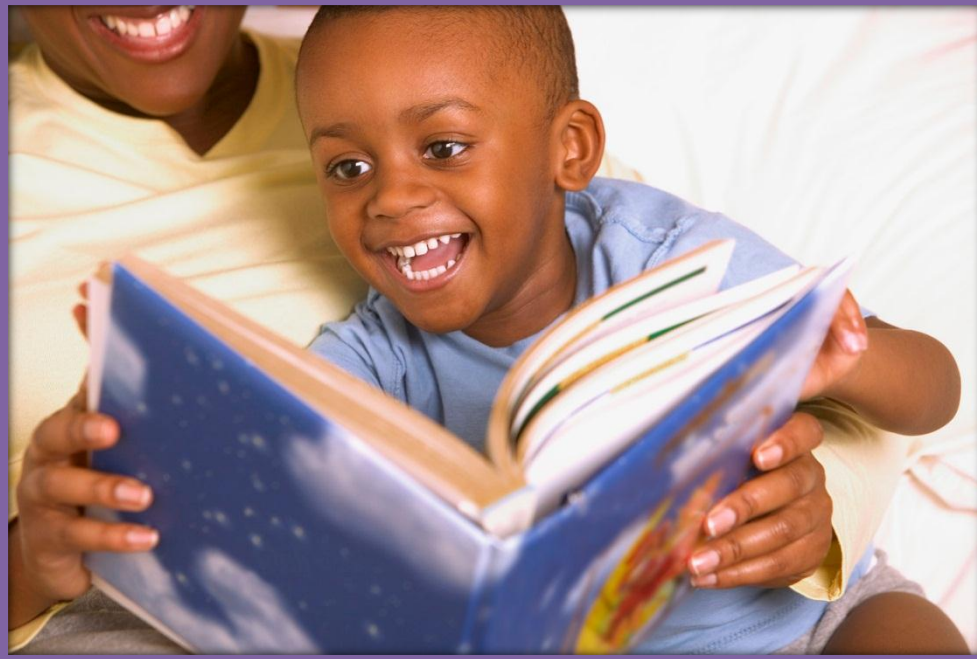


**ENFIELD**  
Council



**GUIDE FOR UNDERTAKING LIFE STORY WORK**  
**WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**



In partnership with

**NHS**

## **Guide for Undertaking Life Story Work with Children and Young People**

Life story work is a collaborative process between child and worker. There will be a finished product, typically a book, however, the life story work is more than just the production of the book.

There are different ways to undertake life story work and life story work can be of varying lengths (as long as is needed), however, this guide includes suggestions for a six session life story plan.

This guide includes:

- 1) Worries about undertaking life story work and the benefits of life story work
- 2) Individual session structure
- 3) Session programme
- 4) Interactive life story techniques to use
- 5) 'Difficult conversation' guide
- 6) Culture, ethnicity and race
- 7) Life story with adolescents
- 8) Life story work with children with disabilities
- 9) Some thoughts on the value of supervision

## Some worries that might make it hard to start life story work

I don't know all the details of the child's past....and I don't have time to gather it!

I don't want to upset the child by talking about the abuse they suffered....

I've not done life story work before and I don't have time to learn

The child never wants to talk about his mum and will be so angry if I try to make him.

The child is doing so well at the moment; I'm worried that life story work is going to make him regress.

I don't know how to evidence all the work it'll involve on our system...

However, life story work can offer the child or young person the chance to integrate their history, develop a more rounded sense of identity and can provide a great sense of relief which can lead to a reduction in behavioural problems!

### **Individual session structure**

Individual sessions need to be planned in advance and based around your knowledge of how much the particular child you are working with would be able to undertake in a session. You will need to think about the child's ability to concentrate. You might need several short activities; moving between games and more focused activities could help keep the child interested. Life story sessions would typically last no more than an hour.

A general rule is as follows:

- Warm up games (snap, dominoes, sand and sensory play, whatever the child likes)
- Main body of the session (this will need to be broken into different sections, particularly for children who struggle to concentrate, for example, you may need to move between something interactive such as working on the family tree and a game).
- Ending game

### **Session Programme**

Life story work does not have a prescribed time frame – some life story work can span as much as a year, whilst others have to fit within a much shorter time frame. In practice you are likely to have a shorter time-frame. The guiding principle is to start in the child's present, then move to the child's past and then come back to the present before projecting forward to the child's hopes for the future.

Here is a suggestion of what could be covered and when over six sessions:

#### ***Session One***

- Getting to know each other – games
- You will need to think how you are going to introduce the life story work to the child
- Activity to explore the different feelings people can have
- Ending game

#### ***Session Two***

- Warm up game
- Activity about babies and their needs – using pictures
- Activities about what the child is like now: for example, their age, height, school, likes / dislikes, bedroom, pets, hobbies
- Where the child is living
- Ending game

### **Session Three**

- Warm up game
- Activity about what the child was like when born, where born (including a photo of the hospital), how much they weighed, a copy of the birth certificate
- Details about birth family – names, ages, ethnicity, occupations, religion, interests
- Activity about the child's cultural or ethnic background, for example, using maps, pictures
- Ending game

### **Session Four**

- Warm up game
- Why the child is in care – see 'Difficult Conversations' below
- The judge's decision – this activity needs to explain when the court met, where and what the judge decided
- Ending game

### **Session Five**

- Warm up game
- Activities about the child's time in care – this should include linking up the previous foster placements
- A time line / life map (see below) to link all the aspects together and go over information / issues from session four
- Ending game

### **Session Six**

- Warm up game
- Activities about the child's future, including their dreams and wishes for the future
- Ending game

Book handed over following this. For further ideas about the structure of the work and book see:  
[http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life\\_Story\\_Works/LIFE\\_STORY\\_BOOK.html](http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life_Story_Works/LIFE_STORY_BOOK.html)

**Please note with the links that if you put the mouse on the link and then press 'enter' you should be taken straight to the site shown. Alternatively you may find it works with control and click or just touching it with the mouse.**

Here is an example of life story sessions which lead to the production of a book for an adopted seven year old:

[http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life\\_Story\\_Works/TEMPLATES\\_DOCUMENTS\\_files/Stella%20LSB%20aged7.pdf](http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life_Story_Works/TEMPLATES_DOCUMENTS_files/Stella%20LSB%20aged7.pdf)

### **Interactive life story techniques to use**

Use technology which the child will be familiar with – e.g. use the child’s own laptop to search the internet for information about their birth country or to use 'Google Street View' of the country or town they grew up in.

It is important to use as many pictures as possible to bring the book to life – you can use online maps to show the locations of previous homes, you can search for pictures online of significant places, such as the hospital where the child was born. It is important to use photos of the child from both their birth family (where possible) and their foster placements.

We have various publications that list different activities such as the ‘life map’ – these are held by Natalie. In addition, templates for other activities can be found at:

[http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life\\_Story\\_Works/TEMPLATES\\_DOCUMENTS.html](http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life_Story_Works/TEMPLATES_DOCUMENTS.html)

You will need to think about different techniques to help you engage with the child you’re working with, ensuring that they are age appropriate. This page on the Enfield Eye site lists tools to be used in direct work with children and young people:

<http://enfieldeye.enfield.gov.uk/info/200515/tools/1605/tools>

This is a useful site about the child’s day of birth which can help you provide useful information:

<http://www.dayofbirth.co.uk/>

Life story work can also include activities which take place outside the child’s home, for example, visiting previous foster placements, or visiting the area the child used to live:

<https://www.google.com/maps/views/?gl=gb#!home>

### **‘Difficult conversation’ guide**

It is crucial that the life story work does not shy away from thinking with the child or young person about the reasons they are in care. Whilst this needs to be handled sensitively, it is generally a great relief to children to have their experiences acknowledged and to be helped to understand them.

This website provides a good guidance for how to talk with children about a range of difficulties their parents faced and different types of abuse:

[http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life\\_Story\\_Works/DIFFICULT\\_STORIES.html](http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life_Story_Works/DIFFICULT_STORIES.html)

This website has useful information about mental health difficulties:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/0/22028518>

When the conversations feel too difficult for the child to take on board it can be helpful to use the third person or the child’s name, rather than saying ‘you’.

### **Culture, Ethnicity and Race**

These aspects of the child's identity are key to life story work and need to be part of the creation of the book. Promoting a sense of pride and interest in the child's culture and cultural heritage needs to be something that is addressed in the work and book. As we know, this is a rich and complex subject that involves subtleties as well as tangibles to convey.

Perhaps you can think about how the work and book can touch on music, religion, language, cuisine, and history of the country of origin as well as the history of the ethnic group within the United Kingdom? Flag design, skin colour and famous and talented people from the heritage of the child both in the present and historically can be incorporated providing opportunities of conveying positives directly to the child about this part of themselves.

Children who have been removed from their birth family and who are living with those of a different ethnicity or culture may become more out of touch with their beginnings. This may also be a factor if they have not had any contact with the parent who is not white UK. There may have been negative associations for the remaining parent in relation to domestic violence or other abusive actions which somehow have got transferred to the child in the form of prejudice or racism about the absent parent. Be mindful that children may internalise racism and be particularly reluctant to look at aspects of themselves that signify difference from the dominant culture. We hope that as workers you can be aware of these possibilities whilst doing the work so that they become integrated into your communication with the child.

### **Life story with adolescents**

Adolescents also benefit from life story interventions: the basic structure of starting with present, going back to the past and then on to future aspirations is still valuable. However, as ever with adolescents one might need to be more flexible, for example, starting with a list of what the adolescent might want to know about their history to ensure that they feel ownership of the project.

Technology can have an important part to play in life story work with adolescents, for example, information found on line, 'Google Street View', going on line to listen to the songs that were popular when they were born, and perhaps making videos rather than books.

The Enfield Eye has suggestions for direct work with:

13-15 year olds

<http://enfieldeye/info/200515/tools/1605/tools/7>

and 16 +

<http://enfieldeye/info/200515/tools/1605/tools/8>

We also have some work sheets for work with adolescents and have had positive experiences using these feelings cards:

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Bear-Cards-John-Veecken/dp/0980517524>

### **Life story work with children with disabilities**

Life story work is important for every looked after child and this is no different for disabled children. However, communicating with disabled children can be more difficult for professionals than communicating with non-disabled children – research has consistently shown that the former will often take more time, more resources and a higher degree of skill. In addition and depending on the impairments of the individual child, they may have more difficulty than other children in understanding concepts such as ‘time’ and ‘place’.

As with any other child, there is no ‘one size fits all’ way to approach life story work with disabled children. It is also important to consider that disabled children may have experienced more changes than other children and had many more carers involved in their lives. For example, if we imagine a young man with autism living at home with his birth parents prior to becoming looked after. He may have had a carer who supported him in the mornings to assist in getting him ready for school; he may then have used school transport where an escort would have looked after him during the journey. At school, he may have had many more classroom assistants than other children to help him throughout the day and he may then have attended a specialist after school club as well as spending time with a short break carer one weekend a month. Thus, the experience of change and of having multiple carers may be the child’s routine even before we even begin to consider their experiences since becoming looked after.

From a practical point of view, undertaking life story work with a disabled child may involve the use of different resources than might be the case for other children. The child may have complex communication needs which in turn may require the person undertaking life story work to spend time initially learning how best to communicate with the child, before introducing resources specifically related to life story work. This may include using sign language (e.g. Makaton), symbols, video and information technology, art, play and music. Thus, one of the best things we can do when thinking about life story work with disabled children is to start by finding out as much as possible about their communication needs from those who know them best – this may be their foster or residential carers, their birth parents or health and education professionals.

Spending time observing how other people who know the child well communicate with them can be a helpful way of developing our own expertise, as well as enabling the child time to get to know us and for us to get to know them.

### **Some thoughts on the value of supervision and consultation**

Life story work inevitably puts the Social Worker in contact with the child’s often traumatic history as well as painful emotions in the present. This process can then evoke powerful feelings in the worker. Engaging with such feelings is an important part of undertaking life story work with the child or adolescent and understanding them can actually help you understand more about the child or young person. Supervision is an important aspect of reflecting on these feelings and ensuring that the work remains focused on the child’s needs.

Furthermore, additional specific consultation sessions can be accessed to explore the therapeutic and practical challenges of such work outside of regular supervision slots. These are currently offered to all Social Workers on a monthly basis and are bookable via email:

[natalie.salaman@enfield.gov.uk](mailto:natalie.salaman@enfield.gov.uk) and [miriam.creaser@enfield.gov.uk](mailto:miriam.creaser@enfield.gov.uk).