

A Social Work Perspective on Life Story Work and Life Story Books

What to do and how to begin

My experience with life story work and creating books comes from my work as a social worker where I don't have the intimate understanding and knowledge of a child that a parent has. The bonus of no personal history with the child is that I have found it can be a freeing experience for them to communicate about themselves and their past with a sympathetic and interested stranger. Holding the dual role of social worker allows me to explain why they were removed from their birth parents and take responsibility for this as I talk about the job I do.

The reality for most adopters is that the life story book hasn't been done or is no longer relevant to their child and the social work resources to do this are rarely available post order. These notes are for adopters in this situation who want to create a book and do the work around this with their children. Some of these tips in how I have worked may be helpful for you as parents although of course there will be differences.

There is no one right way but this section aims to inspire ideas for the book and for communication with a child. I believe that it is the lack of acknowledgement of the impact of the early past and silence on the subject that create tension in the child and those around them.

I feel that the golden opportunity for creating a book that the child will really use comes before the age of 12, as this is often the time that children find it most easy to engage in creative activities and their defences against adults introducing painful topics with them may not be so strong. Of course it is still possible to create one with them after this age but the bulk of my experience has been with children under 12 and this section reflects that. The likelihood is that touching on the child's past once a teenager will be in the form of conversations and 'Difficult Stories' may be helpful in thinking about these talks. It is for you as a parent to consider at what level of emotional maturity or intellectual

ability your child is at and what you want to use or experiment with.

The ideas that I use come from discussions with colleagues, adopters, adopted adults, workshops, books, training and courses. I also use what has come from me and felt right with a particular child at a particular moment. Please also look at the book list. I have included books for reading with young children [most of these not written with a therapeutic intent] that are a good way of exploring their inner world.

I always try to relax the child at the beginning of a session by playing a game they like for example snap or dominoes letting them win if these feels right! I also find sensory play [water or sand] can be good for relaxing them into a different dimension than conscious thoughts or concerns. For example I have filled an old empty plastic tub of icecream with dry white kidney beans which are smooth and cheap. I then have buried small objects [key, kinder egg, spinning top, bouncy ball] and timed child with eyes closed feeling for them with fingers. Each week we repeat this at the start. If a child has wanted a story I often read the Trace Moroney Feeling series [short books about a rabbits different feelings]. If they choose the story and it is short, this can be a good calming way to start.

Timing

In the first session with a child I start by introducing myself and saying that I am someone who works with children who are adopted and help them to understand the reasons they are adopted. I say that I want to make a book with them about the story of their life and that I will do the writing bit but I will need their help to do this.

I explain that I will be taking it away with me until it is finished and that it will then become their book to keep. They will then be able to decide who looks at it and where they keep it and if they want to add or take anything away from it

I say that I am going to be visiting for about six sessions but it could be a more or less depending on how we get on with creating the book. As an adopter it could be less time as a lot of social work time goes to putting the child at ease and playing getting to know you games.

I say that I won't be with them for more than an hour although it could be less than this.

For a parent I believe it would be important to set aside the time as special time with the child and let them know when this is going to be e.g. Wednesdays after school for a limited time where there are unlikely to be interruptions. It is important to let them know an approximate amount of times you feel you will work on it with them. Even if it turns out to be more than five or six sessions, if this is what you have stated, you can then ask how they feel about doing more once the promised amount has been passed.

It might be useful to have a discussion with the child or between the two of you [if there are two of you] to decide on who does what with the child and whether it would feel right or not to have both of you doing it together.

In terms of how long you work with your child, this will depend on their age and concentration span and their willingness to engage with you.

We do not want the book to feel like 'homework' and for this reason it is usually best that it is actually written by the adult with the child contributing to it as much as feels possible.

How I have created The Book Itself

You will see some examples of a life story book on this site and you will also see in 'Difficult Stories' suggested ways of approaching the

situations that can lead children to adoption [or equally situations that children who are not adopted might have lived through]. We hope that you will pick out which ones are relevant to your child's story and adapt them to the specific circumstances in your child's life adding names and details as you think appropriate.

I have normally used A4 sized sheets to write in and draw on just because this is a common size for a folder and life story books generally to be, but of course children's art work does not neatly conform to this size and you may want to use a larger style folder and paper. If art work gets too large for the folder then take photos of it and stick these in the book.

I would advise to keep the written parts at this size as this makes for the most comfortable reading, if you decide to type; a font of 16 looks attractive. The books I have created have run to about 50 pages long but much of this is art work and easily digestible. It is important that the book does not turn in to an enormous photo album with an overload of certificates and memorabilia as its chief function is to tell the story of the early events.

This does not mean the book has to be dominated or consumed by the early life events and I would normally anticipate that a third of the book would be about the child's present life and some examination of the world of feelings and the passage of time [please see the example]. The middle section would tell the story that led to the adoption and the final section would cover the adoption itself and some of the family activities that have taken place since this time and lead right up to the present moment. You could then continue to add to the book with ongoing information if the child wants this or just begin a fresh new book for ongoing family life if this feels right for you. This book you are creating is going to be slightly different from any other family album as it is in effect, your child's unique story.

I would always suggest that the book is laminated once it is finished. Often children who are angry will destroy something important to them

and a life story book which contains material that can be at times as threatening to their self esteem as enhancing of it, may be attacked. For this reason I would also suggest scanning or photocopying it so that if it does get damaged there is at least a record which at some point may be valuable to them.

The first section: the Immediate Present.

The child can refer to themselves in the first person as 'I' in this section if they are involved in the actual writing of this part of the book. If it is you as the parent I would suggest that you refer to your child by their name and use the third person 'S/he' in this section. This gives some distance to the child as they have it read to them or read it to themselves in the future and helps to convey a sense of the story being told.

Ideas of subjects that can be included here with appropriate photos or illustrations are as follows:

Their name. Their school. Their teacher. Their address. Their age and date of birth. Their likes and dislikes. The things that they like doing.

Their Favourite Food. Their Favourite Colour. Holidays they have been on. A map of where they live.

A photo of themselves. A photo of their house. A photo of their school. A photo of their family [adoptive]. An explanation of who is in their family. Use Google maps for street views and maps.

I have made hand prints with the child and asked the whole family to make a hand print. These can be coloured in and illustrated with photos as it again reinforces the sense of belonging in the adoptive family.

It is good to have a roll of wallpaper [for larger bits of art work] but

also to trace round the child and then both colour it in together. This can offer an opportunity to talk about their physical selves and if it feels relevant to talk about colour of skin. The child may be in a family who has a different ethnicity or skin tone, eye colour etc to the adopters. Art work or self portraits can be revealing as to how the child sees themselves and their art can show self image issues.

I draw an outline of a castle with nothing in it with some children and ask them to fill it with whomever they want to. I tell them it is their castle and they are the king/queen/knight/soldier who controls entry. Who does or does not get put in the empty castle is informative about their attachments at that moment in time.

A Sense of Time

It is vital that the child has knowledge of the passage of time to fully understand what has happened to them at different ages. For example although they know they are six years old; do they understand what a year is made up of and how many years they have lived through?

I talk about the seasons with a child and ask them to make collages [from magazines] or do drawings of summer, autumn, winter and spring. We usually start with the season they have been born in. These illustrations in whatever form still come under the first section covering the present.

Some words about feelings.

To some extent the ability of the child to understand their birth parents reasons for not being able to continue to care for them depends on their insight and understanding of the emotional world and the life of 'feelings'.

It is important that the child is guided through an understanding of the vocabulary of feelings and is able to put words to their own emotional states. I believe this helps the development of a mindset that includes

the birth parents emotional world and what limited them from being able to properly care for children at the time that decisions about adoption were made.

There are many ways of talking about emotions with children and daily life often throws up the best opportunities to reflect on the part they play in quality of life for everyone. As social workers we spend such limited time with the children we work with, we have to create the opportunities to talk about this side of life through our 'play' with the children and use play to build up empathy and words for feelings.

I have found playing 'catch' with a soft ball or other object [Hawkins bazaar squelchy balls] a good way in to acting out feelings. The child and myself guess what emotion [when we drop or catch the ball] the other is trying to convey. There are also books on feeling states and googling art images on google art throws up all sorts of visuals of feeling states. It always surprises me how few words there are to describe the enormous range of feeling states we go through.

The bear cards are an excellent resource although expensive. They have no words but wonderful pictures of 49 bears with different expressions on their faces - a big bear, a not so big bear and a baby bear. Each range of emotion is symbolized by a different colour e.g. blue for the quieter, sad and introspective feelings.

There are five broad colour ranges and I pick or let the child pick five cards from the different ranges and then we might tell a story involving the picked cards. The stories that the child tells me help me again to understand their world and give me clues as to how to speak to it. There are also lots of feeling faces on Word Clip Art and in google images that this sort of communication can be done with as well as childrens stories recommended in the book list.

I have sometimes made lists of 'Things that make me Happy', 'Things that make me sad', 'Things that make me Angry' if the child wants to engage

in this way. For an immediate route to feeling states the Mary Corrigan sentence finishing exercise described in 'James's Life Story Guide' can be helpful.

The Second Section. The Past [time before arriving at adopters]

I start, usually with the help of a doll, by discussing with the child what a young baby needs [as with most children this is when they came into care]. Through asking the child to imagine what they would do if the doll was crying [acting comes in from myself or the child] I elicit that a baby needs cleaning, changing, putting to sleep, feeding, a bottle, cuddling [very important to stress this one as it covers the non functional areas] and someone to prevent accidents and protect him/her. An explanation of the role of parent [and usually it is mothers we talk about] vary in sophistication.

As an adoptive parent, natural opportunities come up regularly to reflect on the essential need for a responsible parent either through doll play, observation of other babies, or care of animals. Adopters can reflect with the child on how they would have cared for the child when they were a baby had they been there and express sorrow to the child about their neglect as a baby.

A discussion of what love is also may come up here since almost all parents say they 'love' their child and certainly in children's case files [which they can read at 18] there will usually be a statement about the birth mother's love for the child. An idea that love is a mixture of what is said and what is done needs to be touched upon and that this sort of love is not enough for a child if it is not backed up by action to take care of the child and put the child's needs first. This can go hand in hand with later explanations of Difficult Stories, which sympathetically relay whatever the issues the parent was grappling with when their child came into care. I am careful not to be over rosy with the story as too much euphemism leaves the child confused about why they are in care e.g. 'your mummy was not very well' 'your mummy could not learn how to be a mummy easily'

These sort of statements need taking further at appropriate moments as they can be confusing. I do not want an illness in the adoptive home to lead to fears of removal or the belief that a learning difficulty equates with removal of children, as a child needs reasons specific to their child care to understand why there was danger in staying in the birth family.

I then go to talk about the birth of the child. I get a picture of the hospital from the internet. I get as many birth details as possible and these go to the story. I might get bags of sugar on the page to represent weight at birth or a tape measure to show length at birth. Sometimes we have the medical Red Book and if not, the GP usually has the hospital birth records as they are sent on via the NHS when a child moves between health care providers.

The facts of life

Quite often a discussion of heritage leads to a discussion of how a baby gets made. It is easy for a child to understand the concept of a baby growing in a mummy's tummy and for that reason 'Tummy mummy' or 'Birth Mummy' flows off the tongue quite easily. It is less easy to understand a Daddy's role especially if the birth father has not lived with the birth mother. It is then important that they have some understanding of the conception process and I discuss this with adopters. I prefer to leave an explanation of the facts of life to a child to their adopters who can do it in parallel with my work. I am also aware that for some this can be an uncomfortable subject due to infertility issues it sometimes raises and for some people feelings of shame or blame. However young children are usually not intensely curious about their adopter's infertility [if this is the case] and prefer to focus on the mechanics of how a baby gets made in relation to thinking about themselves. In the book list there is information on a good book about the facts of life which describes the subject factually in a way that is sensitive to 'different' family structures and to very young children.

It is hard to generalize what I then do with the child's particular story but I always read through all the records on file [now usually all scanned or placed on IT networks in many boroughs]. These are usually very revealing of the story over time. Often where there have been changes of social worker information gets lost by the time it gets to the summarizing reports; the Form E/CPR [now the Child Permanency Report]. This is the form for the Social Services Adoption Panel, which says why the child is in care and needs adoption. A copy of this form should have been given to you when you were deciding if your child sounded right for you.

The social work case records contain specifics of interviews with birth family and show all the attempts that have been made to keep the child within the family. They also convey atmosphere in a way that formal reports do not.

An example of what might be found in the case records I recently came across, involved a description of an accident in the birth home where a light fitting fell on a baby's head as he was lying on the floor after a bath. Years later the three siblings in their respective adoptive families had an almost phobic fear of new bathrooms which had led to much speculation by adopters of what this might be about. Reading the case records but not the CPR revealed that it is probable that all the children witnessed the accident which involved a lot of blood and a trip to A and E and that it appeared a genuine problem with the bathroom light rather than an act of abuse. Adopters do have a right to ask to read records beyond what they have been given as long as third party interests are not compromised.

The Family Tree

Sometimes I draw out a picture with the top part of the tree containing the adoptive family and the roots, which fill out half the page containing the birth family, who are known about. This might lead to a conversation about the adoptive family being those who around you who love, feed and nurture you as you grow whilst those who bought you into the world are

the invisible part of the tree below ground which you would not exist without. On other occasions when the actual structure of the birth family makes drawing a tree too complex I just write out sentences about each family member and make a collage background of trees and roots. Alternatively the leaves on the branches can represent the different family members; the birth family on one side and the adoptive family on the other.

I would put in any photos or information about members of the birth family; names, physical description, ethnicity, employment [if appropriate] talents [if known] and addresses if felt to be safe to reveal. This is a useful section to explore cultural and racial heritage in more detail and discuss diet, religion, lifestyle and language in positive ways especially if the child is not living in a family that directly reflects his/her birth roots. There is wonderful artwork that can be used on google images and maps and photos of flags and destinations around the world on the Internet. I often put the original birth certificate in this section in an envelope as this would be the place it would naturally sit easily in.

The File

I then tell the story as I read it in the file as simply and non emotively as I can although I always make attempts to show [where revealed] that there were positive aspects to the parent and that the decisions that got made about removing the child were those of the social workers and judges. I don't burden the story by complex accounts of when child protection meetings and conferences were held or when second opinions for the court from medical professionals were gained, as all these details they will read if they want to at 18 and can over complicate the story. I do refer to the passage of time so that the child can see they are getting older as these decisions get made. I also show that there were efforts made to help the parents keep them and explain why they were unsuccessful.

I do always reveal what the abuse or neglect was and the style covered in

the Difficult Stories section is the tone I talk about it in on the written page.

The Foster Carers

I often ring foster carers if there is not enough about them in the Memory book or the file and get edited highlights of the child's time there and always get photos of them for the book and the child with them. It is here I hope to be able to get an account of first steps, first words or funny and/or affectionate anecdotes of the child as a small baby if they have not yet reached the adopters. I will usually phone or write to the foster carers asking them either verbally or in writing to help me with this. I also put pictures of the social worker in this part as often even if very young [under 3] the child may retain an image or memory of the social worker who moves them from foster care to adoption. They may also know the social worker who supports the adoptive family so a picture of her too can be helpful. In addition to this at some point in the book I put a picture of myself in, since the child is that much older and will usually remember our work in creating the book together.

A time line at the end of this section of the book [which covers the past] with miniature pictures of a symbol representing the different seasons [e.g. A Christmas tree] can then be used to show the different moves at different times they may have experienced in their lives. There is an example of this in the 'Stella' life story book. I also play with model towns/villages to physically represent their moves and the significant physical moves they may have experienced eg from hospital to home to foster home to adoption. We might have also a social service office and a court in the toy town. Furry animals can be used to represent the moves as people. Sylvanian toys are particularly helpful for representing different family cultures if they have had cross cultural placements or live in or come from a family which is racially mixed.

The Third Section. The Present [time since arriving at the adopters]

The last part of the book is often more photo based and is just a way of bringing the child back to where s/he belongs.

I start this section with an account of life since the arrival in the family- the excitement and the first memories of the adopters of this time which they sometimes are happy to write about. There might be something on the different birthday parties the child has held [if this is of great emotional importance for the child in the family] or festivals/events such as Christmas's that have been spent in the family. There may be holiday photos that can get stuck in or family activities. I will keep them in a time sequence reminding the child of their changing age.

If the family do keep lots of photos it can be good to get photos of the child passing through the seasons with the family e.g. opening a Christmas present, eating an Easter egg, in a swimming suit on a beach, or at bonfire night or Halloween if these autumn festivals are celebrated. Again, a child might want to draw more pictures or collages if photos are not available. A child might want to stick in certificates of achievement or photos of them accomplishing something [for example riding a bike] in this part.

I will certainly include the adoption certificate in this section. Most courts and judges encourage photos to be taken of this special day and it is a symbolic event marking the child's permanence with the family. Seeing these in the life book gives a signal of the enduring status of the child in the family although of course in itself is not enough to totally remove the early fear of change and security that stays with lots of children over many years. Please see the example life story book for James and the Adoption Template which provides words to describe adoption itself.

Some children do still have face-to-face contact with members of their birth family and with their foster carers so if this is the case then photos of these events at the beginning of this section may be helpful.

If it is unlikely that the book will then just become an ordinary family album then it can be fun to finish with the child's projections into the

future: e.g what they want to be when they grow up, what sort of car they want to have, what sort of house they want to live in, where they want to travel and what type of living situation they might want to create. Let them take the lead in how far and how much into the future they want to project!

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