One Minute Guide

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Life Story Work

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West Sussex County Council has produced a framework for life story work, which can be found within the Practice Guidance on Tri-X. The life story work process must be initiated, driven and coordinated by the child's allocated social worker. Understanding a child’s story (the chronology) and trying to understand what it’s like in that child’s shoes, and talking to children and young people about their past experiences and what their care plan is, and recording it well, are all things that good social workers will do well.

All children with a plan for Adoption must have a Life Story Book. Life story work and background history letters are a very important part of the adoption process for all children because they help the child to make sense of his or her past. The draft Life Story Book should be taken to the Matching Panel and should be ready for the second Review. Later Life Letters are to be given to adopters no later than 10 days after the ceremony to celebrate the making of the Adoption Order.

But whether or not the plan later becomes adoption, all children in care will benefit from the information and photographs that make up a Life Story Book.The allocated social worker will need to begin to plan the work on a child’s life story as soon as possible once they come into care – not just if and when the plan is adoption. For children whose permanence plan is long term fostering, further life story work may need to be re-visited throughout their childhood.

Making a Life Story Book is more than creating a photograph album with identifying sentences giving dates, places and names. It is an account of a child's life in words, pictures and documents, and an opportunity to explore emotions through play, conversation and counselling. To do life story work effectively takes effort, time and commitment. The allocated social worker and practice manager will need to try to ensure that the worker is given the space to do it well. This includes seeking help from the child’s family, the foster carer, from the child or young person if they are willing, and from other professionals in order to effectively gather the information required to enable the child or young person make sense of their history.

Children separated from their birth families are often denied the opportunity to know about their past and to clarify past events in terms of the present. 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 or fantasise about a concocted story that may prevent the child forming a congruent sense of self and belonging.

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. 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.

Children separated from their birth parents 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 children in care the opportunity to do this, and we want and need to get this right for the child. 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 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.

The principles are the same whether life story work is done directly with a child who is of sufficient age and understanding to be involved, or prepared for a very young child so that when they are older their carers can work through their story with them. 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 complete, 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 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 the allocated social worker the opportunity to show the child why they should be proud of themselves, and this positive attitude should be evident in any record. In talking about their birth parents, for example, although it is imperative that the worker tells them a suitably-worded version of the truth (however painful that may be) about their family and why they needed to come into care/be adopted it is important to stress the positive side. The worker will need to talk about their birth parents in non-judgemental terms, for example the worker might say that not everyone is good at being a parent, but that does not mean the birth parents are bad in other respects. 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.

Poor life story work has the potential to be harmful for the child, for example, if it is inaccurate, incomplete, poorly presented or the work is done in an insensitive or rushed way, the child may find it very hard to develop any kind of understanding of their background history and the reasons for not being with their birth family. This in turn can lead to major problems developing for the child, for example, in areas such as identity and attachment.

**Further information**:

Control, Practice Manager Early Therapeutic Support:

Need more detail about the policy.

Start point- Attachment- shared files.

See Tracey’s quick reference guide.

Follow up