

# Life story work

## About this briefing

This practice tool focuses on how social workers and others supporting care experienced children and young people can help them to understand their own histories, primarily through planned direct work and writing life story books. It aims to build confidence in explaining difficult stories and provide ideas for working across the age range, bringing together research knowledge and practice wisdom based on the extensive experience of the author and her colleagues over many years of working in this area. Examples of written stories and other work with children are used throughout and links are made to these in the tool; these have all been created for training purposes. The tool is divided into the following sections:

- > What is life story work and why does it matter?
- > Overcoming the challenges
- > Doing life story work with children and writing the story down

## Introduction

*I would like to see a picture of my dad, so I know what he looks like. I would like to see a picture of me as a baby. I have never seen a picture of me. I have a lot of questions that no-one answers.*

(Understanding why you are in care, p.1)

Children and young people growing up away from their birth parents want to know where they come from and why they could not remain in their family of origin (Morgan, 2006). Knowing your own history is a basic human right, and vital for identity formation (Staines & Selwyn, 2020). For children and young people who come into care, this story is often fragmented and disputed, full of trauma, separation and loss. They are often separated from those who share their story and the adults around them may be unsure what to say or worried about causing more harm. But children and young people want social workers and others to help them understand the past, even when this is difficult (Hammond et al., 2020). Life story work is a way of explaining the past, answering questions and helping children and young people make sense of their own lives.

The creation of **life story books** began with adopted children in the mid-1980s, a time when direct work with children was seen as central to social work practice. There was growing recognition of the impact of separation and loss and the continuing importance to children of family history and cultural and religious heritage (Aldgate & Simmonds, 1988). The involvement of social workers in direct work diminished over the following decades but the broader concept of **life story work** has now re-emerged with the renewed emphasis on relationship-based practice and the impact of trauma.

Children and young people growing up in foster or kinship care and those returning to their birth parents from care are now recognised as having similar needs to those who are adopted (Nicholls, 2005). Previous influential publications on the subject have been updated and the work continues to provide the foundation for an expanding range of ideas and exercises (e.g. Fahlberg, 2012; Ryan & Walker, 2016).

Some work with a child may need to be planned and long term but the responsibility for helping children understand their own histories underpins every aspect of social work from case recording, to making sure every child has a photograph of their birth parents or answering a child's questions during a statutory visit. Everyone has a contribution to make – parents, extended family, social workers, family support workers, children's guardians, contact supervisors, foster carers, nurseries and schools – both in writing down memories for the life story book and in answering children's questions as they arise.

Life story work can be done with or for children depending on their age and readiness to engage. Whilst all young people need information about what is happening now and in the near future, revisiting the past needs careful timing. Highly traumatised children need recovery time and sometimes more specialist interventions.



### Reflective questions

Which children and young people receive life story work where you work?

Are there other children and young people who might benefit from life story work?

## What is life story work and why does it matter?

### What is life story work?

Life story work aims to answer the questions: *Who am I? Where did I come from? Why did I not grow up with my birth mother or father?* It brings together the child's lived experiences, thoughts, feelings and questions, with memories of birth family and others and the social worker's understanding of what happened and how decisions were made. It aims to create a coherent narrative, a story that makes sense of the past, present and future.

It covers a wide range of activities intended to help children and young people understand the reasons why they were separated from their family of origin and to learn more about their own history and heritage. There is no one right way to carry out life story work – the approach chosen needs to suit the needs of the individual child or young person.

Children need an explanation of what is happening, before they are removed from home if possible, and they need it more than once; understanding this life changing event is an on-going process. Life story work needs to be revised over time as understanding grows and new questions emerge, particularly during adolescence when questions of identity are pressing and contact with birth families may be renewed (Nicholls, 2005, p. 21).

For further information watch the webinar



[Life story work: what it is and why it matters](#)



## Examples of life story work

This includes **creative direct work** such as drawing, playing, taking photographs or making films, visiting places a child has lived or going back to visit previous carers and family members (Wrench & Naylor, 2013). This may contribute to the shared creation of a **life story book** or series of books.

Some children's life story books are made for them because they are very young or not ready to think about the past. The **letter for later life** adds to this and is given to young people when they are ready for more detailed information (Moffat, 2012; Nicholls, 2005; Rees, 2009).

**Memory boxes** can help to keep important mementos safe (Nicholls, 2005).

Ordinary, everyday **life story conversations** with social workers and carers allow information to be absorbed gradually over time (Watson et al., 2020).

For younger children, **therapeutic stories** in which the events of their own lives are retold using animal characters provide a gentle approach (Sunderland, 2001).

**Therapeutic life story work** is a more specialist trauma informed approach for older children and their carers and delivered by trained practitioners over several months to create a shared understanding about the impact of early experiences and compassion for birth parents (Rose, 2012).

**Digital life story work** is primarily for use with adolescents (Hammond & Cooper, 2013).



## For further information see the following resources:

[Creative life story work: Blue Cabin](#)

[Therapeutic life story work: Melbourne](#)

[Richard Rose's model of therapeutic life story work](#)

[Podwalk example: Simon Hammond](#)

[Trove- A digitally enhanced memory box: Gray et al. \(2019\)](#)

## The benefits of life story work

Research indicates that good quality life story work, whether delivered as part of day-to-day practice by social workers or by more specialist workers, is regarded as positive by children and young people and associated with increased placement stability (Hammond et al., 2020).

Features of quality include work that:

- > is delivered by a consistent, trusted adult
- > is young person led
- > provides support to access and process personal information
- > explains chronological facts
- > gives clear reasons for coming into care and subsequent decisions
- > includes support for carers.

Photos and mementos from the past are highly valued. The memory store approach – in which foster carers are trained to write down memories and collect memorabilia (e.g. baby clothes, school reports, tickets from days out) to record their time together- helps build relationships, opens up conversations and develops children’s thinking and learning (Shotton, 2010).

More specialist life story work delivered or supported by therapists has additional benefits of increasing parents’ and carers’ understanding of children’s emotional needs and enabling better emotional regulation in children and young people (Hammond et al., 2020).



### Reflective questions

What photographs and mementos do you have of your own childhood?

Where are these stored?

Who is gathering up memories for the children and young people you work with?

## Children and young people's views

Many care-experienced children and young people want more information than they currently receive about their own histories: half of children aged four to seven and a fifth of those aged 11-18 do not feel they have a full explanation of why they are in care. A quarter of care leavers do not know or would like to know more about why they did not grow up with birth parents ([Understanding why you are in care: Coram Voice](#)).



For further information see the following:

[What matters to children in care and care leavers' well-being: learning from the Bright Spots programme: Webinar](#)

[The wellbeing of children in care and care leavers - learning from the Bright Spots Programme: Strategic Briefing](#)

Young people report that rushed, insensitive or incomplete life story work that is not updated and which does not address the reasons why they came into care can have long lasting impacts on their sense of identity and well-being (Hammond et al., 2020). If they are denied access to information about their own lives they can feel a sense of injustice that others know about their history when they do not (Watson et al., 2020). The negative effects of not having a full explanation about the reasons they are in care can persist into adult life (Staines & Selwyn, 2020). This is exemplified in the following quote:

*'The local authority owns all this information about me and as a grown adult has the discretion to decide how much of that information I am entitled to.'*

Darren, care experienced adult talking about accessing his files.

Click here to listen to the full podcast:  
[Reflections on accessing care records.](#)

Children and young people see social workers as key sources of information; they want them to feel confident in answering questions, know their stories and explain these in clear, accurate, sensitive language, even when this is painful. They want some control over the pace, timing and direction of the work and the chance to get to know practitioners before talking about difficult issues (Watson et al., 2020). Young people can find life story work tedious if it feels too much like homework or is imposed on them (Willis & Holland, 2009).

Good quality, labelled photographs of themselves growing up, information about their birth, personal stories about how their names were chosen, physical objects from the past and records of positive milestones are all important (Hammond et al., 2020; Morgan, 2006; Willis & Holland, 2009).



Click here to hear messages from care-experienced young people in Norfolk about why life story work matters to them: [Life story work animation](#)

## Life story work and attachment

Life story work is based on an understanding of the impact of separation and loss, drawn from attachment theory. Children and young people growing up away from birth parents have by definition experienced separation and loss, not just of their primary attachment figure but sometimes their siblings, home, pets, toys, extended family, school, friends, and neighbourhood. For many these losses are repeated and cumulative with multiple moves before and after coming into care, often taking children into new families that differ from their own in terms of class, culture, religion or ethnicity.

Loss can be particularly hard for those placed with strangers (who may know little of their story) and because of the lack of family grieving rituals in these circumstances (Bowlby, 1973). When children have gaps in their understanding about what has happened, they may blame themselves, be overwhelmed with fear, shut down their feelings or begin to feel that what has happened must be too terrible to talk about. This can make it difficult to form new attachments. Children 'cope better' with separation and loss when allowed to grieve and when they are given prompt, accurate information and encouragement to ask questions (Bowlby, 1973). Life story work aims to provide an opportunity both to grieve past loss and to obtain information about what happened.

Life story work is also focussed on building attachments for children and young people by helping their new family understand their stories and gain confidence accepting and supporting their feelings. This is important because children and young people who grow up in families with high levels of 'communicative openness' (meaning that difference and a sense of belonging to two families are accepted and it is OK to have thoughts, feelings and questions about your family of origin) have higher self-esteem and a more cohesive sense of identity (Beckett et al., 2008; Brodzinsky, 2006).

Further information on attachment can be found in this [Research in Practice Webinar](#).



## Life story work and identity

Developing a sense of yourself as the same person over time, despite how you and the world around you has changed, is central to identity (Bamberg, 2011). Continued relationships with those who knew us in the past and can share memories, photographs and information are an important part of this process of learning to tell the story of ourselves, particularly in relation to early childhood when we may have little conscious memory of our lives.

Children who are not brought up by their birth family may no longer be in touch with anyone who knew them as a baby or young child. Life story work provides tangible evidence of the connection between past, present and future for young people with fragmented lives. It also conveys that they were valued and their future was held in mind when life was uncertain.

Black and minority ethnic children and young people growing up away from their family of origin have particular needs because of their marginalised identities and experiences of racism, which white carers and professionals may struggle to understand (Ryan & Walker, 2016). The loss of culture, language and religion compounds the loss of family for children placed outside their own community (Rose, 2012) p10.



For further information see:

[Understanding the lived experience of black, Asian and minority ethnic children](#)

[Understanding the experiences of Muslim children & young people in care](#)

[More than faith - Muslim-heritage children in care: Strategic Briefing](#)

## Life story work and trauma

*Please don't take on life story work...until you understand how to do it and you have the space and time to do it – we owe it to children to take as much care as possible.*

(Ryan & Walker, 2016, p. 3)

Many children with care experience have endured traumatic abuse or neglect that can fragment memory or make thinking about the past feel overwhelming; unprocessed traumatic memories are experienced as if the abuse was happening again now. Life story work focussed on the past needs to be done with great care in these circumstances and some children and young people need therapy first or alongside the work; liaison with therapists is vital when this is the case. However, the creation of a coherent narrative – a story of your own past that makes sense and in which feelings and events are reconciled – is associated with recovery from trauma (Watson et al., 2020).



To learn more about trauma-informed practice with children and young people see:

[Trauma informed approaches with young people: Frontline Briefing](#)

[Trauma-informed practice: Webinar 1](#) and [Webinar 2](#)

When learning a new way of working, such as creating a timeline (see section 3 for an example), it can be helpful to try the exercise out on yourself first. This provides an understanding of the emotional impact of the work but should only be done when you feel able to cope with remembering. Give yourself permission to stop any time, just as you would a child or young person. Life story work can take an emotional toll on workers as well as children and requires robust organisational support (for further information see: [Embedding a trauma-informed approach to support staff wellbeing](#)).

## Overcoming the challenges of life story work

*They call it life story work...but they don't really do it. I have a memory box, but I want information and facts...to know more about how I came into care.*

([Understanding why you are in care, p.4](#)).

### Fear of getting it wrong

Adults often hesitate to talk to children and young people about their past for fear of upsetting them or saying the wrong thing. Children hold back from asking questions because they do not want to hurt the feelings of their current carers or are afraid of the answers. But silence has consequences:

*The very fact that adults hesitate to share with a child information about his or her past implies that it is so bad that the young person won't be able to cope with it. Whatever the past was, the child has lived through it and survived*

(Fahlberg, 2012, p. 353).

Understanding how children think at different developmental stages can help practitioners have a better understanding of how to talk about difficult issues.

Young children are **magical thinkers** – believing that their own thoughts and feelings can affect the outside world and blaming themselves for things that happen. A child may think that if they had been 'good' their brother would not have been abused, fear that if they have negative feelings towards their new family they will be moved again or hope that if they are good enough they will be allowed to return home (Moffat, 2012) p8. They are also **literal, concrete thinkers** – so a 'new family' might come from the shop (Jewett, 1982).

As they get older, children's **problem-solving** abilities increase; they question earlier explanations and need more information. If a child has been told that their father 'didn't have a house', they soon notice that houses can be rented. They begin to make logical deductions, applying what they have been told in one situation more generally. So, a child told that they had to leave home because their parents 'had lots of arguments', may be fearful when their new carers have a minor disagreement.



For further information on child development see:

[Child development: Frontline Briefing](#)

[Child development: Poster](#)

Kind but vague explanations like ‘Mummy can’t look after you because she is poorly’ (when the issue is, for example, chaotic drug use), may leave a child wondering if they have made their mother sick and worrying she will die. They may also be frightened when their current carer is unwell. These kinds of explanations are particularly confusing when children have first-hand experience of their parents’ difficulties. They may doubt their own memories or come to believe that drug use is a family secret.

Life stories that completely avoid harsh truths do not make sense, even if the child has no conscious memories or has never lived with their birth parents (Lozterkamp, 2009). If life at home was perfect, why are they not still there? Early explanations need to be simple and kind but rooted in children’s experiences and in reality, so that the detail that follows can build on them. If children find out their carers have deceived them, they may begin to question everything.

Children and young people with learning disabilities may have specific and unique communication needs; specialist advice or joint work may be useful (for further information see: [Communicating with children and young people with speech, language and communication needs: Frontline Briefing](#))

### Tackling difficult stories

There are ways of telling difficult stories – such as violence within the family, mental health difficulties, drug and alcohol misuse or sexual abuse – that make them easier to hear:

- > Divide the story into manageable chunks,
- > Start with what all children need – food, drink, a home, care when poorly, help to learn, love and cuddles, to be told off sometimes, no hitting or hurting in the house,
- > Provide positive information about birth parents’ talents, hopes and dreams,
- > Describe what bits of parenting they found easy (like making spaghetti) and hard (choosing nice boyfriends), emphasising that we all find some things hard,
- > Explain how problems like heroin use affected parental behaviour (no money for food, asleep a lot) and the impact on the child (sad because they had to wear dirty clothes to school),
- > Say who tried to help and what happened,
- > Normalise human fallibility – arguments, sadness, illness – (most grown-ups have a drink of beer sometimes and might get a bit silly but this was not little drinking, it was big drinking),
- > Emphasise ordinary positive solutions like talking or going to the doctor,
- > Explain it is only when things get serious or go on for ages that social workers get worried,
- > Include fathers and extended family (or their absence) in the story,
- > Be honest if social workers got it wrong and say sorry (we thought you would be safe, but we were wrong).

The story needs to convey that the child was too young to keep themselves or other people safe and what happened was not their fault. They deserved to be loved and cared for and to know that their own behaviours (like hurting a sibling) were survival strategies. It is important to let them know that there will be lots of help to learn new ways of coping and make sure that their own adult lives turn out well.

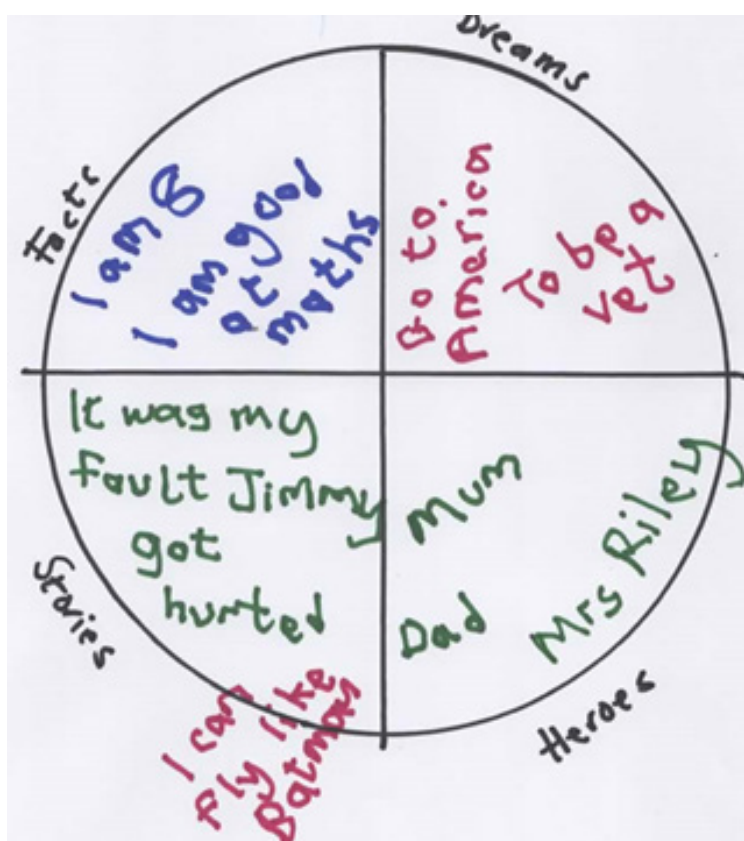
Click [here](#) to see examples of how to explain prison and mental health problems to children and part of a life story book for a young child who was present when his brother was injured.

## Stories children tell themselves

Children who have care experience often believe things that are 'not true', for example idealising their parents or blaming themselves. These are survival strategies that provide comfort and emotional safety, for 'without their ability to fantasise many of our children in care would not survive. Their reality can overwhelm them'

(Rose, 2012, p. 122).

Rose has developed a gentle way of teasing out facts from stories and naming a child's heroes and dreams. The worker draws a circle divided into four and helps the young person identify what **facts** they know about themselves, what **stories** they have been told or imagined, what their **dreams** are for the future and who are their **heroes**. The fictionalised example below was completed by adopted Max, whose younger brother was physically abused.



## Dealing with conflicting accounts

*For this is what family is; a group of disputed memories between a group of people over a lifetime. Lemn Sissay MBE, poet, former child in care*

*(The Guardian Interview 21/08/26).*

When children and young people come into care, they are often surrounded by adults who disagree about what happened and may continue to give them conflicting explanations over many years if they remain in contact. This can lead to confusion and torn loyalties, particularly if social workers insist birth parents are wrong or dishonest. It is important that practitioners form a partnership with the child in wondering and finding things out together, for example by asking: 'I wonder why you got taken away when you say your Mum was not taking drugs any more...let's see if we can find out more'.

The example below provides an example of how you might explain the court decision for a young child who is aware of their mother's disagreement to their placement with grandmother. The ducks represent the different people in the child's life.

My test said Mum had been taking heroin



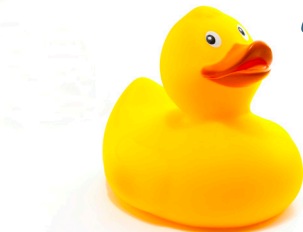
Doctor

I was worried Mum was using heroin again. Lucy and Roisin need to live with me



Nana

The doctor is wrong. I want my children back. I love them. Everything was fine



Mum

Lucy was in her cot crying and hungry. Her nappy was very wet. Little Roisin had tried to cook the tea



Police officer

Mum tried really hard to stop taking heroin but she couldn't do it. Lucy and Roisin need to live with their grandmother



Judge

I will keep Lucy and Roisin safe and make sure they see their Mum



Nana, Lucy and Roisin



## Helping children decide how much of their story to share

Children need help to work out how much of their story to share with others. Finding the right place for each person's name on a diagram like this can help.



## Organisational support and resources

Social workers carrying out life story work need time to read case files as well as their own set of resources such as:

- > story books
- > art and craft materials
- > rolls of wallpaper (for drawing a timeline)
- > camera
- > puppets
- > collections of animals
- > vehicles and play people
- > cardboard box houses.

As well as resources, practitioners also need access to a colour printer, storage space and sometimes use of a playroom or funding for visits to people and places such as previous homes and schools.

Collections of play people need to be large because children's lives are complicated. It helps to include grandparents, babies, pets, the emergency services, nurses, doctors and a judge. Toys and stories need to include positive representations of adults and children with disabilities and a range of family types. Ethnic diversity amongst the figures for family members and professionals is also key. Calling figures 'people' rather than 'dolls' can make them accessible to those who think they are just for girls or babyish. The photos below show the types of figures that can be used to represent the various people in a child's life. Letting children handle the figures helps make sure that play is a two way conversation and allows them to show as well as tell workers what they think. The figures shown below are available in high street toy shops. The knitted figures cannot be bought in shops but local knitting groups are often happy to make these.



Life story work can feel like an overwhelming task that cannot be fitted into a busy caseload. But clarity about what work is needed for this particular child and recognition of the value of short pieces of work (such as letters for later life) can make this feel more manageable. Training and supervision for practitioners is vital (for more information see: [Supporting life story work: the role of managers](#))

An organisational commitment to life story work for all children that need it can make this work possible. This was demonstrated in Ofsted’s 2020 inspection of Telford and Wrekin, which identified the integration of life story work across services as ‘a strength and area of exceptional practice that helped children understand their life experiences and plans for their future.’ [Ofsted, 2020 p. 8](#)



Norfolk Children’s Services have also done innovative work in embedding life story work throughout the organisation. You can listen to the podcast here:

[Ensuring children's life stories are at the centre of direct work](#)



### Reflective questions

What tools have you used to help explain children’s stories?

What other resources could you use?

For other examples of tools that can be used when working with children and young people see:

[Enabling and embedding creative participation in child and family social work: Practice Tool](#)

### Stories to read with children and young people:

Title	Topics covered
‘Dennis Duckling’ by Paul Sambrooks	Fostering, living with grandparents, going back to birth parents, big decisions about children.
‘Billy Says’ by Joanne Alper	Neglect, fostering, court decisions, waiting for an adoptive family, living with a new family.
‘Nutmeg’ by Judith Foxton	Adoption, angry feelings, letterbox contact, understanding the past, getting into trouble, getting an adopted siblings.



## Doing life story work with children and writing the story down

Planned life story work sessions need to be regular and reliable (ideally weekly or fortnightly), starting and finishing on time. About an hour is usually long enough, including warming up and winding down activities such as marking the session off on a calendar, checking in with how they feel today, and sharing a snack or regular game at the end. The duration of the work may vary from six sessions to many months, depending on a child's needs. Planning goodbyes is important (Ryan & Walker, 2016).

For many children and young people, having their parent or carer in the room or nearby and joining them at the end helps them feel safe. If new information is going to be shared during the session, which may require time to process and could impact on their feelings and behaviour, the trusted adult needs time to absorb the information themselves first.

Life story work involves 'doing', as well as talking. Play in its broadest sense of creative activity of all kinds (e.g. puppets, imaginary play, drawing, throwing pebbles in the sea, making a film on a phone) is the greatest resource in communicating with children and young people, whatever their age. These approaches create emotional distance from painful topics, providing physical activity that absorbs anxiety, avoids direct eye contact and create a natural boundary for the work – when the activity ends, the subject is put away (Fahlberg, 2012). It is important to keep alert to the child or young person's reaction throughout, watching for signs that they may be overwhelmed or need a break or reassurance from their parent/carer.

There are many ways of doing life story work, but preparation, introductions and rapport building are always key. This provides the foundation for work that typically starts with the present, revisits the past, returns to the present and considers the future. All or part of a life story book may be produced during these sessions, but this can also be a separate piece of work informed by these sessions and shared with the child or young person later.

### Preparation

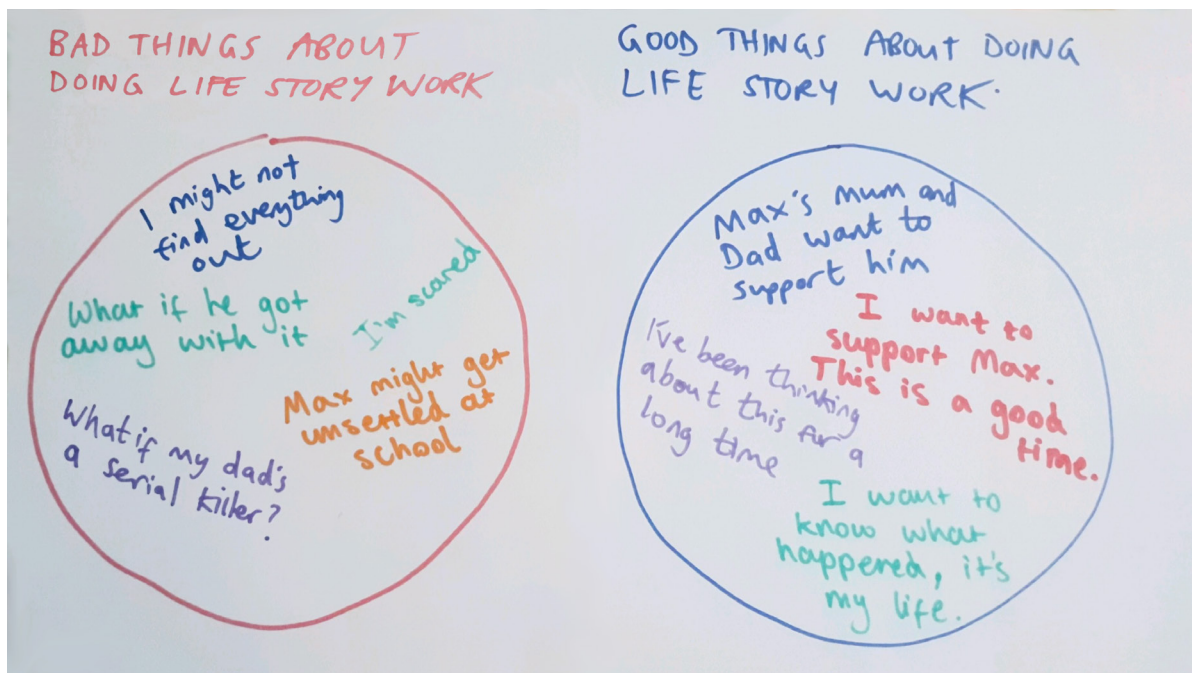
The following questions can help in preparation and planning:

- > Is this work part of the child's plan?
- > What work has already been done?
- > Why does this child or young person think they are not living with birth parents?
- > What do they want to know and how do they feel about talking about this?
- > What kind of life story work is needed?
- > Am I the right person to do it? What does any shared history mean to this child? Is my race, gender, age or sexuality relevant?
- > Do I understand this child's story?
- > Do I have the skills, time, resources and supervision needed?
- > Do I understand how to communicate with this child and their emotional and developmental stage?
- > How can the birth parents, current carers and any future family be involved and supported?
- > What impact will there be on siblings, other children in placement and family time?
- > Are there any risks in sharing information?
- > Where, when and how often will the work with the child happen?
- > How will the work be recorded, stored, shared and backed up?
- > If it is not possible to do everything, what can I do? Who else can contribute?

## Introductions and rapport building

It may take weeks or months to build rapport with a child or young person who has little trust in adults. Time spent playing and talking with children and young people, just getting to know them, is never wasted (Ryan & Walker, 2016).

Children and young people need time to understand what life story work is and think about whether they want to take part. Rose has devised a simple way of exploring the natural anxieties of children, young people and their families early on in the work (Rose, 2012). As exemplified below, the worker draws two circles labelled 'good things about doing life story work' and 'bad things about doing life story work'. The child, their carer and the worker take turns to share their worries and hopes for the work. This fictionalised example was completed by 14-year-old Karl, his adoptive mother and social worker Liz.



This exercise can help alleviate fears and work out how best to support the child or young person and their family; occasionally it will indicate that this is not the right time for life story work.

## Work focussed on the present

Starting with the present builds trust and provides an opportunity to get to know the child or young person and their parent/carer better before moving on to more difficult aspects of the story. Simple activities such as using feelings cards and questionnaires help establish that the worker is interested, comfortable talking about feelings and keen to understand what may upset the child or young person and the support needed (Rose, 2012; Ryan & Walker, 2016).

Gathering information and photos about the child's current life - their likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, talents and dreams- along with photos of their home, family and school and positive comments from friends and family can affirm a positive sense of identity. It can also help bring their carer into the work and make it clear that there is more to this child than their past.

Rose suggests making a simple 'All About Me' book at this stage of the work (Rose, 2012). This stage can also include finding out more about what the child or young person does or doesn't want to know about the past.

## Work focussed on the past

This is often the most difficult part of the work, arousing painful emotions. Life story work can provide a safe place for children to express powerful feelings of sadness, fear, rage and confusion in the presence of a worker able to accept and bear witness to their feelings.

Adults needs to remain alert to the difference between the natural distress that is part of human grieving and re-traumatisation, in which powerful, unresolved feelings may overwhelm a child. When this is happening, children may appear 'zoned out' or chaotic during the session or experience persistent distress in the days that follow.

To keep life story work safe, children and young people need control over what parts of the past they would and would not like to learn more about (generally and on any given day). Cards saying STOP and GO can be used to signal that a child has had enough.

When considering distressing events, it can be helpful to ask what their younger self needed or what they might change about the past if they had a magic wand. The trusted adult can be encouraged to provide the comfort that was needed in the past, regardless of the child's current age. This might include:

- > cuddles
- > rocking
- > calm music
- > soft toys
- > wrapping a child in a blanket
- > stroking their face or hand gently
- > saying 'if I had seen you crying when you were a baby all alone, I would have picked you up and given you a big hug'.

Children can be helped to return to the present by noticing what is here in the room with them today and taking deeper breaths. Setting aside time at the end of each visit for a drink and a snack, playing the same game every time, gentle humour and talking about how the rest of the day will be spent can help the child re-focus after a difficult session.

Activities can include:

- > Looking at the child's birth certificate, visiting the hospital where they were born, finding out more about their development.
- > Looking at photographs of themselves and other important people.
- > Family trees and learning about different kinds of family.
- > Visits to people and places from the past.
- > Showing moves on a map.
- > Learning more about birth parents, previous carers and other relatives, why they could not live with them and how this was decided.

Timelines or life graphs drawn on wallpaper can help children and young people make sense of multiple moves and muddled histories. They can be given choices about the order in which they want to explore their timeline. Parts that feel too painful to think about can be identified but left blank or that part of the story may be written and sealed in an envelope attached to the wallpaper (Rose, 2012; Ryan & Walker, 2016).

In this fictionalised example, the social worker drew in some of the details before the session and the child added their own memories and drawings as they talked together.



[Click here to watch the video of this timeline in action](#)

For younger children, play people and houses can be used to enact past moves as a way of explaining moves and decisions. Figures representing the judge and the other professionals can be used to show who tried to help and explain decision making. The judge can also be used as a neutral figure when other adults disagree about what really happened or this is uncertain – a bit like the referee has to decide in a football match or the head teacher at school. The first example below shows a child who has put the figure chosen for her birth mother into the foster carers home - expressing a hope (or perhaps a fear) that she could live there too. The social worker is talking for the foster carer to explain that she only looks after children, not Mummies.



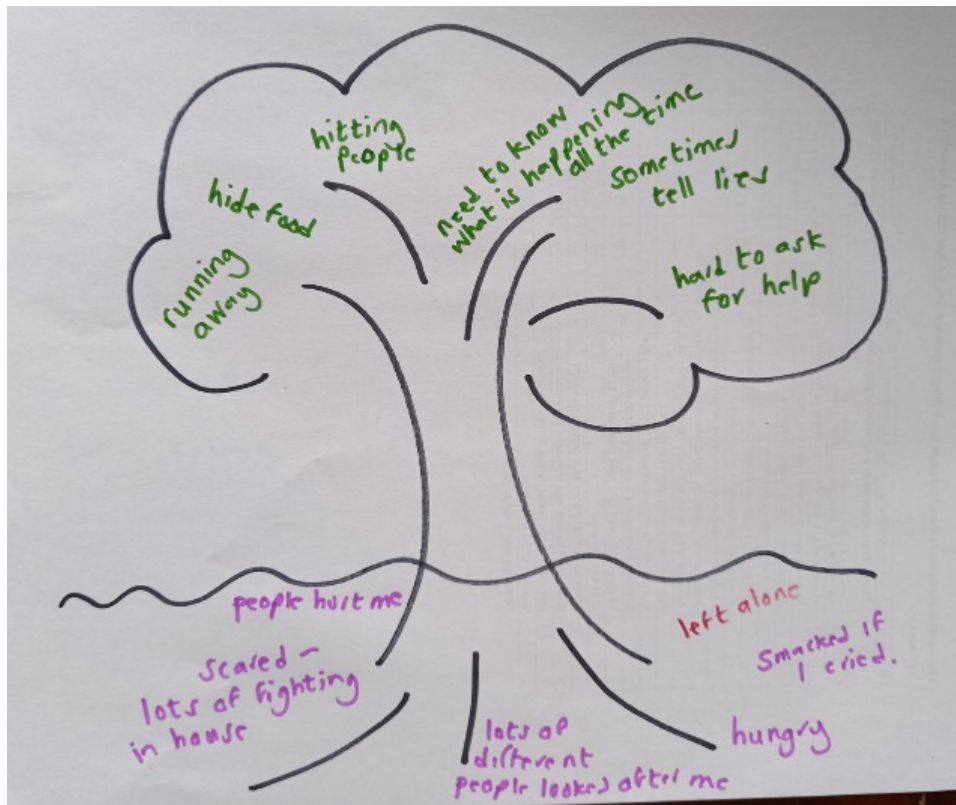
Using play people allows children to join in the conversation and play out feelings or ask questions, for example throwing the judge behind the sofa or telling him or her what should happen, as shown in the second picture where the child is telling the judge to send her mother's boyfriend to prison. This knitted judge has a removable wig to show that he works in criminal and family courts (Ryan & Walker, 2016).



## Present and future-focussed work

If you are piecing together the events of a child or young person's life, this will eventually bring you back to the present and provide an opportunity to think and talk with the child and their parent/carer about how this history has affected them and how they can help. The aim is to reframe the child or young person's behaviour as survival strategies that worked well in the past and they now need support to change, rather than as further evidence of the worthlessness they often feel.

Rose uses a behaviour tree to help children and their families reflect on this together, as in the example below (Rose, 2012). The leaves and branches show the child's behaviour now, whilst the roots are their early experiences. The work can finish by identifying hopes and dreams for the future.



For children and young people who are facing a move, life story work may focus primarily on the present and future, helping them understand what is going to happen next through the use of techniques such as moving on calendars or playing out or drawing future changes and exploring their questions and feelings about this. When the future is uncertain, life story work can help to manage this by providing some certainty 'you will still be living with Fatima when you put on your new clothes for Eid' and explaining that 'it will take a long time for the judge to decide'.

## Writing the story down

There is no one right way to write a life story book, but the quality of presentation is crucial as it conveys a sense of the value given to the child or young person and their story. Give a warning if there is distressing information coming up and choose a format (such as a ring binder) that allows for information to be added or taken out over the years as what the child or young person wants and needs to know changes. Photos of the child growing up are important (Willis & Holland, 2009). The balance between words and pictures on each page depends on the child's age and understanding, but the younger the child, the less writing and more white space and pictures there should be.

Click [here](#) to read Max's Story

Short paragraphs, simple sentences and short words make life story books easier to read. Structure can help the reader navigate the story by using a contents page, chapter headings and bullet points. Birth family photos can also be included depending on the child's response to these, but avoid using happy family shots on pages describing family difficulties as this can seem incongruous. Make sure there is a digital backup copy in case the book is lost, destroyed or not shared with the young person by their new family.

Rees (2009) advises referring to the child in the third person, (e.g. 'Ellie-May was born in Croydon'), as this makes the story easier to understand and creates some emotional distance. For adopted children, use 'Mum and Dad' for their new family rather than birth parents; for others, find out what names are used at home. Avoid too much detail about professional processes or parents' own histories (Rees, 2009). Start and end the story with the child's permanent family to confirm their sense of belonging.

Click on this link to access free tools and ideas: [Life story work template examples](#).

## What should be in the life story book?

Life story books need to include information about:

- > The child or young person and their current family now.
- > The child's birth and how their name was chosen (if known).
- > The child's birth family and family tree, important people in their life, their culture, religion and ethnicity.
- > Photographs of the child growing up.
- > Their early experiences (good and bad), why they came into care and how this was decided.
- > Moves, who looked after them, what happened to brothers and sisters.
- > Joining their permanent family (Morgan, 2006; Ryan & Walker, 2016).

The level of detail needed for an adopted child removed at birth will be very different to that for a recently fostered eight-year-old with vivid, frightening memories or a 14-year-old living with grandparents whose learning-disabled father often comes for tea.

Life story books need to be updated to reflect changes over time. Some children have a series of books, each more detailed than the last. An ordinary photograph album that just contains pictures of the birth family without any story for showing to friends and a memory book of life in foster care can also be useful (Nicholls, 2005).



## Reflective questions

How would you describe your own childhood now?

How is that different from what you would have said when you were 10, 20 or 30?

For some children and young people there will be significant gaps in information which need to be acknowledged. Extended family members, those who have worked with parents, the child's medical records and online searches may be helpful. Birth parents who were not willing to contribute to life story work during the emotionally charged period of care proceedings may reconsider over time or if asked by a different worker.

A knowledge of child development can help to provide a general picture of the child's life, for example: 'When Callum was six months old, he was busy doing all the things babies do, eating and sleeping and learning to sit up and smile and say Da Da and blow raspberries.'

Click [here](#) to view Living with Nanna (an example of a child living in kinship care).

## Letters for later life

For adopted children, a letter for later life written by the social worker is a statutory requirement under Adoption Agency Regulations 2005, but they can also be useful for all children growing up away from birth parents. These letters are intended for a time when young people are emotionally and cognitively ready for the full story, providing a gentler alternative to accessing case files.

The later life letter covers the same areas as the life story book, but in more detail and with advice about how to access further information. It also conveys a personal message, explaining the writer's role in the young person's life, their memories of them and hopes and wishes for the future; this personal message is also the focus of letters from other individuals such as birth relatives, foster carers and nursery workers (Moffat, 2012). Even if your involvement with a young person was brief, a later life letter can be invaluable for the child at a later time and need not be time consuming.

Sharing fictionalised examples of letters can be useful when asking for others to write to a child or young person that you are working with; three are available [here](#).

## Conclusion

Social workers are involved in some of the most profound and long-lasting decisions that can be made for any child – the removal from their family of origin, perhaps permanently, and the restriction of their future contact with them. It is not always possible to get these decisions right or to change everything in children’s lives for the better. But social workers are uniquely placed to use life story work as a means of helping to explain what has happened and why, giving children and young people a sense of who they are and where they come from. These conversations also allow professionals to listen and understand more about children’s lives and the impact of social work decisions, providing an invaluable opportunity to improve their own practice.

Life story work is important and difficult, but not impossible. It depends on well-supported practitioners building strong relationships with children and young people and knowing their stories. This is the basis of all good social work.



### Reflective questions

Now that you have read this practice tool, what is one thing that you can put into practice immediately?

What things can you do in the future?

What support do you need to put your actions into practice?



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