

Life Story Book Guidance

Policy Updated December 2020

1. Why a Life Story Book?

A Life Story Book is just one of the many elements of a child or young person's Life Journey Work. The Life Story Book is often considered to be the end product, while the life journey direct work is the process of helping the child and young people to internalise their story. While this may be the case for children in care, for pre-verbal and younger children who are adopted, the book may be the starting point. It will provide the foundation for the adoptive parent to help the child understand their early history and to answer the what, why, when and how questions they may have, in an age appropriate way and as they arise. It is the adoptive parent who will need to help the child process their information in the years ahead.

While some aspects of Life Journey Direct Work should be undertaken with all children in care, Life Story Books are only a statutory requirement for children placed for adoption. It is however, good practice for all children in permanent placements to have Life Story Books and we are committed to making this happen.

Creating a Life Story Book is more than compiling a photograph album with identifying sentences giving dates, places and names. It is the narrative story of the child's life in words and pictures, It needs to provide an honest, but sensitively written, account of the child's history and should be written in an age appropriate and child friendly way.

A Life Story Book should:

- Enable the child to understand and accept their history and not feel overwhelmed by it;
- Ensure that we do not feed into a child sense of shame and self-blame in relation to their early experiences;
- Increase a child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth;

- Integrate the present into the past and it should give the child a sense of a positive future;
- Provide a basis on which Life Journey Direct Work can continue;
- Be something the child can return to when he/she needs to deal with their feelings and clarify and/or help them to accept the past;
- Provide the words and structure for talking to children about both happy and sad memories.

2. Who Should Write the Life Story Book?

The Life Story Book, and other elements of Life Journey Work, should be co-ordinated by one person, usually by the child's social worker. The child, the child's birth parents, other birth relatives, foster carers, adoptive parents, Special Guardians, and anyone else of significance should be encouraged to contribute to the Life Story Book.

Time and care should be given to:

- Planning carefully how undertake the direct work;
- Reading the information about the child carefully and thoroughly;
- Collating the information in chronological order;
- Noting reasons for decisions;
- Noting gaps in the records and attempting to fill them;
- Counselling children, parents, friends, relatives and carers if necessary.

3. Compiling the Life Story Book

Remember that for adopted children and those in other permanent placements, Later Life Letters and various documents and reports, including the Child's Placement Report, may be available to the child at a later stage. The Life Story Book is just the first layer of information and a tool to be used by carers to help the child understand why he/she came into care and why and how subsequent decisions were made about their future.

- The Life Story Book needs to be written and presented in a way that is appealing to the child. It should invite the child into their story and should contain a mixture of scanned photographs, illustrations and colourful clipart;
- For young children, consider writing in the third person, so use the child's name instead of 'you' or 'me'. This tends to reflect the emotional and developmental age of many of the children you work with;
- Remember to thread positive subliminal messages throughout the book. The child is loved, loveable and precious. The book needs to raise their self-esteem;
- Do not inadvertently feed into the child sense of shame and self-blame. The book should give an honest explanation of the serious concerns leading to the child coming into care. It was the adults in the birth family who were not able to care for him/her in the way they deserved;
- Beginning the story with the child's birth and with the birth parents details and their history will be overwhelming for most children and is not a good way to promote a sense of security and attachment within the permanent/adoptive family;
- Children need to be claimed and to feel that they belong and the best way to promote this is to start the child's story more gently in the present, before discussing the early and often traumatic history;
- The preferred format would be: Present - Past- Present - Future. The child's history must be presented honestly in the book, but it should be safely contained and in proportion to the rest of the child's life;
- Divide the book into 8 or 9 manageable, child sized chapters.

4. Suggested Format

- **Present:** start where the child is now and scan in recent photographs of the child, description, favourite activities and with photographs of him with his/her family i.e. adoptive parents, long term foster carer, special guardian, photograph of any pets, house, bedroom, garden. Reinforce the child's need to belong and sense of permanency and security. Move on to details of current nursery or school and friends then onto:

- **Past:** Start with details of birth, where, date, time, weight and then introduce birth parents. Scan in photographs, if available, and give description, etc. Brief details of other children the birth parents may have had and current whereabouts, if known. Details of parent relationship and explanation of why the birth parents were not able to look after the child. Children need specific facts and concrete examples of what we mean by *not able to keep you safe or of being harmed or neglected*. She/he loved you, but couldn't look after you, is not enough of an explanation and do not use social work terminology. This part of the book should give a clear explanation of why the child came into care and lived with foster carers, while care proceedings concluded and legal decisions made. Information about and photographs of time spent with foster carers should be included. If birth parents met adopters or long-term foster carers mention this and scan in any photographs of this meeting. Any agreed contact arrangements or letterbox agreements could also be mentioned here;
- **Present:** Moving from foster care to live with his/her family. If this is an adoptive placement, do not refer to them as new parents or adoptive parents they are just parents, mum or dad etc thereby reinforcing again that sense of belonging and security. More information about the family, getting to know each other, reinforce child's sense of being loveable and loved, then the Adoption Hearing and the Celebratory Hearing. Give details and scan in photographs of this special day. Do not end the book here;
- **Future:** Finally give the child the sense of a positive and hopeful future, identifying a few plans and aspirations both short and long term;
- By using this approach the Life Story Book will not only help the child to integrated the present into the past, by looking to the future, it may also increase their sense of belonging, of security and of permanency.

There are many different ways of presenting the child's narrative story. In order for us to achieve an in-house standard the following guidelines should be considered:

- Drawings and photos should be mounted;
- Where possible and suitable in the story use the child's words;
- Use good quality copies/photocopies of treasured photos, documents etc. and not the original;
- Get a balance of words and pictures;
- A responsible adult should keep hold of the book until it is finished;
- A copy should always be kept on file.

The life story book will be completed ideally in Power Point format and all direct work, photos, other scanned material will be incorporated into the book. The completed Power Point document will be uploaded onto the child's electronic file as PDF document. The children or young people will receive an A4 size hard copy of the book and also electronic Power Point and PDF copies either via secure email or uploaded onto a USB drive.

5. Preparation before compiling the book

The following are some of the information and documents you might gather while preparing to write the book or doing life journey work with the child. Not all of these need to be included in the child's Life Story Book. We do not want to overwhelm and should remember that it is the child's story, the child's journey through care, not the birth parents story.

For all children, but for those who are adopted in particular, and with the rise in social networking sites, we need to be mindful of how much identifying information is included in the actual book. The birth certificate for instance gives not only the birth mother and possibly the birth father's full names, but also the home address at time of birth, and they may still be there many years later. While this is ultimately the child's information and the details need to be recorded, consideration should to be

given about how and when these details are shared and some risk assessment is essential. For most children the Life Story Book is just the first layer of information.

When working with older children and young people who remain in care, then disclosing identifying information may not raise the same concerns. They usually retain their birth surnames; they may already have many other details and may still be in touch with members of the birth family.

- Family tree - back three generations if possible;
- Photos of maternity hospital (and, for younger children, a clock showing the time);
- Weight, length, head circumference at birth;
- Any items from the hospital (e.g. identity tag);
- Dates of first smile, sounds, words, tooth, steps etc;
- Photos of birth parents;
- Photos and maps of places where the child lived but not actual addresses just name of town or general area if the risk of putting the actual town is too high;
- Photos of birth relatives;
- Photos of friends;
- A truthful life history - including abuse, neglect etc. - that is age appropriate to the child. More detail can be added later as the child needs to know;
- Parents' stories;
- Details of siblings;
- The child's views and memories;
- Photos of workers and their roles;
- Story of the court process;
- Photos of previous foster carers;
- If in permanent placement photographs of adopters, special guardians or long term foster carers;
- Story of family finding;
- Details of ceremonies (e.g. baptism);
- Anecdotes;
- Favourite foods, likes and dislikes.

6. Foster Carers / Residential Staff

Foster families and residential staff should be encouraged to record the story of the child's stay with them as fully as possible. Foster carers must 'encourage the child to reflect on and understand her/his history, according to the child's age, and to keep appropriate memorabilia'. All children in care should have a memory book and foster carers should be encouraged to compile a photograph album and Memory Book recording information and significant events throughout the time the child lives with them. The Memory Book is not the same as the Life Story Book, but some of the information from the Memory Book and some of the photographs should be incorporated into this. The foster carer's Memory Book could include:

- Descriptions of what the child 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;
- Birthdays, Christmases 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 got on with and who they didn't;
- If appropriate, times when they had arguments, sulks etc;
- Special rituals the child 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.

7. Using the Life Story Book

Children need truthful and honest explanations that they can understand - that means using language and terms that are familiar to them and age appropriate.

The child's story should flow and provide a coherent narrative; the adoptive parent or carers need to be able to read it aloud to or with the child. This process of sharing the story is as important as the actual content. The child is aware that the adult knows all about him/her and that it's okay.

It is important that:

- Questions are answered honestly and explanations are given in an age appropriate way, taking into account the child's level of understanding and stage of development and not just their chronological age;
- Adults admit when they don't know the answer and offer to try to find out (rather than making something up);
- Children are helped to accept that not everything can be explained or understood and that the child and the adults involved in their lives may all have slightly different perceptions on what actually happened;
- Information is given sensitively and honestly - protection and evasion leads to confusion and fear;
- Adults help children to realise that different feelings are healthy and acceptable, but it is how they express those feelings that may cause difficulties. e.g. having cross feelings is okay, but expressing those feeling by kicking the dog, or hurting your mum is not okay, etc. Much of life journey work with children is not only helping them to understand their feelings, but it is also enabling them to recognise and express their emotions in more positive ways. It may be helpful to discuss our own feelings frankly, but care needs to be taken not to project our own emotions and experiences onto the child. If feelings are ignored, children get the message that to express them is wrong - bottling them up can lead to negative behaviour like aggression or withdrawal;

- Adults should never pretend abusive/unhealthy relationships did not exist.

8. Children who are adopted

Where there is an adoption plan for a Looked after Child, life story work should be part of the preparation of the child for the adoptive placement. The life story book and “memory box” should be co-ordinated by one person, preferably the child's social worker, and given to the child and prospective adopter in stages. The first stage is at the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopter. The completed Life Story Book should be handed to the adoptive parents, together with Later Life Letters, within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.

9. Children who remain in the Care of the Local Authority

Children who remain in the care of the local authority will undergo Life Story Work as part of the ongoing direct work undertaken by their Social Worker and the Life Story Book will be a vital tool in this work to promote a knowledge, understanding and insight into their current situation and also ensure that they have the information they need and require with regards to their birth family and life before coming into care.

For all children, young people and care leavers the life story book will be an ongoing process regardless their legal status. The last section of the book should remain ‘Future’ as mentioned above, *‘By looking to the future, it will increase the children and young people’s sense of belonging, self-worth, self-esteem and a sense of security and of permanency.*