

Practice Guidance

LIFESTORY BOOKS

The responsibility for completing Life story Books for children placed for adoption through adoption counts, remains with the Local Authority Children's SW team.

We recommend, however that a consistent standard & quality of book is implemented. This will ensure each child, from the earliest possible stage, has access to their own story and increases the likelihood that the adopters will openly share the child's book with them throughout their life.

Adoption counts recommends that the Joy Rees model of Life story book is used for adopted children. An extract is below for information.

Extract from:
Life Story Books for Adopted Children
A Family Friendly Approach
Joy Rees

Compiling a Life Story Book

Remember that life letters and other reports and documents should be available to the child at a later stage. The life story book is just the first tool used to help the child to understand him or her self and their history.

There are a number of points to consider when writing a life story book:

- Historical details are available from the child's file, and current information should be gathered from the adoptive parents and child. Before you begin, check names and terms used by the child and family and let them choose their own title for the life story book – 'All About Danny', 'Danny Rules OK', 'Cool Dude Danny' and 'Danny's Life Adventure' are just some of the suggestions received from children. Put the year on the title page too.
- The book is not an abridged version of the child's placement report. It must be child focused and child friendly and contain bite sized sections, with scanned photographs and plenty of colour, drawings and clip art to illustrate events and feelings. Social work jargon, such as 'placed on the Child Protection Register under the category of emotional neglect', is meaningless to a 5 year old or indeed to the average adult!
- The book needs to be child sized – in other words, not so large and heavy that it is difficult for a young child to lift or hold. It also needs to be durable and child proof. Laminating the pages may seem appropriate for toddlers, but this tends to make the book very heavy. A spare copy or a CD version may be the solution
- Use the child's first name and write in the third person, unless working with older children who are writing the story with you. For younger children, the

less direct approach is a more effective and less threatening way of exploring their history. Toddlers use their names rather than 'I' or 'me' and only gradually develop a sense of self. Many adopted children function at a very young emotional age, and adopters are encouraged to 'think toddler'. Using the third person in the book mirrors this developmental process

- Currently, the average age of children being adopted in the U.K. is 4 years old. Irrespective of age, when preparing the book, you should make it appropriate for a school-age child (roughly 5 to 10 years old). They may already have gone through the book many times, but it is only when they start school that children begin to understand the emotional significance of their adoption. Prior to this some will assume that, just like them, everyone has been fostered and adopted
- A school project about families and requests for baby photographs raises many issues for an adopted child. Changes in the way thoughts are processed and in brain integration are also occurring at this age, which can lead to further questions
- Parents who have adopted children as babies or toddlers often notice a change in their children at this stage. Some sense an undercurrent of sadness or 'grumpiness', while others comment on increased concerns, difficulties, lethargy, anger or aggression. 'Attachment issues' become more apparent, and adopters may feel confused and ineffective as parents, as they begin to absorb the child's emotions
- It is at this stage that an adoptive parent will be able to use a sensitively written life storybook to most effect. While reminding the adopters about the child's history, it can also be used to reassure their child and to help the child to unravel the confused thoughts and emotions they are struggling to understand

The format:

Present > Past > Present > Future

- Beginning the story with the child's birth and with the birth parents' details and history will be overwhelming and is not a good way to promote a secure attachment between the adopters and child. In doing so, the adopters are beginning by reminding the child that they are not 'mummy' or 'daddy'. Think of the subliminal messages here, for both child and adopter!
- Helping the child to feel safe, contained and 'grounded' in the present is a more appropriate starting point. From this position the adoptive parent can help their child to look back and begin to make some sense of their history
- To understand ourselves fully and move on to the future we need to understand our past, but young children live very much in the present and have a limited understanding of 'yesterday' or 'tomorrow'. Many older adopted

children have a similarly fragile grasp of time, so first we need to give them a much stronger sense of their present

1. Present

- Start the book with the present: the child as s/he is now, with scanned photographs of the adoptive family and the home. Include a general description, a photograph of the child, and one with mum and dad (i.e. adoptive mum and dad). They should feature at the beginning and not be tacked on, almost as an afterthought, at the end. Do not refer to them as 'new' mummy and daddy – just as mummy and daddy, and do so throughout the book
- Make sure there are many positive comments about the child right from the start. For example, sparkly/twinkling eyes, lovely/sunny smile or soft/shiny hair. The adopters need to be very involved, so include positive comments from them about their son or daughter and their talents, interests, nick names etc - and interweave these positives throughout the body of the book
- Be mindful of the subliminal messages. Children need to feel positive about themselves – that they are important, loveable and loved
- If the child is at nursery or school, add a few comments and pictures and mention names of teachers, pick out any positive comments they have made, and mention favourite subjects and names of friends
- If children are struggling with school there will still be positive comments to include. They may be great at helping the teacher to put things away, or good at cutting and sticking, kind to other children or amazing at cartwheels!. Feed the positives and don't dwell on the negatives. The life book is not the place for this!
- For children who find separations difficult, parents may find that they are frequently asked to collect the children early from school, either because they are upset, feeling ill, or they have become disruptive in some way. Children express separation anxiety in many different ways and this issue could be alluded to indirectly by mentioning that while the child is at school his mum/dad still think about him as they are cleaning the house, shopping, working at the office, etc. Out of sight is not out of mind - and this needs to be constantly reinforced in all kinds of ways
- Now write about the child's name and scan in a copy of the birth certificate (i.e. the new certificate showing the adoptive name). Mention the meaning and significance. This could lead to a simple explanation about the change to the child's birth name, and the concept of adoption can be introduced. For example, children join families in different ways, some are born into them, some are fostered and some are adopted, etc
- If giving examples of other people who have been fostered or adopted, make these meaningful to the child. For older children Moses, Aristotle, Nelson Mandela, Kate Adie or Fatima Whitbread may be appropriate but will mean

little for younger children. For a 4 or 5 year old, Superman, Stuart Little the mouse or Babe the pig will have far more of an impact. Bring in positive examples of relatives or friends within the adoptive parents' network who were also adopted. Think about the child's world and reinforce their own points of reference

- For inter country adoptions, many children are 'abandoned' and their births are not registered by birth parents. However the same format is still helpful and an honest but sensitive explanation is still needed. For example:
- Kas's mum and dad gave him the name Kasem, but it is usually shortened to Kas. His mum and dad chose the name because it is Thai for being 'well and happy' and because they thought that it was just the right name for Kas. His middle name is Virote, and this is Thai for 'great power'. Virote is the name that was chosen for him in Thailand before he came to live with his mum and dad in Newtown

2. Past

- Having explored and endorsed the present for the child, it is now time to introduce the past. Start with the beginning: - the child's birth
- If there is little information about the birth, use some 'poetic licence' – generally we can assume that babies were born gorgeous, lovely, adorable, loveable little bundles. Details of birth weight and length and time and day of birth are usually available for all domestic adoptions and should be included. If the child was premature, or unwell and in a special care unit, include details of this
- All babies have a birth mother and a birth father, so simply say this. Give the birth mother's name and, if available the birth father's name, and from then on refer to them using their first names only. Scan in one or two photographs if they are available. (The originals and other birth family photographs can be safely put in a separate photograph album for them.) There may be a few exceptions, when photographs of the birth parents should not be included in the book. For example, for children who have experienced extreme violence or sexual abuse, photographs may re-traumatize and not be appropriate
- If the birth father has not been identified, and there is no information available, this must be acknowledged. Not mentioning a birth father could lead the child to believe the father is just so 'bad' he has to remain a secret, or the child may grow up assuming that their adoptive father is actually their birth father. For example:

All children have a birth mother and a birth father. Peter's birth mother is called Jane etc. Peter's birth father is called, Steve. Very little is known about Steve. Jane said that he was about the same age as her and about the same height. He had a medium build and brown hair. Steven and Jane hadn't

known each other for very long and their friendship had ended a few months before Peter was born. Jane thought that he was a lorry driver and that he was from Wales. He may have gone back to that area to live, but she wasn't sure.

- Most adopted children were welcomed into the world by their birth parents. The birth parent would have felt love for the child and may have breast fed, registered the birth, and chosen a name with great care and for a particular reason. All this should be mentioned
- Give basic details of significant members of the birth family: ages, physical descriptions, ethnic and cultural information, religion, personalities, occupations, interests, hobbies, and talents. Do not overload with intimate details of the birth parents' history. Keep this section positive and short
- There has been much debate about the difference between being 'loved' and being 'loveable' and some may feel that being told that a neglectful or abusive parent loved him/her will be very confusing for a child. However many adopted children were wanted and loved by their birth parents and it would be wrong to deny this, even if those same parents were later unable to parent the child appropriately. We need to be more creative about the way we explain and explore the nature of love and parenting within life storybooks
- There needs to be a sensitive and honest account of the events/concerns leading to the child's relinquishment or removal from the birth parents. Neglect or abuse needs to be explained in a very simple and non-judgemental way. Comments about the birth mother's 'inability to meet your physical and emotional needs' will mean nothing to a child

For example, children understand their basic needs, such as the need for food and clothing, or to go to school, or for lots of cuddles as a baby. They need to know that their birth parent simply didn't know how to look after them properly, and certainly not in the way that such a precious and loveable child deserved

- For inter county adoptions there is often little or no information about birth family and an honest and sensitive explanation is still needed. For example:

Kas was born Thailand, and like all babies he had a birth mother and birth father, although very little is known about them. There were both from Thailand and just like Kas they would have had lovely dark shiny hair and brown eyes and skin.

Kas's birth mother may have been very young or very poor, as a few days after Kas was born she decided that she wouldn't be able to look after him properly, so she took him to a baby's nursery in Cha-Am.

She must have carried Kas there and she carefully placed him in a little basket, near the entrance of the nursery, so the nurses who looked after the babies would be sure to see him. She would have known that they would take good care of him. And this is exactly what happened. When the nursery nurse saw him she picked him up very carefully. She looked all around but they were not able to find Kas's birth mother anywhere. The police came too and they searched, but they could not find anyone either.

Kas was a beautiful and very loveable baby. He was very healthy and social workers who came to see him and the nannies who looked after him at the 6

nursery all agreed that he was indeed a really gorgeous little bundle. They chose the name Virote for him as it means 'powerful' and they all agreed that he was indeed a very strong little baby, so the name seemed just right for him.

- Giving an honest account of the circumstances leading to their adoption, while acknowledging sadness and loss, should make it clear that any neglect or abuse was not the child's fault. Words need to be carefully chosen to ensure that they do not feed in to the child's sense of blame and shame
- Lengthy accounts of the birth parent's unhappy childhood, and explanations of the 'root cause' of their difficulties, should not be in the child's book. Children may feel somehow responsible for the birth parent's sadness or inadequacies, and believe that as the abuse or neglect was not really their birth parent's fault, it must be theirs – again reinforcing their sense of 'badness'
- Detailed information about case conferences, care proceedings and specific dates is not needed. Keep these details for the 'Later life letter' and other reports that will be available to the child when older. They will over-complicate and actually detract from the child's understanding of their story
- Give information and photographs about the foster carers – but again not too much, as children should now be given a memory book or box of their time with the carers. If there were several fostering placements, this is usually due to the carers' other commitments, so choose words carefully to ensure that the child does not think that they moved to other foster carers or to the adoptive parents for 'being naughty'
- Bring the story back to the adopters. Again, protracted explanations about 'Adoption Panels' and 'Matching Meetings' are not needed. There is usually a photograph of the child's first meeting with the adopters and they themselves may have positive comments about this to quote in the book. Some adopters say 'It was love at first sight' or they have another positive memory or anecdote to tell. Usually at this stage, the children in photographs look tense and anxious, so avoid captions about how happy and delighted the child was to have a 'new mummy and daddy' While it might be appropriate to comment on the adopters' sense of joy, acknowledge the understandable ambivalence of the child
- Give some details of the move to the adopters' home, including how strange it must have been for the child at first. Comment on all the different things the child had to get use to – different people, a different house, a different bedroom, different food, different words for things, different smells and sounds, different feelings, different colours and furniture, different nursery/school and so on. So many differences!
- Comment on the adoptive parents' knowledge and understanding of the child, and how they knew about all the things needed to keep a child happy, healthy and safe. It may be appropriate to mention that they also realised that some of the child's previous experiences may have left him/her feeling, worried,

wobbly, upset, cross, angry or sad. This could provide an opportunity for the adoptive parent to explore facial expressions and feelings with the child

- Writing in the book in the 3rd person also affords more opportunity for gentle or playful conjecture with regard to the child's emotions. 'I expect that John may have felt...' or 'I wonder if John felt...' allows for further discussion between the child and parent. The child can either identify with, or reject the suggested feelings
- If the child has particular problems, such as bed-wetting, nightmares or eating difficulties, this could be tentatively explored via the book – but never in direct reference to the child. For example:

If children keep them all their worries inside, their insides may soon become so full it can't hold them all in. These scary feelings can sometimes make children feel cross or grumpy, or all these worries can make children's tummies feel wobbly, or give them tummy ache. Sometimes all their muddly feelings and thoughts just have to 'leak out'.

If this happens at night when children are asleep, then some children suddenly need to go to the toilet, so if they are fast asleep, they might wet their beds, or they could have muddly, scary dreams and wake up feeling very frightened.

If they just shared their worries with their mum, dad or another grownup they should soon find that their worries are just not so scary after all!

If John has any worries he just needs to share them with his mum and dad. They will understand and together they will be able to help him sort everything out.

- Contact arrangements, whether direct or indirect, should be simply explained making it clear that this was the adults' decision. Children may have some involvement, but it is not their responsibility to write or to respond to letters from birth relatives. The arrangement is between the adults, and if any direct meetings are planned the adoptive parents will be involved.
- Give details of the actual 'Adoption Day' and how this was celebrated, any comments the 'wise judge' made or thoughts he/she may have had! For example, that the judge also realised just how precious and loveable the child was and just how much the adoptive parents loved him/her. Again, scan in photographs
- Do not end the book here!

3. Present

- Bring children back to the present, with examples of how well the adopters know and love them and mentions of everyday occurrences, activities and family rituals and routines, which will all help to 'ground' the child
- Listing and illustrating some of the child's favourite things will demonstrate just how well the adoptive parents know the child and may prove to be one of the child's favourite pages. e.g. favourite drink, food, colour, book, film. TV programme or toy.

4. Future

- Finally, give the child a positive and compelling future - identify some plans and hopes. This could be planning to join the beavers/brownies or having swimming lessons next month or next year, or the more long-term aspiration of becoming a gymnast, an astronaut or a train driver!
- End with a few photographs of life over the last year or so, with the adoptive family, and by thinking about plans for next year, the year after and the year after that and so on, making it clear that the child's future is with the adoptive family

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