

# Life story book for children in care

## Guidance for staff in Children and Families

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# Contents

1. Introduction .....	3
2. Aim.....	3
3. Legislation.....	3
4. Purpose .....	3
5. What is a Life Story Book.....	4
6 The Life Story Book .....	5
7 Foster carers and residential staff.....	7
8 Monitoring Life Story Books .....	8
9 Children who are adopted.....	9
10 Further information.....	9

# 1. Introduction

1.1 This guidance:

- has been created because life story books should not just be completed when there is a plan of adoption. Life story books should be started as soon as possible after a child/young person comes into the care of the local authority;
- is for all social care staff, carers and other professional staff who work with children and young people in care to support them in preparing their life story book;
- sets out how Warwickshire County Council will support children and young people in care to understand their life journey;
- will ensure timely and clear planning for life story books;
- will ensure the relevant people are engaged;
- should be read and used in conjunction with the [life story book template](#).

## 2. Aim

2.1 For every child or young person who is in care, whatever their circumstances, to have an accurate chronological account of his/her life, which is relevant, has enduring value and can be shared with them in an age appropriate way.

## 3. Legislation

3.1 The following legislation and regulations underpin direct work with children and young people, including life story work:

[Children Act 1989](#);

[Adoption and Child Act 2002](#);

[Fostering Services Regulations 2011](#);

[Adoption Agency Regulations 2005](#).

## 4. Purpose

4.1 The purpose is to create a secure base for children/young people to safely explore their past, present and future. Life story books are crucial for children and young people who have been separated from their family and have experienced trauma and loss. They help children and young people to make

sense of their unique histories and life journeys with a view to gaining a greater sense of identity.

## **5. What is a Life Story Book**

- 5.1 A life story book contains a brief history of the child or young person, including any significant events. It is an ongoing piece of work while the child or young person is in care and should be started by the social worker as part of the care plan when the child/young person first comes into care.
- 5.2 Many children or young people in care do not enjoy the continuity of one family that other children/young people do. Most children/young people in care live with more than one foster family, have different social workers, homes, schools and communities, and may often have to move to different parts of the country. With so many changes, memories can become confused or even lost and the child/young person loses their sense of identity and self-worth. When children/young people lose track of their past, they may find it difficult to develop socially and emotionally. A life story book can help give the child or young person a better sense of identity by preserving their memories, making sense of the past, and filling in the gaps in their own recollections. A child/young person who has been brought up in their own family automatically has the family's collective shared history, and with that comes their identity.
- 5.3 All children/young people in care are entitled to an accurate knowledge of their past and their family, and need to understand why the separation occurred and why various adults have been unable to care for them. Gathering together facts about that life and the significant people in it and creating a life story book, helps provide structure for talking to children and young people, helping them to accept their past, understand their present situation and go forward into the future with this knowledge.
- 5.4 As well as preserving memories and helping the child or young person to form a sense of identity from their past, a life story book can also be used to prepare the child/young person for the future, for example, if they are going home, to another foster carer or to permanency, or leaving care.
- 5.5 Although the life story book is primarily for the child/young person it can also help the child/young person's new carer or adoptive parents better understand the child/young person's past and how it may impact on their behaviour. A good life story book is appropriate for the level of understanding of the child or young person, and will often be treasured by them in years to come.
- 5.6 Making a life story book is, therefore, more than creating a photograph album with dates, places and names. It is an account of a child/young person's life

in words, pictures and documents and an opportunity to explore emotions through play, conversation and therapeutic interventions. It should:

- Keep the child/young person at the centre of the story and journey;
- Keep as full a chronological record of a child/young person's life as possible;
- Contain balanced and relevant information;
- Be structured and understandable;
- Provide a basis on which continuing life story work can be added;
- Be something the child or young person can return to when he/she needs to deal with old feelings and clarify the past;
- Provide a structure for talking to children/young people about painful issues.

#### 5.7 Life story books help children and young people to:

- Understand their background and history of their birth family and who is important to them;
- Understand why they are separated from their birth family, know who has cared for them and put their past into perspective;
- Know where they came from and develop a sense of identity;
- Enhance their self-esteem and self-worth;
- Explore their feelings about their past and their journey to being in care
- and also articulate their wishes for the future, including any worries;
- Share their past with their carer's and others;
- Link the past and the present and to help both them and their carers understand how earlier life events continue to impact on behaviour;
- Acknowledge and help resolve issues of separation and loss and help to develop a sense of security;
- Enable carers to understand and develop empathy for the child/young person, promoting attunement and attachment.

## 6 The Life Story Book

### 6.1 Presentation is very important in terms of validating the importance of the life story and motivating the child/young person to want to read it and show it to others.

- Use [the life story book template](#) as a basis (be creative!);
- Use a presentation folder;
- Always work on clean paper;
- Use neat headings;
- If the child/young person is unable/reluctant to write things themselves, let them dictate what they want to say;

- Use good quality copies/photocopies of treasured photos, documents etc. and not the original;
- Get a balance of words and pictures;
- Keep an electronic copy of it.

6.2 Children/young people need truthful and honest explanations that they can understand - that means using language they know. When sharing life story books and discussing a child or young person's life journey, it is important that:

- Questions are answered as honestly as possible;
- Adults admit when they don't know the answer and offer to try and find out (rather than making something up);
- Children/young people are helped to accept that not everything can be explained or understood;
- Information is given sensitively and honestly - protection and evasion leads to confusion and fear;
- Adults help children/young people to realise which feelings are healthy and acceptable by discussing their own feelings frankly. If feelings are ignored, children/young people get the message that to express them is wrong; bottling them up can lead to negative behaviour like aggression or withdrawal;
- Adults never pretend abusive/bad relationships didn't exist;

6.3 The [life story book template](#) content includes:

- Personal details;
- Birth certificate;
- Birth details;
- Developmental information/chart/health reports;
- My Family Tree;
- Early life memories;
- Journey to foster care;
- Journey through foster care;
- Social workers;
- Education;
- Educational achievements;
- Activities/achievements/hobbies;
- Birthdays;
- Religious celebrations;
- Holidays;
- Friendships;
- Time with my family (contact);
- Space for list/photos of memory box items;
- Later life letter;

## 7 Foster carers and residential staff

7.1 Foster carers and residential staff are vital in collating information for life story books and are key contributors. They should be encouraged to take regular, good quality photographs of the child/young person. It is useful for foster carers to keep a memory box for/with the child/young person. These can include more photographs than are included in the life story book, items that link to an event, place or person in the child/young person's life, cards and trinkets the child/young person has received. These can have incredible significance for a child/young person in later life. It is important to keep a list of the items included in the memory box, including where they came from, who provided them and any reasons why they are thought to be special or significant. This list can be included in the life story book and on the child/young person's file.

7.2 Information that is relevant for foster carers and residential staff to share in the life story book include:

- Descriptions of what the child/young person was like when they arrived, what they liked and disliked;
- Details of development (e.g. learning to ride a bike);
- Their own special memories of the child/young person;
- Positive comments about the child/young person;
- Birthdays, Christmas and other family celebrations/outings/holidays etc. (photos, favourite places etc.)
- Details and photos of the foster family (including extended family), home, pets etc., who they liked and didn't like etc. their memories of the foster family etc.
- If appropriate, times when they had disagreements and how these were resolved;
- Special rituals the child/young person liked;
- Souvenirs of school, photos, certificates, reports, photos of and stories from teachers;
- Contact visits;
- Illnesses;
- Photos of birth family with foster family;
- Crafts/pictures completed in the foster home/school/playgroup;
- Anecdotes.

## 8 Monitoring Life Story Books

- 8.1 The case responsible social worker has overall responsibility for the completion of a child/young person's life story book. This work should be undertaken alongside other social care workers and professionals supporting the child/young person as well as their foster carers and birth family. It is important for the child or young person to be encouraged to participate in the formulation of their life story book. For sibling groups, while work may be undertaken individually or with siblings, the expectation is that each child/young person has their own, individual life story book.
- 8.2 At the first Looked After Review, arrangements for starting the life story book and who will contribute to this will be agreed. From this point forward, information should be gathered for the life story book whether or not the plan for the child/young person is rehabilitation, placement within the extended family or permanency (e.g. long term fostering, special guardianship or adoption). The aim is that all children/young people in care will have, as a minimum, their life story book started with the basic background information provided by the second Looked After Review (within 4 months of entering foster care).
- 8.3 Team managers should monitor the progress of life story book through monthly supervision. They should also check the life story book to ensure it is easy to understand and does not have any critical missing information.
- 8.4 The child's independent reviewing officer will review the progress of life story books with the child/young person at each Looked After Review. Should there be concerns that the life story book is not completed or progressing; this will be raised by the IRO with the relevant team manager and highlighted in the review monitoring report.
- 8.5 Life story books should be an ongoing agenda item in the foster carer's supervision.
- 8.6 Social care staff and foster carers will be trained in using the template and responsibilities for completing life story books will be explained. Additional training on communicating effectively with children/young people and the child's voice can be accessed via Wilma.



## 9 Children who are adopted

- 9.1 Life story work and existing life story books can be a useful preparation tool for children who are being placed for adoption. Every child who is placed for adoption is required to have a life story book completed by the second review of the adoptive placement; however, this has a different format to that set out within this guidance. They also require a Later Life Letter which should be completed within 10 days of the Adoption Order being made. For further information, please contact [Adoption Central England \(ACE\) Service](#).

## 10 Further information

[Life story book – Fostering Network](#)  
[Guidance - Life story work](#)