

**Lifebooks: Priceless Keepsakes for  
Exploring Identity, Nurturing Attachment,  
and Supporting Permanency**

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Presentation by

Shannon Shepherd and Oma McReynolds

Today we wish to share the  
why and how of Lifebooks with you.

Lifebooks are created to help a child tell their story.

They are especially important in foster care and  
adoption.

While much of today's presentation will reference  
foster care adoption, Lifebooks are critical to any  
form of adoption.

# Lifebooks....

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## Are:

- Child focused
- Information based
- Truthful
- A therapeutic tool
- Private
- Fluid and changing

## Are NOT:

- A scrapbook
- A journal
- Photo albums
- Open for Show and Tell
- Optional

# Shannon's Story

# A Lifebook helps create....

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- a physical and visual confirmation of a child's existence and their life story
- opportunities for intimacy and communication, which in turn creates...
- opportunities for attachment, connection, and trust
- opportunities for the child to express grief and loss
- opportunities to eliminate or reduce “magical thinking”

# Lifebook work can be an excellent source of therapy work.

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## *Lifebooks can cover:*

- Grief and loss
- Separations
- Misconceptions
- Identity formation
- Impacts of behavior on others and themselves
- Chronological story
- Cultural issues
- Preparation for new moves
- Review and understanding of early life experiences
- Information sharing
- Emotions and emotional expression

Questions that a  
Lifebook should  
always answer:

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Who am I?

How did I get separated from my  
birth family?

Where I am going?

Darla Henry 3-5-7 model

**3 Tasks:**

Clarification, Integration, Actualization

**5 Questions:**

Who am I?

What happened to me?

Where am I going?

How will I get there?

When will I know I belong?

**7 critical elements:**

engage child in process

listen to the child's words

when you speak, tell the truth

validate the child and the child's life story

create a safe space for the child to do this work

it is never too late to go back in time

pain is a part of the process

# Important Points of Lifebook work

- Provide chronological view of child's life
- Help child identify their past, present, future and view the connections between
- Dislodge magical or fantasy thinking about separations from birth family, past caregivers
- Identify positive as well as the negatives of past caregivers
- Help children address and resolve strong emotions relating to past life events
- Allow child to hear and express positive messages about their birth, foster, and adoptive families
- Allow child to recognize that rejection of past caregivers is not necessary to accept new caregivers
- Help child understand the court and legal processes that affected their lives
- Help child access language that is positive and strength based (birth vs. real; private vs. secret)
- Help caregivers learn how child views himself and his situation



Shannon's story continues...

# Barriers to Lifebook work...

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## Adults

- Fear
- Lack of time
- Unsure of how/when to start
- Costs
- Hard topics to discuss

## Child

- Not motivated
- Avoidance of tough topics

## The Black and Blue Technique

John's mother, Darlene, was a prostitute who used meth. John came into foster care due to abuse and neglect. She lost her parental rights because she didn't follow the foster care service plan. Darlene had abusive boyfriends and came from a toxic family.

John's mom, Darlene, had been abused as a child and didn't learn how to take care of a child safely. She was often depressed and would use drugs to try to make herself feel better. Darlene would date men who would hurt her and John. Darlene couldn't meet the responsibilities of taking care of John in safe ways. John was placed into foster care. Darlene was given time to make changes in her life but she continued to make poor choices. The court decided that John had been waiting in foster care long enough and needed a permanent family.

# Building a Lifebook

## Step #1 Gathering Information

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- Who can we ask?
  - Everyone! Birth parents, Case workers, case files, CASA, GAL, Relatives, former foster parents, the Child
- Where does it come from?
  - Case records, interviews, social media
- Who puts it together?
  - Some children have specific adoption workers that assist, otherwise this work would be done by foster/adoptive parent
- What information do we need to include?
  - Draw up a list of questions, look over Lifebook templates, ask for copies of information
- How do we make it personal for the child?
  - Involve the child

Shannon's story continues

# Building a Lifebook

## Step #2 Develop a Lifebook

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- Kid Focused
- Lifebook styles
- Lifebook pages
- Make copies of original photos
- Make a copy of the book to be kept safe
- Optional books

TIP: Look for acid-free

# Building a Lifebook

## Involving the child

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- Communication with the child about Lifebooks, purpose
- Patience is needed
- Dealing with discomfort and resistance
- Dealing with confusion
- Positives and negatives are important here

# Building a Lifebook

## The role of the adult

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- To be the advocate who seeks out information
- To be a guide to the child in compiling their story into a coherent narrative
- To provide structure to the process
- To be the push and pull in areas of discomfort
- To present the truth without being toxic
- To recognize the pain of the process and help child manage it
- To look for help for the child



# Making It

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It is now time for a practice exercise.

With the materials you have been given, create a Lifebook page.

# Sources

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- Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past, Betsy Keefer Smalley and Jayne E. Schooler, 2015
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- Making History, A Social Workers Guide to Lifebooks, Kentucky, 2010
- Lifebooks, Creating a Treasure fo the Adopted Child, Beth O'Malley, 2008