

WHY IS LIFE STORY WORK SO IMPORTANT?

The chaotic and disruptive start that many adopted children experience in their early years can cause great damage to their sense of self and belonging. Life story work can be a therapeutic process allowing children to explore their experiences and feelings to understand what happened in the past and think about their aspirations for the future. It can be a way for parent and child, working together, to strengthen their emotional bond.

Many children who have been adopted blame themselves for any abuse or neglect they experienced. Joy Rees explains that life story work is not only about helping children to understand why they didn't remain in their birth families. It should also allow children to understand that their early life experience is not their fault and enable them to grow in confidence in their adoptive family.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A LIFE STORY BOOK?

- to build a sense of identity
- to give details and understanding of the history
- to enable a child to share their past with their adopters
- to give a realistic account of early events and to dispel any fantasies about the birth family
- to link the past to the present
- to help the child understand how early negative experiences continue to affect them
- to acknowledge the separations and losses the child has experienced
- to enable adoptive parents to understand and develop empathy for the child
- to enhance self esteem and self worth
- to enable the child to develop a sense of security and permanency.
- to help adopters to promote attunement and attachment.

If we focus on these last 3 points early on in the placement many of the others will 'evolve'.

PRESENTING THE FACTS - GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

A Life Story Book is a 'tool' to be used by you, the adoptive parents, to help your child to gain a sense of identity and personal history. Over time these can change and develop and the Life Story Book may need to evolve to reflect this.

Social workers should provide a Life Story Book when the child is legally adopted and within 2 weeks of the Celebratory Hearing. Traditionally, the book is ordered chronologically - starting with the birth family and ending with the adoption:

Traditional format

PAST → PRESENT

The traditional Life Story Book generally finishes with a little information about the adoptive parents, the adoption hearing and the 'forever family'. The implication being that the child fully understands these concepts.

History gives us a sense of who we are, so that we can live comfortably in the present and plan for the future. But when preparing Life Story Books for adopted children, it is important not to allow a child's history to overshadow their present and obscure their future. It is important to get the balance right.

A New Approach

Once children are with you, their adoptive family, the Life Story Book can be amended in a way that will help children build on their growing security. Joy Rees suggests a more balanced alternative to the traditional approach, one that enables the child to learn about their history whilst enhancing self-esteem and security in their adoptive family. In this format, the child's early history provided by the social worker is safely 'contained' in the book while the adoptive family has a much higher profile. There is also a sense of a positive future. So we have:

PRESENT → PAST → PRESENT → FUTURE

Compiling the Book

All children are unique, and no two books are alike. The book may contain photographs, clip-art and illustrations, copies of some documents and other information as appropriate:

Positive messages about the child must be incorporated throughout. Above all, the Life Story Book needs to be child sized and divided into bite sized sections.

It is helpful if the book is in a file format made up of plastic pockets allowing sensitive information to be inserted and shared at an age appropriate time. Young children will need a different level of information than older children.

Present - Start with current information about the child. Writing in the 3rd person is generally regarded as good practice - the child is immediately one step removed from the story and this will make it easier for them to revisit past experiences and cope with difficult emotions. Use the child's adoptive name, age, description, likes and interests. Include details of the adoptive family, home, friends and school. Then move on to different types of families and a simple explanation of adoption. After firmly establishing the child's place in their adoptive family, it is possible to then move to the beginning of the child's story.

Past – At this point the social worker's account of the child's history is important. Details of the child's birth: place and time of birth, day of the week, weight, size, origins of name, etc. All of these details should be readily available for children adopted in the UK. For inter country adoptions, such information is unlikely to be available or may be limited. Here, poetic license could be used – all babies are born loveable!

Details of the child's birth family should be included keeping the information honest but simple - 'All children have a birth mother and a birth father' - use their names and give their ages, descriptions, ethnic origin, religion, health, interests, employment etc. Details of siblings and any other significant family members are also helpful.

An honest, sensitive but simple account of the events leading to the placement in a foster home or residential care is part of the child's story. Again this could refer to the birth parents inability to provide the care a child needed, or to the political policy or economic climate of a particular country. The underlying message for the child should be the same – any abuse or neglect was not their fault.

Details of foster carers are helpful and, if there was more than one placement, an explanation for each move, emphasising that this was not because the child was 'bad' or 'naughty'. Then a simple account about the decisions made by the social workers, police and the judge will help a child begin to understand who made the decisions about their future. Details of meeting the adopters and the child's move to their current home can follow, remembering and acknowledging the mixture of emotions and the process of getting to know each other.

Going to court to meet the judge and the granting of the Adoption Order is a precious memory for all the family and reinforces the concept of adoption being 'forever'.

Present –Now is an opportunity to bring the child back to the present. Perhaps mention all the child's favourite things to show how well you, the adopters, know your child and then move on to...

Future - the child's plans, hopes and aspirations. End on a positive note!

WHEN IS A LIFE STORY BOOK NEEDED?

Children brought up with their birth family are surrounded by their history. Who they are and where they come from is reflected back to them on a daily basis in all kinds of different ways.

Children who are not living with their family of origin, especially those who have experienced multiple moves prior to their adoptive placement, will have a very fragmented sense of their history and a very fragile sense of who they are. A Life Story Book will begin to address this, and to open the door to further communication. As children grow in understanding and security, additional details can be discussed and added to the book.

All adopted children need a Life Story Book. Whatever their age, it is never too early – or too late - to start a book if one has not been provided.

WHY SHARE A DIFFICULT HISTORY?

If adults seem reluctant to share information about the past with a child, this may suggest that there is something so 'bad' that the child will not be able to cope with it.

On some level, conscious or unconscious, the child will have memories of their early neglect or abuse. Not acknowledging the past could feed into the child's sense of shame or 'badness', and increase their fear of further rejection.

The past may be painful, but it is important to remember that the child has already lived through it and survived. Recalling it with a safe, trusted and nurturing adoptive parent should not re-traumatise them. On the contrary, it may be the beginning of a healing process.

There is some excellent guidance at www.lifestoryworks.org

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT UNDERLYING MESSAGES?

All adopted children have experienced separation and loss and they will have some attachment issues. Those who have been neglected or abused will have further difficulties resulting from their insecure attachments. They will have a low sense of self-worth, a mistrust of adults and a perception of the world as an unsafe place.

It is therefore important that the messages throughout the book should be:

- The child was loveable from birth
- Any neglect or abuse was not their fault
- They deserve good parenting
- They are very precious and loved
- They have a hopeful positive future.

If social workers have completed the book it needs to be shared with you, the adoptive parent, first. This will allow you to understand the significance of the information contained in it and the relevance of the social worker's comments.

It is vital that you, the adopter, are comfortable sharing the content of the book with your child. It will reassure the child that you know all about them and their past – and that you still find them loveable.

The actual process of telling a child's story will also help with attunement - the foundation of a healthy attachment. It is not just the words, it is tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures that are important, and the child's feelings and emotions can be gently explored and explained.

The book can be divided in to short 'chapters' and read in manageable chunks. Adopters should follow the child's lead, proceeding at their pace, spending time on sections that interest the child and reading in an unhurried way.

WHAT IF YOUR CHILD DOES NOT WANT TO USE THE BOOK?

Even when explained very sensitively, for some children, the history is so difficult that this approach may still be too direct and painful. For this reason, writing the book in the 3rd person and using the child's first name may be a more effective and gentle way of sharing difficult information, especially for a young child.

If this is still too direct, adopters may need to put the book to one side for a while. Sometimes more work on the present - and developing a sense of permanency - is needed, before a child can be helped to understand and process past events.

CAN THE ADOPTIVE PARENT MAKE CHANGES?

Adoptive parents will know their child better than anyone else and are in the best position to judge when further elaboration is needed or if wording needs to be changed.

If the adoptive parents feel uncomfortable with any part of the book, it is better to amend it so that it can be used, rather than just put aside.

FINAL THOUGHTS

'...to be able to develop new and satisfying relationships as an adult, the young person needs the security, the sense of belonging, being loved and loving that go with it - combined with the knowledge about his/her family of origin, past relationships and the interconnections between the past and present'. (Thoburn – Child Placement: Principles and Practice)

Adoptive parents will need to parent therapeutically - with empathy, with understanding of the child's 'inner world', and with an awareness of the impact that early experiences continue to have on the child's behaviour. To help them achieve this, their social worker will provide a 'later life letter', a chronology and a detailed history to share with the child at the appropriate times. Meanwhile, to enable them to start the re-parenting process they need a sensitively prepared Life Story Book. The book is the basic tool, the first 'tier' to build on, *at the child's pace*.

While acknowledging difficulties, sadness and loss, the book should also be a celebration of the child's life. It should leave the child with a positive sense of who they are and with hope for the future.