

# LIFE STORY WORK



**CANW**

Child Action Northwest

# THEORY

**Life story work as a concept has dated back to at least the 1960s, possibly further.**

The application of the concept to children in foster care and adoption was discussed in academia from the early 1980s onward. Life story work is well documented in the UK and Australia and has been incorporated into UK Adoption legislation.

The objective of life story work is to create a secure base for the looked-after child to explore their past, present and future.

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.

Children and young people who are in foster care are unique individuals with a “life story” unique to them. These children and young people, separated from their family with the experiences of trauma and loss will need “life story work” to help them make sense of their experience and history with a view of gaining a sense of their unique identity.

# PREPARING AND PLANNING

**Social workers should take the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that children who are expected to be adopted or to be in long term care have a life story book.**

Social workers often hold the most factual information about the child’s background and reasons for becoming Looked After or Adopted and it is important that they provide this information for use in the life story work. Day-to-day carers such as; Foster Carers, Residential Support Workers or Adoptive Parents can offer the best informal life story work. They have the information about the day-to-day events in the child’s life, their milestones and achievements.

Birth Parents are a critical part of the life story work with adopted children as they can offer information to construct a family tree and provide pictures or descriptions of family members.

Some suggest that life story work can be completed by any adult who is able and willing to spend time with the child and build a trusting relationship. However, some feel that some professionals such as student social workers, trainees and foster carers should not be encouraged to complete the life story work as they may not have the experience, training or ability to support the child with life story work over a long enough period of time. The person’s needs must be taken into account regarding the gender, ethnicity, religion or culture of the adult assisting with the life story work.

# SERVICE USER GROUPS

## Adoption

**The Children's Rights Director in England found that 71% of adopted children thought it was important to know about their lives before adoption.**

Specific questions that these children wanted answers to included why they were adopted and why they could not stay with birth families.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 outlines the Local Authorities' and Adoption Agencies' expectations to provide information regarding individual's history upon request. Guidance relating to this Act specifically mentions Life Story Work to help them 'explore and understand their early history and life before their adoption'.

## Fostering

Some Local Authorities in the UK have developed procedures which outline the need for all children who are Looked After to have life story work completed with them; usually in conjunction with the social worker and foster carer. Much of the foster carer's role is to collect items for the child's memory box or book and to encourage the child to participate.

## Separated/Bereaved Families

Life Story work can be particularly beneficial for children/young people who have experienced a loss through bereavement or separation such as divorce, imprisonment. If the child/young person did not know the family member before they died, or had no contact with them, Life Story Work can help to fill in the gaps of their knowledge.

**Adults** - Life Story Work has shown to be successful with people suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

# TECHNIQUES

## Life Story Books

Life story books have been a part of adoption social workers' practice for over 30 years; though the quality of them has varied.

It should take around 12 months to complete it though it may need to be updated as the child's understanding develops. Life story work is distinct from life story books, the process of life story work is to assist the person to understand and internalize the feelings associated with their past. However, a life story book does not need to involve the person and can be done by others, this is especially the case when done by social workers before placing a child for adoption.

'Rees & Goldberg' state that a life story book should not include professional reports, later life letters, structured chronology (though this could be recorded in another, more child friendly, format), photo album and should not be an extension of the foster carer's memory book. However, life story books can often be seen as complementary or as an end product to life story work.

A life story book is a system of recording information to answer the questions the participant may have in the future. It is an overview of a person's life to help them recall memories and understand their past. A child who does not fully understand their history is at risk of developing an imagined story of fictional family members leading to a misplaced sense of identity as they mature.

Often, life story books are written from the perspective of the Past-Present though it has been suggested that writing it in this way causes the child anxiety as past issues may be too painful to come to terms with.

Therefore, it has been suggested that a new approach:

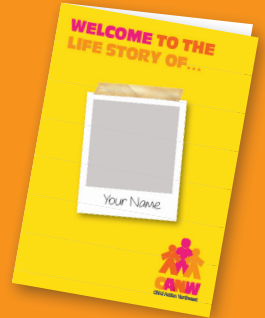
**Present**

**Past**

**Present**

**Future**

allows the child to feel that their life with their current family is secure and symbolically encourages the child to feel contained by their family.



## Interactive Approach

It has been identified that ICT can assist with the presentation of life story work such as amending colour schemes to make it personal to the individual, and correcting spelling or grammatical errors. Hardware peripherals such as scanners, digital cameras and printers are also useful. Computer programs have been developed to complete life story work with children in a way which they feel comfortable and do not find threatening.

## Digital Life Story Work

**The importance of digital technologies and digital media in the lives of children and young people has seen a growth in interest of the ability of these technologies to support self-reflection and build narrative coherence.**

In seeking to make the benefits of conventional life story work accessible to adolescents, 'Hammond & Cooper' integrate the ideas of narrative psychology and build upon established approaches of undertaking life story work with younger children. Recognizing that adolescents communicate differently than younger children, 'Hammond & Cooper' incorporate a range of accessible digital technologies to provide interactive and practical activities which aim to support practitioners to empower adolescents to take the lead in the creation of, and reflection upon, their own autobiographical narratives.

## Story-telling

Creating stories for children that can create a link between their lives and behaviour and that of a fiction character can develop their understanding of why they think and feel the way they do.



# LIFE STORY PROGRAM

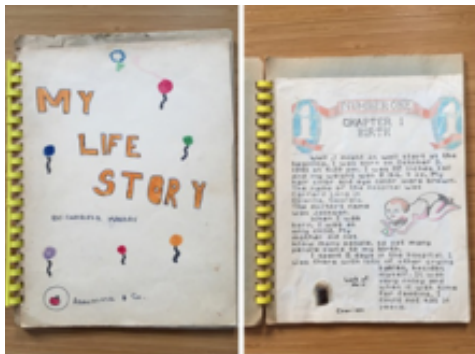
- A succinct, well researched and planned piece of LSW could take up to 12 months to complete, though 6-9mnths is generally a guideline. It is vital not to rush the work as the child/young person will need the opportunity and time between sessions to absorb and process the information. In some circumstances where there is still contact with family members, information gathering time by the practitioner can be reduced.
- Ideally the practitioner will have gathered all the relevant information relating to the child/yp history and life prior to meeting with them for the first time. This can be a lengthy and time consuming piece of work. Court bundles and medical records can be applied for. School records and reports etc. Photographs copied and scanned.
- **Interviews** – with family members, teaching staff, care staff, etc. Ideally carried out in person but can be completed via a phone conversation, skype or e-mail. (Can take a number of months to gather information)

- **Sessions** – ideally take place once every fortnight, so that the young person can absorb what has been done. Carer or Family Member should always be present during the sessions so that they are a part of the process, and are party to information shared or strategies suggested, so that they can be followed through with in between sessions. Session length between 1-2 hours per session. (3-4months) Written work and activities are usually completed on lengths of plain lining or wall paper. Practitioner keeps them until book is completed and then are returned to the young person.

- **Life Story Book** – Young Person and Practitioner work together on completing the book once all the sessions have been completed. Book is created using computer print software with the young person choosing colors, style, and font. What pictures and photographs the y/p wants to include and what information they have they would like to include.

# The book usually has contents:

- **Cover**



- **“This Is Me Now”**

where I live, where I go to school, what my favourite things are.



- **“Why I Am in Care/Been Adopted”**

brief explanation.

- **“My Life”**

0-5 / 5-10 / 10-15 or present, depending on the age of the young person. Detailing their life history and events at each life stage.



- **“Ending”**

young person’s thoughts about the life story process and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Before printing for the final version, the young person should read and agree with contents, with practitioner making any amendments.



Physical copy to be printed and bound for the young person, with an electronic copy given to carer or social worker for future reference. (This process could take 2-3months)

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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