

EXAMPLE GUIDE FOR A LIFE STORY BOOK

This is a guide showing one way of doing a Life Story Book. This child is 7 years old. This example is anonymised and has been done by Natalie. The child has been in his adoptive home for 5 years. For more information and ideas see book list, website list, 'Difficult Stories' and 'Social Work Perspective'.

JAMES'S LIFE STORY BOOK

Start the book with the above statement on the cover of hard back folder [A4 best]. Get the child to help you with the decoration as their taste dictates. It can be best to do this at the end of the creation of the book when they are taking some pride and interest in it. Take a photo of them that they approve of to go on the inner sleeve of first page as an introduction to them.

These books are written using 'He/She' unless the child is writing parts directly. This helps to give some healthy emotional distance from the story and lessens the intensity when reading through it or having it read aloud.

We start with the present for the first third of the book, then to the past [birth history and why they came into care] and then the final third can be the present again. The most challenging section to find the words for is of course the middle section and 'Difficult Stories' can help with this. Guidance Notes in GREEN are put in where relevant.

An Introduction to James

THIS BOOK IS THE STORY OF JAMES'S LIFE.

MY NAME IS JAMES. JAMES MEANS Try and find positive meanings here!

I AM SEVEN YEARS OLD. MY BIRTH DAY IS ON THE 17th DECEMBER.

I AM 1 METRE AND 38 CENTIMETRES TALL.

I WEIGH 5 AND A HALF STONE

I GO TO MERRYTWINKLE SCHOOL.

I AM BORN IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER. THE SEASON OF MY BIRTH IS WINTER.

MY FAVOURITE COLOUR IS GOLD!

Get Child to either write this section or fill in one word at the end of each sentence if they are not inclined to write! Cover these topics anyway you want. You will discover what the child feels is important to say about themselves and culture. You could write the first section in their favourite colour. Photos of the child doing things they enjoy and with their adoptive family can be useful here.

Suitable positive images of their name and favourite colour/meal/sport can be found for the section of the book on the present.

James's Present Home

JAMES LIVES AT 11 MERRYVALE CLOSE IN LONDON.

HERE IS A PICTURE OF JAMES'S HOUSE:

JAMES LIVES WITH HIS MUMMY AND DADDY AND HIS SISTER, JAYNEY.

Find a google maps image of home on internet in photo form and map form. Or they could draw a picture of their neighbourhood/house.

James has written down some of the things in life that he likes.

Stick a piece of paper in the book with the list above.

This is James's Castle with all the people he wants to be in it.....

A useful exercise to find out how the child feels about people is to draw the outline of a castle with nothing in it. Ask them to imagine they own the castle and ask them to put the people they want inside it. They may draw or write. This may or may not give rise to conversation but is a good way of getting into their world. A significant part of my visits involve relaxing the child through playing sensory games, acting feelings out and reading stories to them [see book list and Social Work perspective].

Here is a picture of Natalie who did this life story book with me.

Here is a chart of when she visits me. I tick off the dates she comes. She visited me 8 times to do this book.

Depending on their age it is likely they will remember doing the book with you and the visits will be significant. Try not to cancel at the last minute and give warning as the work comes to an end. The box chart of visits you create will do this for you. I get the child to tick off my visits or put a cross if one gets cancelled.

The Present Family

My Family

My Family's Hand Prints

Jayne

James

Mummy

This is a section that children can enjoy creating with their families. Making hand prints and a self portrait can go here too. Painting a life sized self portrait can be fun. Finding the right colour for skin tone can lead to conversations about culture, race and difference. Photos and drawings can be stuck in here and this section may take a few pages.

A Sense of Time

There are FOUR SEASONS in a Year
WINTER is the season when James was born.
SPRING
SUMMER
AUTUMN

Choose images of seasons from 'Google images' of seasons on Internet. Otherwise do a collage with magazines of the seasons. This section gets them thinking about time in a general way and you can discuss what season their friends/families birthday's are in. This section can take up several pages.

Feelings

There is a need for a section on feelings. Being able to articulate their own feelings and have some understanding of these is necessary to then be able to understand what they might have felt in the past and to have a conversation about what their birth parents situation might have been feeling. This is essential to understanding their story. There are many ways of working with feelings. Googling feeling faces and acting out feelings through puppets, making funny faces, playing with

toys are all routes of doing this. This section can include a summary of what games and ideas you have shared- a photo of a pack of cards, a mask, drawings or paintings of feelings eg a huge volcano for anger. Stick the photos in if the original objects are too big for the book. This section may cover several pages. The adopters can help with this when you are not there. I use Word Art, Clip Art, Google images and rainbow imagery in and around the text so the appearance of the life story book is lively and dynamic. Create a picture or make lists of things that make the child feel happy, sad and/or angry.

Here are some ideas that might be helpful.

This is a Mary Corrigan Exercise for talking about feelings and gives some instant access to them.

The child finishes the sentences and the adult jots down what they say. Move swiftly on to the next sentence if the child can't think of anything to say. The child finds it easier to respond without eye contact so usually I sit beside them looking straight ahead. I don't analyse what they have said at the time with them but could come back to anything that feels important another time.

I like my -

It is hard for me to -

Sometimes I'm afraid to -

I would like a great big -

I hate it when -

I like to pretend I have -

I feel silly when -

When I grow up I want -

I don't like to -

I would hate to lose my -
I love to give -
I was really scared when -
I was very happy the time that -
I would not like to live without -
I wish I could -
I wish people would stop -
I feel sad when -
I feel happiest when -
At night I like to -
I'm very good at -
I'd use a magic word to -
I don't like it when people -
I feel like crying when -
Something at home I like very much is -
One of the best things about me is -
I sometimes wonder if -
I feel happy when people -
If I were a bird I would -
If I were older/younger -

This is an example of how you might write/ talk with a child about some feelings;

There are many more feelings which you will experience as you get older. James and Natalie have only named and acted out a few. Sometimes the feelings all mix up with each other, a bit like the colours of a rainbow can. Everyone feels all these feelings at different times and the thing about feelings is that they never stay quite the same. Here are some pictures of faces with feelings.

Happy is when you feel very smiley!

Great is when you feel fine.

Sad is when you feel like crying.

Guilty is when you wish you had not done something.

Jealous is when you want something that someone else has got.

Surprised is when you see something new like presents on your birthday!

Angry is when you feel red inside and want to shout and hurt something or someone.

Puzzled is when you feel muddled.

Do you want to put some colour in these faces?

Here is a picture of a volcano I have drawn!

Here are some faces with feelings I have made!

Here is a mask with an angry face and a happy face!

This is an example of the type of faces on the internet available. Many are in colour.

A Babies Needs

This is a picture of some of the things that a baby needs.

A baby needs

Cuddles

Toys

Blankets

A cot

Nappies

To be Clean

And to sleep.....

This section prepares the child for the beginning of their history. I find colourful images on the internet to illustrate the above. Depending

on the child a picture of puppies or kittens curled up together for cuddles. For toys I put an image of a mobile above a baby showing that even tiny babies need stimulation. For nappies, I found a picture of lots of babies from around the world all in nappies on their backs smiling. A baby bath for cleanliness and a cot with a baby in it for sleep. I also bring a baby doll in and give it to the child and role play how it might be looked after. I then talk about all these things as being part of the love that a mother gives a baby.

Love

Most people who have children love and want to keep them. But love is not just a feeling - it is an action. True love is giving someone what they need to be happy and safe. We already know how many things babies need. If a parent loves a child in their heart but can not give them what they need then their love is limited and may not be good enough for a child.

It is important that the discussion of feelings leads on to something on Love. Everyone involved in the child's life is keen to inform the child that their parents loved them and yet this so often leaves the child confused since their life history when it is revealed to them often shows their parents had priorities which are at odds with the meaning of the word 'love'.

James's Birth

James was born at this Hospital. He was born at 8.35pm on the 18th December 2003. He weighed 8 pounds when he was born which is about the same weight as four bags of sugar.

Most hospitals have pictures of their buildings on the internet. If not

then ring the hospital and ask for their Press and Publicity Department and them to e mail you photos of the hospital. If you do not know the hospital the GP records should have a record of it. Google images of bags of sugar or baked beans or chocolate or whatever the child would like to as an image to show their birth weight. Make this page bright and joyful.

Use www.dayofbirth.co.uk. This is good for simple facts for children on their date of birth eg how many hours/days/seconds old they are/ birth stones/what animal in Chinese year they are etc.

Use www.infoplease.com/year. This site has lots of information on films, music, politics, sporting events etc in the year of birth.

Use www.behindthename.com. This has information about the meaning of names from all over the world.

Pictures of Birth Family

Here is my Tummy Mummy/Birth Mummy/Mother.

Here is my Birth Father/Birth Granny/Grandmother

Here is my Birth Sister. I still see Leon, Nadia and Jordan so I know what they look like now.

As many pictures as possible of the birth family need to go in this section; even if they are not of good quality or not flattering. If the pictures of the parents are particularly disturbing to the child this might need further exploration but in most cases a photo is better than no photo. A copy of the child's birth certificate could go into an envelope on this page and get mentioned as well.

James's Birth Family

James's roots come from his birth family but the family that he has

forever is the one that he lives with. Their family tree is in this book too.

James came from a Tummy Mother and a Birth Father who also have lots of relatives which are people that James does not know. They are relatives through his birth family.

A family tree can be drawn out in the traditional way or if this becomes too complex and there are many gaps, different images of trees from Google Art or Word Art can form the backdrop for short sentences about each relative.

Information to show you all those in your birth family that we know about.

Birth Father- Marvin Watts. In 2011 he would be 42 years old. Marvin had eight brothers and sisters. He was born in Archway in London and lived in London all his life.

Michael had a job as a Wood Grader before he stopped working. What is a Wood Grader? You might be interested in reading this when you are older.

Pictures of wood grading and information about wood grading put in here. It is useful to add and expand on anything positive known about the birth parent.

James's Birth Grandmother was called Bernadette Thame. Marvin has a sister called Trudy who we will talk about later in the book.

Marvin told Social Workers that he had eight other children.

Marvin's parents were from a Caribbean island [in the Caribbean

Sea] near America. The Caribbean island that Marvin's parents were from is called Barbados.

Here are some pictures of Barbados.

Birth Mother- Her name is Doreen Crane. She will be 35 years old and was born on the.

Doreen is Welsh and was the second eldest of four children. Doreen moved to London from Wales when she was six years old.

Here are some images of Wales.

There is a wealth of information on the Internet. This is an opportunity to put neutral bits of information about the parents disconnected from the abuse/neglect. If you know positive facts about them then don't hesitate to find appropriate imagery and stick it in.

Country and Culture

This is also an opportunity to explore the culture and heritage of the child. Find the national flag and talk about language, religion and diet in different cultures. Do what feels relevant and helpful and interests the child here. Here lies the space and place to talk about all that is positive about cultural origins the child may not be aware of.

This is the house that Leon, Nadia, Jordan and James all lived in with Doreen before they went into foster care.

Doreen has had five children.

They are;

Leon He was born on the. Age 15

Nadia. She was born on the. Age 12

Jordan. He was born on the. Age 8

James. You know when you were born! Age 7

Jake. He was born on the. Age 4

Above are the facts about the family that set the scene for the beginning of child's life.

The story follows:

The Reasons Why Doreen and Marvin were not able to look after James

Doreen already had three children when James was born and she was not managing very well with them.

Natalie and James have talked about the reasons for this together.

James had an older brother called Leon and he was born on 1994 which would have made him 9 years old when James was born. Nadia came next and she was born on the 1998 which made her 4 years old when James was born.

Jordan came after Nadia and you know that he is only 11 months older than you so would have been 11 months old when you were born!

Jake was born when all the other children had gone to foster carers. He was born on the 2006 and is four years old.

All of you had different birth fathers to each other. This means that your siblings are often called 'half brothers' or 'half sister' which just means that you are connected to each other through your birth mother, Doreen, and not through your fathers.

James's Time at Home with Doreen

Doreen was finding life very difficult at the time that you got born. She had three young children and she has said that she had no control of any of them. Doreen did not have a family who could help her very much and by the time you were born she was not speaking to her mother.

The sort of help she needed would have been help with the house cleaning, clothes washing, hovering, looking after the babies [James and Jordan] whilst she took the older children to school. She was also lonely as she did not have many friends. She would have liked someone to talk to and get advice from about how to be a good parent. When Doreen got offered courses by social workers to help with caring for Nadia and Leon, she was not good at going to them or keeping appointments.

Sometimes Doreen would get very fed up and sad so she would either ignore her children [not pick them up when they cried or talk nicely with them] or she would shout at them. Leon and Nadia got very fed up as they did not get any treats or taken out to interesting places. So they got bored and noisy which made Doreen feel worse, The feelings between Doreen and her children were often sad and angry by the time Jordan and James got born.

Marvin

Marvin was one of Doreen's friends and she had known him for about nine years as a friend when she got pregnant with James. Marvin was so pleased when he heard about the fact that Doreen was pregnant with his baby. Doreen said that he was 'thrilled to bits'. Doreen also said that Marvin had always treated her well as his friend and never got angry and never hit her [which of course adults should not do to each other].

The only problem was that Marvin was not living with Doreen so could not be an everyday father to James. Marvin could not live with Doreen because he had got himself in trouble with the police.

Doreen tells us that Marvin was someone who had trouble controlling his feelings. She said that he took drugs. Drugs are illegal which means they are against the law and the police and the Judges in the Courts can punish you if they find you taking them. Drugs are like a bad medicine that no Doctor would give you because they can make you very ill and very mean.

The trouble is that, a bit like chocolates and fizzy drinks, they can make you feel great for a while but like chocolate if you ate it all the time you would get very, very fat and ill. Grown ups tell you how much chocolate is safe for your body to eat. Drugs are like this and are only legal if a Doctor gives them to you or you buy them in a chemist where the amount you have is controlled by someone who understands how they work. Bad drugs can even kill you if a Doctor is not controlling them [which they don't do if they are illegal]. All you can think about is getting more of the drug [which seems as important as chocolate does to you!] Drugs are expensive and Marvin did not earn much money so very soon he was stealing to get money for the drug which is what came first for him.

So, you probably know now that Marvin got caught by the police for stealing and had to go to prison for five years although we don't know whether he spent all that time there. Sometimes people get let out earlier for 'good behaviour'. The important thing for James and Doreen is that Marvin was not around when he was needed. He was not there when James was born or for all the time he was with his birth family. He was not there to take care of James or help Doreen with James. Doreen told the social worker that Marvin used to ring her up after

James was born every week from prison to find out how James was. Blood tests

Doreen's Feelings at this time

James's home for the time that he lived there was smelly [as Doreen did not always change the babies nappies and Nadia wet the bed which also did not get changed very often]. Nadia often changed your nappies for you and became like a little mummy at only 5 years old.

The home was also dirty and social services were informed that rats were living in the home at the time James and Jordan were babies. We know from Leon and Nadia's records that there was often not enough food in the house so they were sometimes found in the streets looking for food in bins. Doreen's children could get very hungry when there was no food in the house.

Doreen sometimes went out as she felt so fed up with having to care for all her children alone. She was very sad and angry at times and did not feel like picking up the babies when they cried. It was sometimes hard for Doreen to care about anything and the workers at the Family Centre who tried to help her later on in James's first year said she was very 'flat'.

This means it was hard for her to smile and laugh or cry or feel very much. She knew when she got pregnant with James that she might not be able to give him what mothers are meant to give their children; love, warmth, comfort. She did wonder what she should do and whether adoption by another family might be the best upbringing for James and spoke about it with social workers. However as James grew older [and he was a gorgeous baby according to all the social work records] it was very hard for Doreen to think about parting from him as she grew to love him. This did take her some time.

Help for Doreen

The Doctors did give Doreen some medicine in March 2004 [when James was three months old] which helped her with her sad feelings. The pills were called Anti- Depressants which are for people who are 'depressed' which is a grown up way of saying feeling very fed up and sad. It can be like an illness as it stops people from wanting to do anything and feel in control of their life. If they have children it affects everyone as children need grown ups to survive.

Doreen said at the time she often just wanted to stay in her small flat and she even wondered if people were staring at her wondering about James being her only black child. Doreen seemed to think that this was a problem and it is true that there are some ignorant people who feel being of one colour skin is better than being of another coloured skin. This can be called 'racism' which I know you can talk about with your Mummy and Daddy.

When James was five months old [in May 2004] things got a little better. Social workers were now trying to help Doreen and knew that none of the children were having a very good time as they were not getting enough love and attention.

Trudy

Marvin could not help but Marvin's sister who was called Trudy who really loved James and wanted to care for him very much. Social Workers also visited James's grandmother who was able to tell them a bit more about the paternal family. Marvin's father had died already but had been a very strict father when he was alive.

Every weekend for about three months Trudy would care for James and sometimes took him to see Marvin in prison. Trudy was married and

her husband also loved caring for James.

Trudy was a bit nervous of her brother as he could have a very bad temper and she was asked if she could care for James for ever by the Social Workers when they realised how bad things were for Doreen's children. Trudy knew that Marvin would have liked someone in his family to look after James.

Trudy said that much as she loved James she would not feel safe having Marvin in her life when he left prison as she did not get on well enough with him. Doreen changed her mind about Trudy caring for James and by the summer of 2004 said she did not want Trudy to have James.

Trudy then stopped having James for the weekends [this had lasted from March to May 2004].

Assessments

Doreen got an assessment at a Family Centre by August 2004 when you were 9 months old. She would go there with you all every day and Staff would try to help teach her to be a good enough mummy. She would go back home and spend the nights at her flat. The workers at the Family Centre noticed that the baby's bottles were often very dirty and that she was giving James cow's milk instead of special baby milk. She was also forgetting to mash up baked beans for James who was not strong enough to eat them unmashed. Doreen did not agree with the advice she was given on this.

This was also the summer when a light fitting in the bathroom at the flat fell on your head and you had to go to Accident and Emergency. You had a bloody cut but luckily you were fine although it must have given everybody a big fright! This really was a horrid accident.

One day because Doreen was not looking out for James enough on one occasion he did fall out of the bouncy chair and banged his head hard and got a big bruise. Babies need lots of looking out for by their parents so they don't have accidents too often and Doreen didn't seem to do this enough.

Social workers felt James was in the Baby Bouncer too much of the time or left in the play pen for too long or even left in the buggy in the house when James should have been free to move about as he wanted. One day in April 2004 a social worker visited the home and James was fast asleep on the floor with his head near a plastic bag.

Sometimes social workers visited and all the lights were off and nobody appeared to be in. It was believed that Doreen was leaving all the children alone and we know that the electricity would sometimes run out as there was not enough money for the meter that worked it. It must have been frightening for James waking in the night in the dark and not having a Mummy to hold him and comfort him. Nadia and Leon did their best but they were only children. In May Nadia told her teacher that James sometimes cried because Doreen hit him.

James used to get nappy rash which is a red stingy rash that comes on a baby's bottom. It can get bad when a baby has been left too long in a nappy. At the Family Centre the workers noticed that Doreen often felt too tired to change your nappies and had to be told to do them.

There was not one thing that happened that made social workers decide that your birth home was not the right place for you to stay.

After the assessment at the Family Centre [in November 2004] and lots of interviews with Doreen, everyone involved decided that Doreen was not going to be able to learn all she that she needed to know to be

a good enough mother for all of you.

This is the Family Centre where Doreen got assessed. It is also where all the brothers and their sister saw each other when they went into foster care before Oliver was born.

Some pictures of the Family Centre/Assessment Centre/Contact Centre can be useful here. They are easily obtained on Google maps as the child is likely to remember these venues and it helps put the story into context for them.

The story above is my personal style and I have put the headlines in and structured it as I thought it would best be understood by James. My view on life stories is that it is best to be as honest as possible and if there are particular incidents which illustrate how the children's needs were not met then they need to go in. The child's mind needs concrete examples to work with and not social work abstractions. How much the child can take is a judgement for you as the social worker in consultation with others who know the child. Use the Difficult Stories booklet I have written for further ideas as to how to write to children. Keep a sense of time through the story. Before you read the story out to the child make sure you have already explored it with them in bite sized pieces through your sessions with them so that it is not the first time they have heard it. They will usually not 'hear' what they are not ready to understand. I always read the child care files thoroughly and not just the Form E/Child Permanency Report as detail and atmosphere is often neglected or missed if panel reports are solely relied upon.

Foster Care

All Doreen's children were put in foster care whilst plans for their future got made by Social Workers, their Managers and the Courts.

This happened on the 1st December 2004 just before your first birthday.

First of all James went to stay with Dina Cant. She loved having James and Natalie has spoken to her and she remembers what a good and gorgeous baby James was.

After three months and a half months with Dina, Dina realised that she was pregnant and needed to give time to her growing family so very sadly realised that James would have to move on. They made a lovely book of photos for James which he still has. The book covers the time they had lived with you and enjoyed you for. James left Dina to go and live with Michelle and Dan Withers in the spring time- March 15th 2005.

James stayed with Michelle and Dan until February 13th 2005 [winter time] when he moved to Merryvale Close where he still is today.

Michelle and Dan also made a wonderful photo album of James's time with them which James has in a plastic box. Sometimes James still sees Michelle and Dan as they live close by and have many happy memories of their time caring for James.

I write to the foster carers for up to date letters if there are none on the file of their memories of the child. I Google their addresses and put all the names of their children down. I see whether it would be helpful for there to be meetings between adopters and foster carers. Put some Google art images of treasure boxes to begin to brighten up this section.

Here is James with Dina.

James lived with his first foster carer Dina Cant from December 2004

to March 2005. He was 1 year old when he arrived and 1 year and three months old when he left because Dina was very pregnant.

Dina lived at Saltwater Drive in Eadrake. Here is a picture of her street.

The Walsh Family. Here they are

James stayed with this family from March 2005 to February 2006. He was 2 years old when he left.

Emily Michelle James and Dan on their way to church.

James and his villages. We have looked at his own early moves with houses from this village.

I find that taking model villages [cheap from MUJI] is a great way for children to play and to see their inner world as well as making sense of their moves eg from hospital to home to foster home to adoptive home. Buildings can represent court, Family Centres and relatives' houses. When discussing the moves you can speculate about what feelings the child might have gone through.

James Life in Years and Seasons

I divide the years into four small boxes per row depicting first the season of their birth eg winter, spring, summer and autumn. A symbol is picked from google images for each season [eg fir tree for winter] and then one row forms one year of the child's life.

This allows the child to see their life and age in visual form through the seasons [they have earlier drawn]. It now just needs small stickers

with dates or arrows to the relevant season to mark the key events [birth/move to foster care/move to adoptive home/date of adoption]. Begin in the season they were born-the boxes will move about- and write their changing age at the end of each row.

You can talk about the child's arrival in the home and get the adopters to write something about the arrival of the child; the excitement and the planning for the child's arrival that took place. A few memories of the first few months in the home could be written about.

Adoption

'Adoption' is the word to describe what happens when a court says that a child gets a different family from the one they were born into [their birth family].

On Adoption Day the whole family goes to Court. A Judge said that you have become a full part of the family you live with and can have their name too. This change lasts forever and means you will live with them for the rest of your childhood and even when you are an adult if you all want to!

Here is a copy of James's Adoption Certificate.

This certificate is given by the Court to James's mummy and daddy. The certificate makes your adopted name the one that everyone can use for you in the eyes of the law. It will be on your passport and when you grow up it will go on your driving licence!

Here is the Court where you were adopted!

Here is a copy of James's Adoption Certificate!

Here is a picture of you with your family outside the court on Adoption Day! This is **Name of Social Worker** the social worker who found your family.

Judges who can be women or men usually wear wigs when they are in Court.

Did your judge have a wig on? If you can't remember your mummy and daddy might. People believe that the wigs help the judges seem wise and intelligent!

James has drawn some portraits of his family!

James has painted a big picture of himself. It is life sized and fills up the whole table. Above are some of his comments about himself.

Here are some more photos of James doing things he enjoys and spending time with his family in all the different seasons and through the years he has lived with them!

If the adoption involves direct contact with the birth family then pictures of the child seeing members of the birth family can also continue in this last section. It may be a good idea to let the adoptive family help the child with the final part of the book. It can be symbolic of time passing to find pictures of the child in the different seasons eg eating Easter Eggs, on a beach in the summer, Halloween time, and Christmas time. Photos of the whole adoptive family doing things together here are helpful in this section. There could also be space for certificates of achievements at school or in hobbies [swimming certificates etc] if the child wants them placed here.

You could mention that the future is tomorrow, next month, next year, when you grow up and ask the child to draw something they would like to happen in their future.

Natalie Salaman
Adoption Support Worker
July 2011.