

# Guidance for Child and Family Practitioners

## Life Story Work with Children and Young People



## What is Life Story Work?



Life story work is completed with children and young people to support them to understand their life history and their journeys in care. Life story work can help children to understand who they are, what they have experienced and why, and support them to establish a sense of identity and adjust to their family lives.

Life story work can include stories from early childhood and beyond, memories, anecdotes, and belongings. This can all be collated in to a Life Story Book which provides the child with a visual record of the significant events and relationships in their lives.



## Why is Life Story Work important for the child/ren I am caring for?

Life story work is important for children growing up living without their birth family. It gives them the same

information about their history that most children will have received from their families through conversations, baby books and photograph albums. As a child moves through care, much of the important information about them can become lost, particularly if there have been a number of placement moves. Their understanding of their journey may become chaotic and fragmented, which can impact upon their sense of understanding and personal identity. A life story book can help recover this information and support the child to really make sense of their feelings and experiences.

Children and young people living in care may also have difficulties regulating their feelings, low self-esteem, and low self-worth. Having access to life story work can be helpful in addressing these feelings, and can open up communication with the child.

## Life Story Books

Life story work can be shared with the child in the form of a Life Story Book that is personalised to them. A Life Story Book is written in chronological order and in a way that is easily understandable for the child.



A Life Story Book seeks to support the child with identifying the connections between past, present and future. It can help Foster Carers, Adopters, Social Workers, and most importantly, the child, learn to associate certain behaviours they display now to their past.

A Life Story Book can also be helpful in facilitating relationships and attachment between the child and their Foster Carers or Adoptive Parents.

## What Can I Contribute to Life Story Work?



**Social Workers should seek to gather the following from people involved in the life of a child;**

- **Photographs** – images of the child, their bedroom, their nursery, school, favourite shops, toys, friends, neighbours. It is really important for individuals to include as much detail, such as when, where, what and who was there.
- **Memories** – this can be funny things that the child has said or done, holidays and trips out, school plays. Again, being as specific as possible is helpful to the child in their Life Story Work.



- **Firsts** – this is important if you are working with a baby or very young child, this can include details from Foster Carers or family about their first

steps, first words, first food they tried and enjoyed/did not enjoy, first hair cut etc.

- **Child's Personality** – you can include details of how the child seemed when you met them and how this may have changed over time.
- **Skills** – refer to any activities or skills that the child shows/ed a real interest or achievement in, i.e. bike riding, swimming, dancing.



### Life Story Work Sessions

Life story work sessions can be completed with children and young people. They are usually delivered by the child's Social Worker or another professional who has been asked to provide specialist, therapeutic support. The sessions

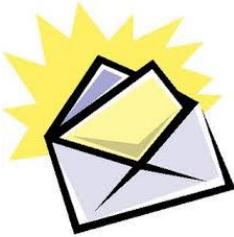
involve providing a narrative to the child about their story, and supporting the child to understand and accept their feelings about their personal history.

When completing Life Story Work sessions, the child's Social Worker / professional should discuss with Foster Carers what they have planned. This way any issues or problems in the session can be addressed. **It would be good practice for Social Workers / professionals to provide Foster Carers with a Life Story Work Plan which clearly details the dates of sessions, what they will cover, and the plan for support for the child following this.**

Life Story Work sessions can bring up memories for children that may cause them to feel upset. During this time, it is best to advise the Foster Carers to let the child know that they are there for them, and it is important not to force the child to talk about how they are feeling. **The best approach is to talk about this at the child's pace.**

Foster Carers should be advised to allow the child to have some space, maybe by spending some time in the garden or in their bedroom, and gently remind them that they are there for them if they want to talk.

**Foster Carers can provide the child with a diary or journal to write in after their sessions so that they can record their thoughts and feelings.** Professionals can then support the child to work through these feelings. Foster Carers should always communicate with the Social Worker how the child has been after Life Story Work sessions.



## Later Life Letters

A later life letter is a letter written by a Social Worker to a child who is being adopted, to help the child make sense of their journey and their past experiences.

The letter is given to the adopters at an appropriate time after the Adoption Order is made - usually within 10 working days of the Adoption Ceremony, i.e. the ceremony *to celebrate the making of the Adoption Order*. The adoptive parents should then give the letter to the child at an appropriate time in their life, when they are old enough to understand.

The letter should be clear and truthful, and should be written with the child in mind, with easy to understand language, without the use of professional jargon. Think of yourself as an adopted person. What information would

you want? What questions would you ask your birth parents?

It is important information for later life letters is collated at the earliest opportunity, as information may be lost if not gathered together now.

Dudley Children's Services do have clear guidance and advice for writing a Later Life Letter, which details how to introduce yourself to the child, how to explain their journey to them, and what else can be included. There are also good practice examples which practitioners are encouraged to review on Dudley's Centre for Professional Practice website ([www.dudleycpp.org.uk](http://www.dudleycpp.org.uk)):

[https://dudleychildcare.proceduresonline.com/g\\_later\\_life\\_letter.html](https://dudleychildcare.proceduresonline.com/g_later_life_letter.html)

## Memory Boxes



**Children’s Social Workers should always encourage Foster Carers to create a Memory Box for children.**

Memory Boxes should be bright and colourful, and they should be tailored to the age of the child/ren. They can be bought or custom made. Items in the Memory Box should be labelled with dates.

Memory Boxes should be started at a child’s first foster placement and travel with them between placements. If a child is adopted, the memory box/boxes are given to the adoptive parents at “The Life Appreciation Day”.

Anyone can contribute to a child’s Memory Box, including wider family of Foster Carers, school friends, the person who supervises contact etc.

## Useful items to include in a Memory Box are;

- Birth tags, hospital tags, milk teeth, locks of hair from hair cuts.



- First shoes or other significant clothing.

- Any personal items associated with their birth family, including toys, teddies and books.



- Drawings, notes, letters.



- Any form of school certificates, reports or project work.

- Ticket stubs from the cinema, theatre, bowling etc.



- Restaurant/holiday receipts, programmes for events and concerts, leaflets.

**Whose Responsibility is it to Transfer  
a Life Story Book or Memory Box  
Between Placements?**



The **child's Social Worker and the Foster Carer's Supervising Social Worker** should ensure that the Life Story Book and Memory Box moves with the child if they move to a different placement or to their adoptive home.

**Where can I get further advice and  
guidance if I need it?**



Dudley Children's Services have example Life Story Books completed for children of varying ages and life journeys. These can be accessed on Dudley's Centre for Professional Website via the following links:

[https://dudleychildcare.proceduresonline.com/g\\_life\\_story\\_book.html](https://dudleychildcare.proceduresonline.com/g_life_story_book.html)

[https://dudleychildcare.proceduresonline.com/g\\_later\\_life\\_lett.html](https://dudleychildcare.proceduresonline.com/g_later_life_lett.html)

Alyson Poyner, Life Story Worker for Dudley's Children's Services, offers training to all staff, including foster carers, specifically about Life Story Work which staff can book on to via Dudley's Training Brochure.

<https://www.dudleycpp.org.uk/eventsandtraining>

***This resource has been created in consultation with  
Alyson Poyner, Life Story Work Trainer for Dudley  
Children's Services.***