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Why do life story work?

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Children who live with their birth families have the opportunity to know about their past and to clarify past events in terms of the present. Children separated from their birth families are often denied this opportunity; they may have changed families, social workers, homes and neighbourhoods. Their past may be lost, much of it even forgotten.

When children lose track of their past, they may well find it difficult to develop emotionally and socially. If adults cannot or do not discuss this past with them, it is reasonable for children to suppose that it may be bad.

Life story work is an attempt to give back some of this past to children separated from their family of origin. Gathering together facts about that life and the significant people in it helps them begin to accept their past and go forward into the future with this knowledge. We have found that most children separated in this way gain a great deal from talking about their past, present and future to a sympathetic adult. Life story work provides a structure for talking to children. In fact everyone gains help from this process – children and adults. Interesting work has been carried out by social workers with adults (an example is mentioned in the booklist) who need to experience attention-giving and be given help in

orientating themselves. Similarly, people who are elderly get a great deal from 'remembrance therapy', and Age Concern have produced a very helpful pack for work with groups of people, illustrating the power of nostalgia and affirming people's sense of identity.

Children separated from their birth parents, whether they are in a children's home, with foster carers, or going to a permanent new family or returning to their birth family, need to sort out why the separation occurred and why various adults have been unable to care for them. We have often failed in the past to give the children for whom we have been responsible the opportunity to do this. Our experience with the children whom we have worked with has encouraged us to believe that life story work is a useful way of fulfilling this need, and that all the children have benefited in some way.

Life story work may result in a book or video, or simply be a record of sessions which took place. It does not have to result in a product – it is the process rather than just the product which will yield most benefits for the children and young people involved.

All children are entitled to an accurate knowledge of their past and their family. This is a right that children who are secure in their families take for

From: *Life Story Work* (1999), British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering, London, Chapter 1.

granted. For those children separated from their birth families, the right to this knowledge is equally important, not only for the sake of the children themselves, but also for their future children.

Life story work can usefully be adapted, not only to suit elderly people, but also the parents from whom children are separated. Many parents, whose children are currently being looked after, have been 'in care' themselves. The possibility of someone having done life story work with them is remote. However, if it is carried out with them as adults, it may help clarify the reasons, for both children and parents, for the family not being able to live together, and in so doing make best use of the separation.

The Children Act 1989 stresses that children should be involved in discussions that affect their lives. Life story work can be a means of giving the child age-appropriate information that allows them to make these informed decisions. For example, the child who discloses the identity of an adult in the birth family home who has sexually abused him or her, will need to understand that it may not be possible to return home while this situation prevails.

Life story work should complement the underlying philosophy of the Children Act 1989 – of participation and involvement of the child and his or her family. We have also heard of it being successfully used with the parents of children to help them make sense of their own past (see page 65).

What do children get from life story work?

Life story work gives children a structured and understandable way of talking about themselves. It can produce clarity where there are dangerous or idealised fantasies. Once completed, it provides them with a record which they and, with their agreement, the adults caring for them can refer to at any time, particularly when there is a crisis.

Life story work can increase a child's sense of self-worth, because, sadly, at the back of the minds of nearly all children separated from their families of origin is the thought that they are worthless and unlovable. They blame themselves for the actions of adults. If they have been abandoned, neglected or injured by their parents or wider family they are convinced that they brought it upon themselves. Life story work gives you the opportunity to show them why they should be proud of themselves, and this positive attitude should be evident in any book, video or other record which results. In talking about their birth parents, for example, although you will tell them a suitably-worded version of the truth (however

painful that may be) about their family and why they are being looked after, it is important to stress the positive side. You need to talk about their birth parents in non-judgmental terms. Perhaps you might say that not everybody is good at being a parent, but that does not mean they are bad in other respects.

When you have worked together on a book, you will feel much closer to the child. We have found that memories of our own childhoods are always awoken. If we, too, have experienced pain, we share this with the child – while always remembering whose story it is! Some people do life story work with more than one child at a time, and some sharing of experiences – without breaking confidences, of course – can make a child feel better. Thus a child can appreciate that many people experience pain in their childhood and that the fault does not lie with them; they need not feel guilt, as so many children amazingly do, for their parents' behaviour.

Finally, you need to be able to relax and enjoy at least some parts of each of the sessions and, for this, you may need to re-learn how to play. This will give you a lot of fun! With some of the play techniques suggested later on, you will need to get down on the floor with the child and play with toys. Self-consciousness is not a virtue in this situation but, if you need a reason, you should know that your playing has a serious purpose and is a valuable technique, and as important as being able to talk naturally to a child on important issues. While not all life story work will lead you into play, some will and you might as well enjoy yourself while you are playing!

About identity

A healthy sense of identity is vital to everybody. A poor sense of identity can disable children and adults alike, and limit their ability to take on fresh challenges. For some children one of the major challenges of their life will be moving into a new family. At its worst a poor sense of identity can 'freeze' children so they have an over-investment in the past and cannot move on to think about the future. It can also cause apathy and a depressed, fatalistic outlook.

Identity is a complex concept; it probably starts in individuals with the first separation of the 'inside' and 'outside' self at about six months. This creation of the idea of 'self' is crucial to healthy development and where it is hindered by events and by other people who are important (like mothers and fathers) not responding appropriately, severe problems can arise.

Whilst an understanding of the 'self' is difficult, particularly for children severed from their roots and

without a clear future, it is made easier by separating out some of the more easily definable parts and discussing them openly with a child. One way of doing this is to talk about the past, the present and the future.

The past is made up of places, significant dates and times, people, changes, losses or separations and other events, both happy and sad, like illnesses, holidays and birthdays.

The present is made up of self-images, reactions to the past and responses to questions like What am I doing here? Where do I belong? How do others see me?

The future is made up of issues such as What will I be? Where will I live? What chances do I have? What other changes will there be?

Many children we have worked with have felt miserable and depressed. Looking to the future should be about easing these feelings and replacing them with hopes and aspirations. In life story work with a child, issues relating to the past, present and future can be raised in ways that feel natural to a child. This will give you and the child opportunities to establish facts about the past and present and go some way towards demystifying events and people in the child's life. Similarly, hopes and doubts about the future can be raised and 'bridging' (linking the past to the future) into the new family or situation can begin.

The section on identity theory is necessarily brief and you may want to read more authoritative views. We have listed books for further reading at the end of this book.



Who should do life story work with children?

We firmly believe in the healing effect of talking. Any sympathetic adult who is prepared to spend the time and give the commitment to the child by making a life story book, video or any lasting record to which the child can add and refer back to, can be the right person to do it.

Anyone who takes on this task will need to enlist the active support of the child's social worker and significant others through regular discussions. We have successfully helped adoptive parents and foster carers and many residential social workers to work with children in this way. It is also important – as the spirit of the Children Act encourages – to make a genuine attempt to include the birth family, although the child will always be the guide to the extent of their involvement.

What does life story work require of you?

Whoever undertakes life story work with the child needs to be alert and have patience in order to pick up any clues that the child may reveal, particularly during sessions when not a lot is happening because the child is not in the mood or is testing if you can be trusted. The person also needs to be sensitive to the child. There is no blueprint for life story work, but the child is always the key. It is your responsibility to find ways of letting the child tell you about his or her life, and avoid imposing your own views. Whilst you should not allow patently false information to be recorded, you also need to avoid taking over and producing the 'Authorised Version' of a child's life. It is the child's life story after all, and it is how he or she views it that is important.

It is also important to convey to the child that the record can be altered. Some children will disclose important information at a later date, which they will wish to add to their life story.

There are mistakes which less experienced workers sometimes make but which should, with common sense, easily be avoided.

- 1 Never betray the child's confidences made to you.*
- 2 Don't avoid talking about things the child wants to talk about because they make you uncomfortable.
- 3 Don't put words into the child's mouth.
- 4 Once you have taken on life story work, you must not abandon the child halfway through it and hope

that someone else can complete your work. You should continue with it until both of you agree it is time to end your regular sessions on it.

5 Never use either the end product or carrying out life story work as either a prize or a punishment, but only as a normal part of your life together.

6 Go at the child's pace not yours – it's actually quicker this way! Rushing children only makes them slow down or skimp on details.

7 Be consistent – the child has to know when you are coming. Don't start work and then say you'll be back when you've got time. A child will not trust you and will feel hurt if you do this.

* If a child discloses to you for the first time that he or she has been sexually abused it must be made clear to the child that some information will have to be passed on to those adults responsible for their protection (See also Chapter 13, *Working with children who have been sexually abused.*)

When might you do life story work?

Life story work can be started at any time when the adult and the child have enough confidence in each other to begin and the time to continue. Sometimes it is part of preparing a child who is going from a children's home to a family; sometimes it can help the child accept life as it is.

Ideally, the decision to do life story work will come at a review or case conference. At the same time it will be decided who does what and where. Everyone involved should then support the adult making the book, feeding them with facts and information and suggesting ways around problems. A foster carer or adoptive parent should look for support from their social worker and perhaps from other substitute parents, and have regular discussions about progress. Equally, if you are a social worker or residential social worker, good supervision is very important.

Other members of the 'team' involved with the child who hear of the child progressing or regressing should tell the adult doing the life story work about it. They should also be prepared to cope with the child reliving past experiences or looking for reassurance and possibly displaying disturbed behaviour. They need to understand that this is all part of the healing process.

Feedback to the 'team' is also useful in reaching appropriate decisions about the child's future. However, it is important to repeat the warning about not betraying the child's confidences to you.

How do you deal with confidentiality?

The question of keeping confidential what a child tells you while undertaking life story work together is an important one, to which we have given much thought. Throughout the time we have worked with children we have tried to reach a satisfactory solution to the conflict between not betraying the child's trust and yet needing to share some of the information with others.

One of the difficulties is that the significant adults in the child's life, such as foster carers, social workers and residential social workers, may have a 'team' approach. They will feel that it is important to pool knowledge with the goal of helping the child. He or she, of course, will not regard this in the same way. Whenever possible try and include significant people from the child's past.

We have always found in our individual work with children that they want your discussions to remain confidential to the two of you. Children may disclose something of their inner world which they are not prepared even to record in a life story book. For example, they may express anger against a person in their past which may have relevance for the future and you may feel it necessary to pass it on to others. In such circumstances, we would share the outline of the confidence only, without disclosing any details.

We always make it clear to the significant adults that their child will probably demand confidentiality about certain things and that we intend to respect this. It may be possible to explain to the child that you would like permission to talk to others about a particular disclosure because you believe it may help him or her. You might be able to negotiate with the child what you are allowed to say. This in itself can be helpful to the child because it provides another format to discuss a possible painful event in the past. However, disclosures are sometimes so serious that you cannot keep silent, for instance, if the child knows of a sexual abuser still actively abusing children. You can think of other instances yourself relating to issues of protection and self harm.

In such cases, you will have to explain to the child that you must share information in order to protect him or her and/or other children. What you can promise is that you will not share the information unless absolutely necessary, that you will stand by the child, be present at any interviews and assure the child he or she will be protected against the abuse. You can also, within reason, agree with the child the timing of sharing the disclosure. In general, the only thing that stops a child disclosing abuse is a belief that nobody can help or protect them. A child will disclose

to you if you gain his or her trust – be careful not to betray that trust.

How does life story work end?

There comes a stage when you both agree that you have reached the present day and covered everything you can, and that the regular sessions can end. This point is different for every child. However, you should be suspicious if the life story work has turned into little more than a photograph album and you are finished after only three or four sessions. In that situation, go back over what has been produced, and see if the child can write or draw about any particular period which you know (from the file or doing a questionnaire, as described later) to be sensitive.

We never regard the work as finished but some record of the process is important as it provides a reference point, particularly as it can be updated until adulthood. It can be turned to in a crisis, such as when a child revives a ghost or a myth from the past, or is beginning to discover and remember parts of the childhood not available to them when they started on their life story work. Then you can go to the section of the book which dealt with it and gently rediscover or redefine the reality together.

We often find, for example, that when we discuss a new permanent family with a child, he or she will start to make up fantasies about their birth family, however badly they let them down. Children have a natural fear of letting go of their present relative security – however unsatisfactory that may be – to face a risky future. Life story work can be helpful in looking back together at the anger the child felt about the birth parents when originally doing the life story book. This may help him or her to let go more easily and face the future.

Welfare 'checklist'

Increasingly, courts are expecting social workers to have worked with a child to find out what the child might want to happen and why. In coming to a

decision about the paramount interests of the child a court will pay attention to the welfare 'checklist', which is a list of the factors the court needs to take into account in arriving at a decision, for example, about whether to make a section 33 order.

Life story work can help a child and social worker to reach agreement on what to say to the court. We particularly point to the first four parts of the checklist mentioned below. The court must take into account:

- a) the ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of his or her age and understanding);
- b) his or her physical, emotional and educational needs;
- c) the likely effect on him or her of any change in circumstances;
- d) his or her age, sex, background and any characteristics which the court considers relevant.

Part b) of the checklist requires the court to hear what his or her emotional needs are, and part c) highlights the need for a child to have thought through, with a social worker, what effect change will have on him or her. Agreeing what these are should be part and parcel of life story work.

This book is the result of our own experience. We have written it to help others who want to use life story work as a way of helping children. We hope that what we have said here will help and not discourage you. You may worry that you might damage a child or give him or her too much pain. If you have a commitment to the child, you are the right person to undertake life story work and you will more than compensate in the long term for any pain the child might suffer in the short term. The only damage you can do is by walking away from your commitment before it is completed.