

## **LIFE STORY WORK**

**A resource for foster carers, residential social workers, adoptive parents, and kinship carers, to support this work.**



**Anne Peake  
with Oxfordshire Foster Carers/Adopters**

Life Story work is part of the role of the child's Social Worker. This booklet is to help parents and carers to understand the process. The booklet aims to be a resource for foster carers, residential social workers, adoptive parents and kinship carers. It is a guide to helping them to help the children in our care to record their lives. The work could be a chapter of their life now or the whole story, as it is known at the time of writing. The central point is that the process of making a record and the content of the work is a basis for talking and listening to children.

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This booklet was written by Anne Peake, Educational Psychologist. It could not have been written without the input from Oxfordshire Foster Carers/Adoptive Parents and the children who have found this work has helped them. The names of the children have been changed.

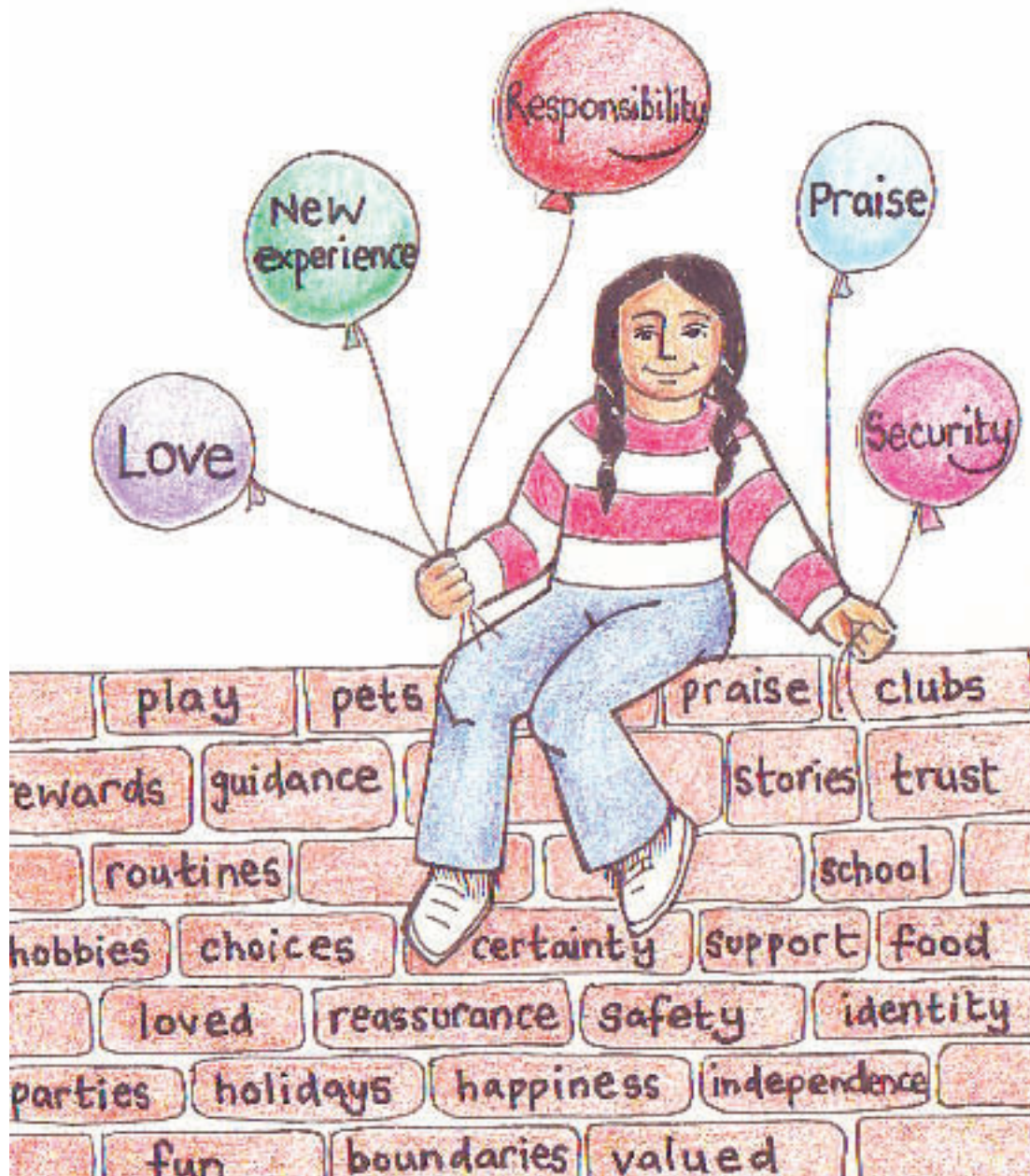
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## The features of a happy childhood

*"Happy families have no history" Tolstoy*

While this statement of Tolstoy can, at first, seem odd, it is worthy of more consideration. When children and families are happy, time and events don't jar on their views of themselves. To continue the analogy there are no upheavals or losses or wars to punctuate time. When we start to think about children whose childhoods have been disrupted, the need to talk and listen to their feelings about their history becomes a priority. Where better to begin than with ideas about the features of a happy childhood.



## **The experience of many children whose lives are disrupted, prior to coming into care**

While it is true that only the children know the real details of their histories, they are often not able to have the insight or feel they have permission to recount these, even to themselves. It is likely that some children may not be consciously unhappy about their situation. Children need to love their parents despite all that has happened. Carers/parents need respect and be very sensitive to the child's perspective. We know enough about the ways in which children's lives are disrupted to understand the issues. The list makes uncomfortable reading, especially given the history of welfare and social care in our country. What emerges are three themes of negativity, the omission of care and abuse.

### ➤ Negativity

- Neglect
- Not listened to
- Not being valued
- Being frightened
- Being shunned by society
- Getting no praise
- Feeling blamed/scapegoated

### ➤ Omission of care

- Poor or no supervision
- Poverty
- Being dirty
- Being hungry
- Lack of routine
- Lack of continuity
- No support for school
- Not feeling cared for
- Being ignored

### ➤ Abuse

- Arbitrary inconsistent limits
- Arguments between adults
- Arguments with children
- Domestic violence
- Experiences of inappropriate adult talk/behaviour
- Physical, sexual, emotional abuse
- Being fearful and unsafe
- No support for traumatic life events

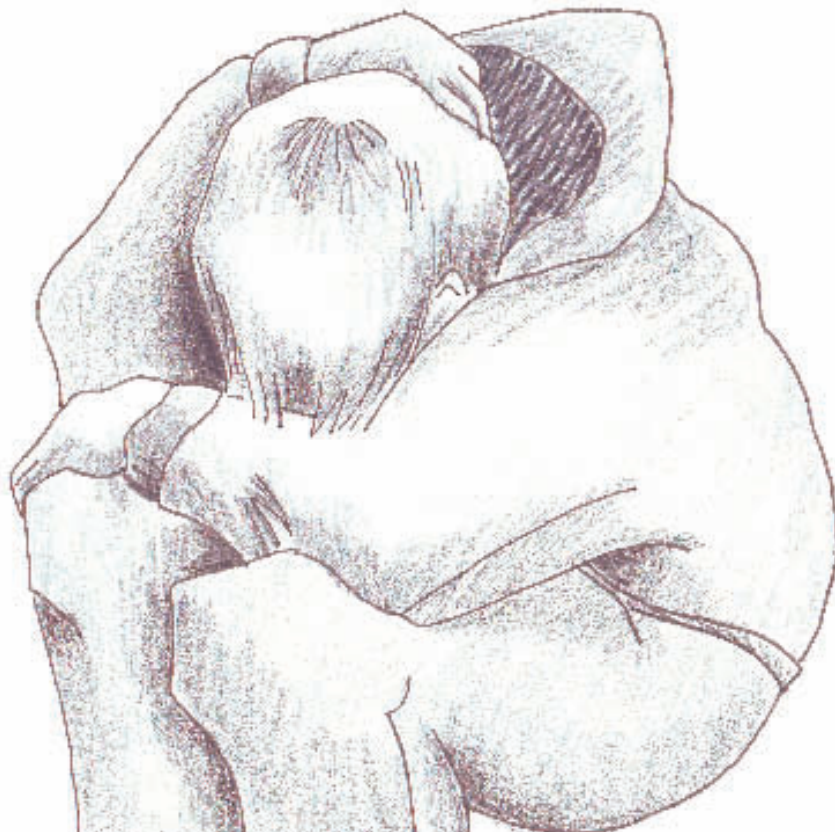
## The impact of disrupted childhood experiences

A proportion of the children, whose childhoods are so disrupted that they come into care, have major difficulties to the extent that the professional network is challenged, school staff can feel defeated, and the children find it hard to make relationships and settle. Difficulties are likely in terms of:

- A sense of security
- Self esteem
- Social well being
- Emotional literacy
- Ability to trust and make relationships
- Achievements in school
- Disturbances of sleep and eating
- Challenging behaviour

*I want to be a machine because then I would not feel things.*

*James 12 years*



## What coming into care can mean

Coming into care sounds wholly positive. Is it really so? What we know is that the process, by which a child has to come into care, has its own impact on the child, his/her birth family and those involved with the child. The experiences that prompted the intervention will be precipitating events to the disruption of coming into care. The anxieties around the accommodation/care placement and the changes to the child's world, are disruptive events too.

Coming into care can mean:

- The intervention of professionals in their lives.
- The child is separated from family, friends, pets, and community.
- There can be uncomfortable feelings of 'why me' for a child separated from siblings.
- A move away from their community.
- It may mean a change of school or more time travelling to school.
- A lack of certainty about what will happen next.
- A loss of familiarity.
- The child may have had a role of parenting siblings or their parents which they now lose.
- They may have previously fended for themselves but now are being cared for.
- There can be an increase in supervision which is resented.
- A change of class/culture.
- A change of family routines/language.
- Different parenting styles.
- Changes in diet.
- There may be changes with regard to beliefs/faith/church attendance.
- The expectations of the child will be changed.
- Styles of dress will change.
- A change of pastimes.
- A loss of photographs/memorabilia.
- A loss of familiar toys.
- Often assessments of the child are undertaken and the child feels under scrutiny.
- Meetings and reports.
- There can end up being lots of adults to see.
- Placement moves/breakdowns.

(for asylum seeking children)

- Move of country on account of upheaval and trauma.
- The need to learn a new language.
- A change of food.
- A change of climate.
- Time spent in Detention Centres seeing/hearing things unhelpful for a child.

Children coming into care face all this at a time when they are most vulnerable. They can struggle to understand the reasons why they have come into care and they may hear conflicting stories from all the people involved. They may well need advice and support about how they will explain their situation to others, especially peers. It can be useful to help them think through what is appropriate and when to share the details of their situation. Their histories are already being written by others, not usually by the children themselves.

*The most frightening memory from that time is hard to say. My mum and dad had loads and loads of fights. I don't have any good memories from that time. Life was worse then than now.*

*James 12 years*



## Why do Life Story work?

The writing of a life story book is not an end in itself. It can't be. The story goes on with the child. There will be times when the story is retold and reworked, when the child is more mature or feels more safe. It may be that a lack of information or an upset child, precludes doing any more than recording the present. Whatever is done, the life story remains unfinished and this can be a useful concept for work too. A life story book can be a means of doing regular work with the child to give some very important messages which are:

- What the child can remember and say is important.
- The child deserves support with his or her memories.
- Understanding the parents' stories.
- Remembering is a basis for understanding with the help of a supportive adult.

*When I first met Damian he looked terrible. Now he looks worse! I don't think he can like me because I do so many bad things. I know he trusts me and I think he does care.*

*James 12 years*

*Damian wrote "You have had a difficult life. Lots of bad and confusing things have happened to you. It makes me sad to read about it. But it also gives me hope because you have survived and have been so brave ..... I have good memories of you, James.*

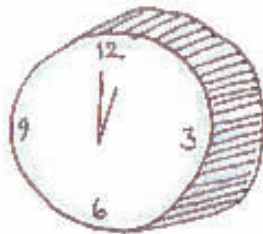




## Preparation to do Life Story work

Before any work is done with, or on behalf of children, there needs to be a stage of planning. If the work is being done with the child, it needs to be done as part of one-to-one special time. Any work done with children is enhanced by giving them the undivided attention of an interested adult.

- ❖ The work with the child is usually co-ordinated by Social Worker in planned regular sessions. Parents and carers are around the child all the time and so can support and extend the work.
- ❖ The person who undertakes to do the work should be someone in whom the child has trust and it should be the same person who continues the work.
- ❖ The person should know the child very well and be able to read the child's body language, as well as listen to what they say.
- ❖ It may be useful to discuss with the child when would be the best time to do this work and how often.



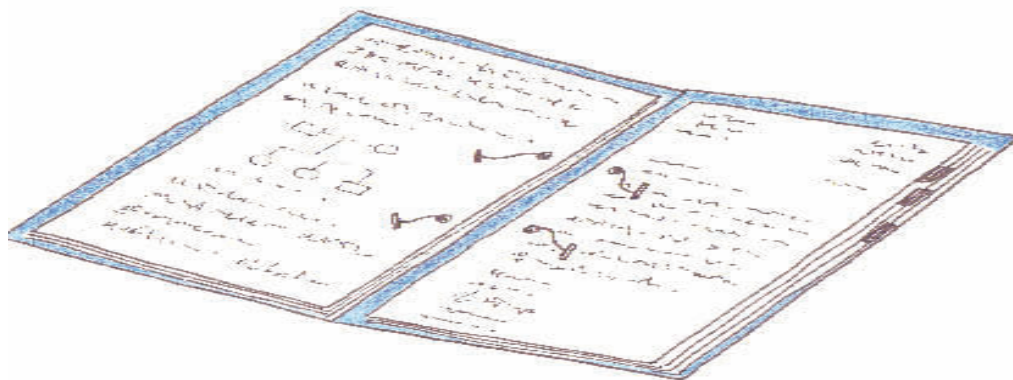
- ❖ It can help if the work takes place in a familiar setting which offers space, is uninterrupted and is comfortable.
- ❖ Materials needed may include:
  - Cuttings book
  - Plain paper
  - Felt tip pens and a pencil
  - Glue
  - Scissors
  - Wallet to keep things in
  - Magazines which are suitable for cutting out pictures which are suitable in terms of literacy levels, ethnicity and interests.

It is helpful to plan before the meetings for different reactions from the child. Some children will only be able to do life story work about the present. They may be too young, too new into care, or too disturbed to do more. It is still helpful for these children to begin life story work about the here and now. Doing the work gives them a tangible record of a point in their history.

When children can extend the work, they will talk about their birth families, their early experiences and their feelings. It is a good idea to think through how to help a child move on from negative feelings without denying the importance of these and the right of the child to express those feelings. When listening it is important to know when and how to respond to what the child says. The routine for the sessions can include a comfort break/reward for work done. This could include a drink, a favourite biscuit, or time on a shared activity. This could become a feature of ending a session in a way which is positive and nurturing.

*When Anne came to see me in school, I got a bit annoyed. She said it didn't matter. She said she liked me anyway. She said she thinks I get annoyed when I'm not sure about new people or new situations.*

*Leigh 9 years*



## The process of doing the Life Story work

It is really essential that any life story work is not viewed by the child as an extension of work or pressure. It is often the case that life story work can touch on difficult issues, as the work is a means of helping children come to terms with things that have happened to them previously or are a problem for them currently. The work should be planned into content areas, that are manageable for the child. The book is a tangible record of work with them. The work needs to be planned and plans could be based on the following ideas:

- The child needs an explanation of the need for making a life story book and the fact that there will be planned sessions to do this.
- The book is for the child to keep at the end of the piece of work.
- The Social Worker will take a lead role and will work with the child at his/her pace.
- Life story work is not a probing of what the child knows, remembers, and is willing to say. It needs to be a way of helping a child link the past with the present and the future. To do this children need information provided by adults. The child will already have some information and feelings from having the experiences they have had. Life Story work is a process of getting more information, sharing memories on the basis of this with a trusted adult, and the child getting support for the ongoing task of healing.
- Life story work is usually written up in chronological order. However, it doesn't need to be written chronologically. It can be arranged in order of time later. As the work is beginning, it can start where the child wants it to, and this may be with the present. It can help to draw up a preliminary list with the child of what might be covered, listing names of people, places, events. Then each session, the child could be asked to choose something from the list. This way the child can judge how she/he feels and what content is manageable for them at the time.
- Any time that the child is clearly disinclined to do the work, this should be respected. It may be that the content feels too difficult to contemplate or that there are events happening around the child which undermine her/his capacity to undertake the work. It is important to still have the session with the child, to signal your acceptance of their feelings, your genuine interest in them, and so the very valuable session of undivided adult care and attention is not lost to the child.
- The child doesn't work straight into the book. This is so that if she/he is dissatisfied with the piece of work or wants to change it, it can be done by working on paper. When the child feels that a particular topic is complete, then it can be pasted into the book.

- Before each session, it can help if the adult is clear about what information is available and what questions might be asked to help the child engage with the content of the work.
- Working with the child to draw a detailed family tree can be a very good place to start. The fact that it is a visual and simple way of detailing who was and is in the family, makes it an accessible overview for the child.

*When he drew his family tree with us, Robbie started to understand who was who and he could put things and places together.*

*Adoptive Mother*

- Questions can be put to a child as a way of prompting and developing a dialogue. So open-ended questions from a neutral stance are the best, such as 'what did you most like about .... What did you least like about ...?'
- Children need permission to find memories painful or to express angry feelings. It is important to ensure that a session doesn't end with these feelings and that the child feels reassured.
- It can be useful to record what the child says in note form. This would need to be explained to the child, that what she or he says is important. Whenever possible the adult should retain the child's own words.
- After the session, what the child has had to say can be written up on a word processor and checked with the child before it too is included in the book. Word processing the work improves the presentation. Children are otherwise limited by their abilities to express themselves in writing and over time can find their earlier writing hard to read or embarrassing.
- The following week/session and before a new area of content is started, the draft of the work from previously can be read to or with the child and checked out. Any corrections can be clarified at that point. When this has been done, it too can be pasted into the book.
- Drawings, photographs, cards from people, mementos, can all be included in the book. Photographs are best copied so precious pictures can be kept separate from the book. Otherwise a child can feel that not being able to hold the photograph or have it in a frame, is a loss to them. Similarly with drawings or mementos, colour copies can be made for the book or a photograph of the treasured memento can be taken for the book.
- The adult can write items for the book which are helpful to the child. It is especially important if the child is moving from one placement to another.

*I really looked forward to meeting Leigh on Thursdays. He came always ready to do some work and I feel he did his best. I am sure it has been helpful to Leigh to learn more about his family and what happened to his mum and dad. I know it's been hard for Leigh to talk about his feelings. I wanted Leigh to know that it is good to talk about things. I liked Leigh a lot. He has lovely eyes, he listens well, and he is fun to be with – he is a tease. He used to swap the keys in my filing cabinets. He was always polite. I hope he remembers our ideas for the future. Good Luck Leigh.*

Much of this work is enjoyable and engrossing. However, there may be times when the content stirs up intense feelings for the child. It is important for all those involved to have established support for themselves, when the work is underway. Some kind of regular support/consultation/supervision can be helpful to maintain the focus of the work with the child.



## **Ideas for the content of Life Story work with children**

### **Current Carers**

A picture/photograph of where the child lives now, with pictures, maps, drawings of the neighbourhood, for example: the bus stop the child uses to go to school, the post box, the neighbourhood shop, the local playground. The child could write, or the carer scribe, accounts of who goes with the child to the playground and what the child enjoys most there.

For children from other countries, the book could include maps of the world, of their country of origin, with details of these such as for example: the name of the town, the language spoken, some written language, the national dish, currency, names people chose.

Photographs of the child with the people who live with them and drawings of them done by the child.

Pen pictures, that is short written summaries, about the people with whom they lived/live now, for example:

- Physical characteristics such as height, hair colour, eyes and appearance.
- What I like most about the person.
- What I like least about the person.
- My memory of a time with this person.

A photograph/drawing of the child's bedroom and the child in the room, perhaps proudly displaying a favourite toy or book or the view from the window.

Writing about everyday events, for example, walking the family dog, getting up in the morning, the walk home from school, shopping.

Pictures/photographs of the child in different situations (which illustrate the child's life), for example: in cub uniform, having swum a length, with the family pet, at school, etc.

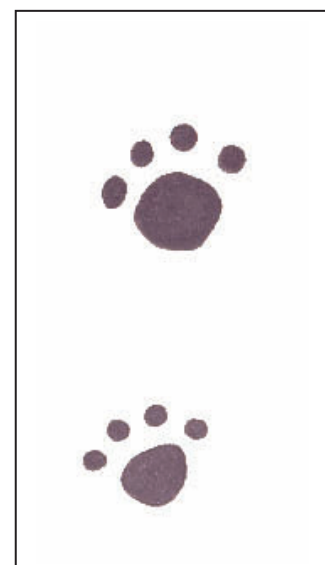
Writing about favourite foods, favourite places to eat, recipes from home for children from other countries.

Writing about the child's individual likes/dislikes, for example: pop stars, colours, TV programmes, toys, computer games, bedtime stories.

Photographs of activities at home, for example: 'here is me making a cake ..... helping out ..... dancing ..... jumping in puddles.'



Pets are always important. Drawings//photographs of the pet, of the child with the pet, paw prints, a story about an event with the pet or the character of the pet, a map of a favourite walk or a story of what was seen on walks.



Carers of babies/small children can record developmental milestones with stories and drawings/photographs, for example, about a child's comforter or favourite toy or game.

Handprints and footprints can be fun.



Details of respite carers, where they live, the frequency of stays, times spent with them, who else is there, activities, with photographs/drawings.

Writing about the first day the child arrived at the carer's house and a photograph of a favourite toy at that time.

*It was in 1998 when I was 6 years old and still going to school, that I went into foster care. My mum says that that was because my dad had walked out and she couldn't cope. My mum says that she rang Social Services to say she couldn't cope, and when they came they said that the children were neglected. So we went into care.*

*Ben 14 years*

A list of books the child reads or has read to him or her. A child could write about a favourite book, the child's comments, a drawing, a photograph of the child reading.

A collage of favourite pictures from magazines which represent the child's interests, for example: fast cars, fashion, animals, pop stars.

### **Special days/events**

An account of fun day out, for example: at the seaside, a funfair, a walk to feed the ducks, to see a film, have a meal out, visiting friends, cinema tickets.

*Don said that I liked jumping off the sand dunes.*

*Ben 14 years*

A log from a family holiday with photographs of who went, where the family stayed, train/bus tickets, menus, postcards, souvenir guides, and a memory from the holiday.



An account by the carer about how the family celebrated the child's birthday: when the child got up, cards received, presents received, their favourite present, what the child and family did that day.

A record of special days for the child and family: Christmas or Easter, Divali or Ganesh Utsav, Ramadan or Eid, Passover or Hanukah, local carnivals, school sports day/prize day.

## **School**

A photograph/drawing of my school and my teacher.

Details of how the child travels to and from school with drawing/photographs of the child's impressions: me running into school, hanging my coat and bag up, coming out of school to meet ....., stopping at the local shop, having a well deserved rest after school.

Writing about school, for example: subjects I like to do, subjects I find difficult or don't like, my timetable, a best piece of handwriting or a story or drawing.

*It didn't go very well when I started at secondary school. Allen said that he'd take me to school and when he thought that I had gone in, I would run off up the road. I told them "I skived all my lessons". I didn't want to go to lessons because the work was too hard.*

*Ben 14 years*

Photographs/drawings of my friends at school. The child with the friends.  
A message board for school friends where other children can write messages, draw, give autographs.

A timetable of after school activities/clubs with photographs/drawings of adults who support the child in these and friends they make there.

*Don said that he remembered playing football with me and that I really liked that. He said I used to like to be in goal.*

*Ben 14 years*

Certificates earned: for attendance, work, behaviour, at school, music, sport, clubs.

## Health/well-being

Hospital/doctors/dentists appointments for what and with what outcomes, for example: pictures of new glasses, braces, a plaster cast.

A record of any medication taken and why, allergies, special diet requirements.

A record of people who see the child to provide support: counsellors, therapists, psychologists, specialist teachers, a psychiatrist, family support worker. This can include their names, why they see the child, their message to the child and importantly, the child's view about this support – what helps/doesn't help.

The child writing, or the carer scribing, about how they see themselves, their ideas for being supported, what do they want now, in the future, and ideas about who can help.

If appropriate, photographs/drawing of a church, mosque, synagogue, which the child attends, times of services, a favourite prayer or hymn.

Pages or a special book for a child about the death of someone, for example: the cause and date of death, a photograph/drawing of the person, photographs of the flowers at the funeral, the funeral order of service, the cards received, lists of people attending the funeral, a photograph of the grave, written memories of the person.

*I didn't go to the funeral because my mum thought I was too young. I think he is buried. I would like to see his grave ... and maybe put some flowers on it.*

*Pam 14 years*

## Birth family

A statement written by a Social Worker, perhaps the worker who first met the child when she/he was in the birth family about the difficulties there were. It is a help to children to address the reasons why they were unable to remain in their family of origin, Nicholls (2005): their parents may have had problems and troubles of their own, they may never have been cared for themselves as children and so not know how to care for their own children, they may be too ill to care for the child, their difficulties may be such that they couldn't learn how to parent the child.

Comments/memories/drawings by the child which capture good times in their birth family.

*When talking with a child in our care about his time before he came to live with us, he talked about a place and the number of times he went fishing there with his daddy. It opened up a valuable conversation about happy times with his dad. Several days later he came to me with a huge grin and said "you know when I said about fishing there? My dad only ever took me once". .*

*Foster Carer*

A statement written by a Social Worker or carer which provides an explanation of contact with birth family members – why/where/with whom and with explanations of changes in contact.

When possible and appropriate, a visit to a member of the child's family of origin can provide information, often in details which can help a child feel connected and reassured.

*Granny thinks that I look like my dad. She said that I have his very dark hair and his lovely eyes. She said I'm like my dad in that I am good at making things. He was a very good mechanic.*

*Leigh 9 years*

#### **And also ....**

Approaches can be made to significant people in the child's life to ask them to write for the life story book, for example: the class teacher, cub leader, Social Worker, a previous carer, a neighbour, a friend of the carer or child.

The carers could write about the child: preferred food choices, style of clothes chosen, what makes the child smile, laugh, feel sad, get angry, find scary, mornings, bedtimes. Most of all, the best things about the child.

The child's drawings/photographs/ideas about their best features/talents.

## Common themes of Life Story work

*“The past is for reference not for residence” Kris Akabusi M.B.E. (World, European and Commonwealth Champion, Olympic Silver Medallist and ex-care leaver).*

Life story work is an important way of helping a child to integrate their past into the present, in order to help them to move into the future. All children and young people identify with their birth parents. Those that live with them, have the opportunity to know about their past through discussions with their parents and others. Children who are separated from their past, can literally lose it. This can make it difficult for them to know what has happened, to understand, and to know they are not to blame.

Many children will only be able to do life story work about the present. They may be too disturbed, too new into care, too young, or unable to talk about their early experiences and the reasons why they came into care. It is helpful to these children to begin life story work about the here and now. It is an opportunity to talk about, record and enjoy the present. Doing the work will give them a tangible record of a point in their history, it provides a positive experience of reflecting on their life and the support of having the undivided attention of an interested adult.

When children can extend the work that they do, to talk about their families of origin, early experiences, and their feelings, common themes/issues may well emerge. The carer can note these, and at an appropriate point in the work, discuss these at an age appropriate level with the child. Here are some of the common themes with examples from David’s work. David was 16 years when he talked about the themes of his life story work.

- Changing parent figures and consequent breaks in care and consistency.

*I never really thought about having so many father figures. When you are little, you don’t think about it. It is upsetting and confusing about who is your dad and how a dad should behave.*

- Frequent moves.

*I once worked it out, I’ve moved house 21 times. This was disturbing because I never had enough time to make friends and I’d have to change schools too.*

- Recurring problems of violence, alcohol, drugs, abuse.

*My mum used to encourage me to drink. The drinking got us nowhere, we would give it mouth in the pub, get into fights, and then go home and have a drink.*

- Mental illness.

*My mum got depressed all the time, after Sam was born. I was the oldest and I noticed it more and so it got to me more. I'd be the one who'd try to do something to make her happy, like do her a picture at school or give her a flower, which she always let die ....*

- The involvement and roles of professional agencies.

*Helen found out about his violence from the Police reports and also from seeing the house smashed up. Then her boss took over. She had us all put into care because my mum was getting ill.*

- Difficulties with relationships with friends, at school, in the community.

*After a while she stopped sending me to school ..... I had quite a few changes of schools because of family moves and because some schools couldn't handle me. I wish I had gone to school so I wouldn't have had to go to special school. I could be taking my GCSEs now like most other people.*



Once a theme/issue has emerged, the carer can talk to the child about it and help the child to talk about their views/feelings and try to make some kind of sense of it.

While the themes/issues can be difficult, it is possible to talk about them in ways which are appropriate to the child's age and stage of development. Here is another example from life story work with a teenage girl who has learning difficulties. The work focussed on the abuse, she had experienced:

*The Policewoman said she believed me and wanted to help me. She talked to me and took me with mummy to the doctors to see if I had a bruise .... Jack was naughty, he made me upset ..... I want to say, Jack you are a naughty boy. I don't like you. I don't want to see you again. You have made my mum cross. She says it was not my fault.*

*Tina 14 years*



## Organisations/books that can be useful

### Local Organisations

Children's social care workers have responsibility for Life Story Work. Contact your foster child's social worker or your supervising social worker.

The Virtual School  
[VirtualschoolLAC@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:VirtualschoolLAC@oxfordshire.gov.uk) 01865 256640

The Attach Team  
[attachteam@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:attachteam@oxfordshire.gov.uk) 01865 378114

Seesaw  
[info@seesaw.org.uk](mailto:info@seesaw.org.uk) 01865 744768

### Books

Children's Social Care has a resource library and an interactive CD for Life Story Work. Supervising and Children's Social Workers have details of these. There is no one book or work book that can be used for children in care. The following have ideas which might be useful. Life Story work needs to be put together in an individual and personal way.

Bannister G., "Family File 1" Learning Materials Limited.

Bannister G., "Family File 2" Learning Materials Limited.

Bruzzone C., (1991) "My First Family Tree Book". Early Learning Centre.

Harmin M., (1976) "Got to be me!". Argus Communications.

Heegaard M., (1991) "When someone has a very serious illness". Woodland Press.

Heegaard M., (1991) "When someone very special dies". Woodland Press.

Leclerc Marcel "My book about myself" Learning Materials Limited.

Maximé J.E. (1991) "Black like me: Workbook One – Black Identify". Emani Publications.

Maximé J.E. (1991) "Black like me: Workbook Two – Black Pioneers". Emani Publications.

Mitchelhill B., (1987) "I'm glad I'm me". Learning Materials Limited.

Mitchelhill B., (1988) "I'm glad I'm me" workbook. Learning Materials Limited.

Nicholls E.A., (2005) "The New Life Work model practice guide" Russell House Publishing.

Rees J., (2009) "Life Story Books for Adopted Children: A Family Friendly Approach". Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ryan T., and Walker R., (2007) "Life Story Work: a practical guide to helping children understand their past". BAAF, London.

Shah S., (2006) "Life Story Work – What it is and what it means: A guide for Children and Young People". BAAF, London.

Striker S., and Kimmel E., (1984) "The Anti-Colouring Book". Scholastic Publications Ltd., London.

Striker S., and Kimmel E., (1979) "The Second Anti-Colouring Book". Scholastic Publications Ltd., London.