, where researchers conduct visual analyses of children's drawings or photographs. Jean and Julie have respectively called for more attention to the processes and contexts through which children's drawings are produced for research, arguing that these processes tell us as much about childhoods as final art products, and also that children's drawings cannot be abstracted from the contexts that shape their content (Hunleth, 2011; Spray, 2021). Here, we use comic form to show processes that are inaccessible through viewing a final art product or through describing the process in words. We wanted viewers to come away from the comic questioning their assumptions both about art – what it is, what it does – and about being together in virtual space.

The research comes out of a mixed-methods, interdisciplinary study on asthma caregiving that is funded by the U.S. National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. As part of this study, our project investigated children's perspectives on asthma management in two cities: St. Louis, Missouri, and Gainesville, Florida. We initially planned an ethnographic child-centred study involving two visits with children with asthma and their families in their homes, 3 months apart. In order to accommodate the different needs and interests of children aged 6–16, we took a mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), offering children a menu of activities, including drawing, photography, show and tell, and interviews. We completed 9 of the planned 12 first home visits between January and March 2020, before growing safety concerns with the COVID-19 pandemic paused, and eventually halted our study.

Six months later, we resumed our research with children, this time online, over Zoom. We retained the mosaic approach, adapting original activities for online (e.g. by using the Zoom whiteboard feature for drawing) and designing new activities to enhance the Zoom medium and answer questions that arose from the first round of visits. Prior to the Zoom interview, researchers in St. Louis and Gainesville dropped off through contactless delivery a goody bag along with a tablet for those who needed or wanted a device. As well as snacks, the goody bag contained art materials (pipe cleaners, play-doh, balloons) that doubled as sculpture materials and sensory play for engaging children while they talked to us on Zoom. We also created and adhered to a strict protocol for COVID-19 infection prevention. This included sanitizing all equipment and supplies before and after exchange, contactless delivery of the iPad tablet and goody bag, masks, and social distancing.

Our comic shows what one child, Becca, did with these materials, while enabling us to keep her rich coproduction of visual, tactile, and verbal data intact. We show what we would lose if we stripped the art-making and reduced the encounter to only Becca's words about asthma, as we find in abstracted transcripts and in most published analyses.

In Jean's prior writing on child research methods, she has turned the lens back on researchers, asking 'what do research methods accomplish for the researcher?' (Hunleth, 2011, 2019). As Lynda Barry (2019) teaches us, artistic ability is not a prerequisite for drawing comics, and every researcher can draw their process – both process and product offer new insights on the event or, in the case of this piece, art. Some anthropologists advocate such drawing as a different way of knowing (Causey, 2017; Spray, 2021); Taussig (2009), paraphrasing John Berger, has called drawing in the context of the research field note, a 'means of getting close to' the object or people drawn (p. 271). In this respect, we see drawing as part of the note-taking process as especially relevant

during COVID-19 when we all wish to find means of getting close, but infectious disease has meant we must stay apart.

We developed our ideas for the comic over a series of conversations as we watched and re-watched the Zoom interviews. Zoom-based research offers the opportunity to do this sort of re-watching, allowing different researchers to pick up on key moments that resonated with our individual experiences and perspectives. As a team, we were able to put these moments together. We saw through the interviews how children used the materials in various ways that we first recognized categorically as 'use as sensory material' or 'creation of art'. We also saw hesitancy from both young people and the researcher working with them in St. Louis or Gainesville. What do we do with these materials? Will kids want to use them, and how? We saw Hannah variably forget to invite children to use the materials or hesitate about how to introduce the materials or how they would be received, especially by older children. 'Ask kids to make something to show us what it's like to have asthma', Julie told Hannah. 'Just experiment. It's okay if they don't get into it – you can switch to something else'. In a Zoom interview Julie conducted with three siblings aged 6–13 in St. Louis, she had watched the participants produce sculptures of a patient in a hospital bed, a sad face, and a heart and lungs to represent three very different perspectives on what asthma was about. In another of Hannah's interviews, a 12-year-old boy constructed an 'inhaler' out of balloons and pipe cleaners. Ten-year-old Becca, however, did something completely different with the materials. In fact, her piece 'Valentine's Day', including its ephemerality and destruction, is more 'fine' art than anything else. She fascinated us with what art-making did for her, and for the research process. What was art doing for the researcher-participant relationship? What was it doing as data? And, as children (and Banksy) most challenge us to consider, what even *is* art? What gives art its value, in life and in research?

When we pivoted from home visits to online interviews we bemoaned what we had lost, that ethnographic tradition of 'being there' together as bodies in and moving through space (Trnka, 2020). What surprised us, watching Hannah and Becca on screen, was how Becca's art-making brought embodied and material-spatial dimensions to her, and Hannah's, participation. Even though the interactions were in digital space, they also still involved bodily presence within material spaces, and the art, based in materials selected for their sensory properties, enhanced those embodied relationalities. Contrary to our expectations of a static child on a chair in front of a screen, Becca's engagement with the materials involves full body expression, moving from table to floor, sometimes just the tip of her head, flying braids, or quivering pipe cleaners. Our asthma study aspired to get at those habituated, often unconscious embodiments and bodily practices of asthma and its management – how children sense, feel, accommodate, and relieve asthma symptoms through their bodies. Finding we could access these embodied ways of knowing through virtual space, then, was a delightful incidental.

The comic also engages with methodological themes that have interested childhood studies scholars for decades: improvisation, patience, proximity. Perhaps most visibly, we illustrate the messiness of arts-based research with young people and the even messier-ness of virtual research with young people in a pandemic. *Embracing the messy*, the uncertainty, and the unpredictable is a theme and a directive in research with young people (Chesworth, 2018; Eldén, 2013), but we so rarely get to glimpse what that *looks* like. This visual output helps us see and feel the messiness and disorientation that is so

common. Moreover, this messiness is not a problem or a methodological failure. We did not get from Becca a sculpture of what it means to have asthma, but we got something even more interesting. Art facilitated our understanding of Becca and her asthma nonetheless. Showing the messy also forms part of an ethics of care for other researchers as we reveal the imperfect nature of research with children and of the creative methods we try. In our comic we say to other scholars: child research is hard, arts-based methods are hard, it is normal that things do not work the way we plan, and your research is still successful. Play, experiment, take risks, and have compassion for yourself.

Like messiness, patience is something that is difficult to visualize (what does patience look like?). Patience may also be more difficult to practice in virtual environments where technologies mediate and interrupt our togetherness and where, as our comic illustrates, interviews may be scheduled in the margins of family life (before school) and time is more constrained. Watching the Zoom video and later viewing the comic, Jean wrote, 'Hannah's way of being *in* the interview certainly inspires me, and I think about this patience in relation to how she uses her body to give space for Becca to create *and* to get into the space with Becca'. The temporal dimensions of Hannah's patience engender a slowing down and an interpersonal synchrony as Hannah matches Becca in pace, and then in body. Through these social and bodily processes, researcher and participant are embodying each other, even over digital space. Scholarship from psychology suggests our unconscious mimicry of another's postures and gestures create our communion (Lakin and Chartrand, 2003), while simply seeing another's behaviour triggers the same 'mirror neuron' to fire as would if we had made the action ourselves, empathically inscribing the other's action into our own brain structure (Iacoboni, 2009). (Imagine if Hannah had also been making art with Becca). 'You look so comfy on the floor, I'm going to join you', Hannah says. And as she moves to the floor we see Becca and Hannah getting a little closer to each other, each embodying a little of the other, then ultimately they enter into the same comic frame, achieving the proximity and interconnectedness that many researchers and humans have mourned during the pandemic.

Seeing herself with Becca on the last panel of the comic, Hannah felt sad that she could not be with Becca. While we acknowledge this feeling, we do not think that is the end of the story. The comic aims to show how they were able to come together. And art was an actor in this. Becca, accidentally (the play-doh wasn't sticking!) and then on purpose, turned the piece of art she made into a performance *that included Hannah*. The deconstruction brought Hannah into Becca's frame, bodies together while apart.

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Bringing our arts-based interactions online also brought up the need for new approaches to negotiating research ethics. We received ethical approval from the Washington University in St. Louis and University of Florida institutional review boards (IRBs). However, IRBs in the US are typically more concerned with protections for the university than for participants, and so our project involved cultivating attention to many ethical issues that arise when doing research with children and research during a pandemic. This included viewing consent and assent as an ongoing process rather than an event: while caregivers and children gave formal consent through a Qualtrics form, we sought additional informal verbal consent from children when they appeared on Zoom, emphasized our respect for their

comfort and wishes, offered them choices of research activities, and remained attuned to non-verbal and background signals that children's attention or time were waning.

Our choice of comic as a medium also offers a resolution to a common problem of visual research: the ethical tension between participant protection and emancipation. While photography and film have tremendous power for visual storytelling that can challenge stereotypes and push for political change, these media also reveal identifiable details about participants, and images may be decontextualized through digital dissemination in ways that create harm or stigma (Brady and Brown, 2013; Lomax, 2015). Moreover, research suggests that young people often prefer to have their contributions, skills, and expertise recognized and that the traditional emphasis on anonymity can be a form of paternalism – oppression in the guise of protection (Wiles et al., 2010). While in some projects waiving anonymity rights is an option for children who wish to be fully represented, in many circumstances gatekeepers such as schools, institutional ethics boards, or parents may preclude this. Young people may also change their minds later in life about their unconcealed identities (Brady and Brown, 2013).

In our case, visual representation was important for showing embodied and relational processes that are only partially accessible through written form. Our ethical review board agreements also constrained us from using photographs, video, or the real name of our participant, which, due to the medical topic under study, were subject to added layers of protections by the United States' health privacy laws (HIPAA). The comic medium gives body and face to Becca while allowing for a simplification of features that protect her likeness from recognizability. There is a special intimacy that comes with drawing a likeness, however, that invites ethical considerations of a different kind. As Julie has experienced, through drawing, the artist comes to a deep seeing and knowing of the participant's being (including details that may be unknown to the participant themselves) (Taussig, 2009), while the participant may not know they have been drawn and is further vulnerable to the representational choices of the artist. This comic was produced with Becca's consent; before the interview, Hannah asked Becca if Julie could draw her, and after the comic was completed Hannah recontacted Becca and her mother to explain what Julie had done and why and seek Becca's approval. Becca liked the comic.

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Artist

Julie Spray created this comic. More information about Julie as an artist-anthropologist can be found on her website: www.juliespray.com. Follow Julie on Twitter @JulieSeraSpray.

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Related publications

This comic is viewable in animated form at https://juliespray.com/2022/04/25/what-do-arts-based-methods-do/

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Author biographies

Julie Spray, PhD, BFA (hons), is an interdisciplinary medical anthropologist, child health researcher, and ethnographic illustrator. Her methodological focus has been on developing innovative ways for examining issues related to child health and well-being, including through collaborative drawing and other visual and co-constructed approaches. She is author of the recent ethnographic publication *The Children in Child Health: Negotiating Young Lives and Health in New Zealand* (Rutgers, 2020).

Hannah Fechtel, BA, BPH, is a researcher at the University of Florida and Washington University in St. Louis. She uses drawing, photography, and arts-based methods in research with children. Her current interests include youth and addiction, and culture and substance use.

Jean Hunleth, PhD, MPH, assistant professor of surgery and anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, is a medical anthropologist who studies childhood, illness, and caregiving. She is the author of the award-winning book, *Children as Caregivers: The Global Fight against Tuberculosis and HIV in Zambia* (Rutgers, 2017).

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