

Life Story Work Practice Guidance

Child and Young People Services

1. Introduction to Life Story Work

Life Story Work should take place with all children in our care and those children with a plan of adoption. Life story work captures the direct work that takes place with children and young people to help form their identity, and to understand and comprehend their history. The social worker completes this direct work with the child or young person, their carers, parents and others around the child or young person.

2. The process of Life Story Work

Life story work provides the child or young person with an understanding of their individual situation and their journey. This work should not be considered a 'one off' piece of work and should be seen as an evolving process. Life story work should be inclusive and take place with the child or young person. However, there may be times when it is appropriate for the initial life story work to be started and information gathered for them. This may be due to the young age of the child or the young person not wanting to engage in the process. Life story work should be considered as part of the care planning process and be addressed fully when permanency options are being considered.

3. Who completes and organises life story work

Herefordshire County Council expects that the qualified allocated social worker undertakes life story work with the child/young person as part of the direct work that takes place in their regular visits. The social worker will take the time to get to know the child, building a rapport and relationship to understand the child's world, including what and who is important in their lives and why this is. Team Managers, within supervision, will have an understanding of the child and their wishes, feelings, hopes and interests. Team Managers will take into account the skills and experience of the social worker. Children receiving life story work will need to have an understanding of their family history, background and unique individual story to help them understand their identity.

Children and young people are central to the process of life story work. It is vital that social workers have the skills to maximise the child/young person's engagement and participation in the process according to their age, understanding and developmental needs. Parents, family members, carers and significant adults play a key role in providing accurate information, anecdotes, photographs and memorabilia for the child/young person and should be supported and encouraged to make a valuable contribution throughout the child's childhood.

4. Therapeutic Life Story Work

Life story work with children and young people needs to be progressed at a time and pace that meets their needs. In some circumstances, it may become apparent through discussions with the child and their carers that it may not be the right time for life story work to be progressed. Consideration may also be given to another practitioner/provider undertaking life story work as part of a planned or existing programme of therapeutic support. When we refer to therapeutic life story work, this refers to a wider piece of work where an identified service provides more specialist therapeutic intervention with a child or young person. This is often intended to address the child or young person's emotional and psychological distress and trauma as part of a wider programme of support, often including the child's current primary carer.

Therapeutic Life Story Work is a strengths based approach underpinned by psychodynamic principles. The child / young person is supported to process their past and work through their trauma in a safe space. This approach enables the strengthening of the attachment based relationship with the current primary carer, recognising the importance of build trust, resilience and reliance. Therapeutic life story work will support the child to consider:

- The reason why they could not stay with their birth family
- Their birth family and where they were born
- Their siblings and why they may not be together
- What life was like before they came into care
- Their history and experience in care
- Helping to understand what has happened and managing their emotions

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) can provide an element of life story work with children as part of the therapeutic support that children and young people receive. Referrals to CAMHS can be made by using the referral form on the website Our Services | Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust (hacw.nhs.uk) or by calling the service on 01432 220450.

The Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service, HIPSS, can undertake life story work where they are already providing existing support to carers and children in care. HIPSS also provides a consultation service and can offer advice and guidance to social workers who are completing life story work with children. The contact details for HIPSS is 01432 220450.

5. Where should life story work take place?

Every visit to the child or young person is an opportunity to reevaluate the impact of life story work and their understanding and appreciation of what this means for them. There are no hard and fast rules to where the work should take place. Building a rapport, trust and relationships will all help to develop an understanding about children and young people and life story work can take place during visits, whilst in the car, playing games or through organised activities. Planning activities even short activities, can be seen as “good things” in a child’s life, allowing social workers to build positivity and resilience and support children with resilience and optimism. It may be appropriate from time to time to take the child/young person to significant places as part of the recollection of earlier events and times.

How do you complete life story work?

Social workers, through their social work training and their practice learning, development and experience, have the required skills for undertaking direct work with children and young people and this should include knowledge of child development and attachment theory. The most important skills are communication, observation and the ability to build a rapport and a relationship. All social workers will have theoretical knowledge regarding the impact of abuse and neglect on children’s presentation and development. This will aid the social worker’s ability to

‘select’ the most appropriate approach and choice of tools to support the child/young person to engage in life story work.

There are various methods and tools that can be used as part of life story work, for example:

- Communication skills - listening, talking, reflecting, reading, writing and storytelling.
- Use of engaging and fun activities - drawing, painting, playing games, using puppets and other interactive activities to help the child express their thoughts and feelings e.g. using art materials to help the child or young person express themselves, or using puppets to re-enact conversations about what was said or what happened
- Use of family trees, life maps and pathways – to create a visual representation to describe the child or young person’s story over time e.g. what happened when they were a baby to their age now, explore why this happened and the impact this had on the child or young person
- Words, pictures and photographs – prompt words or pictures/photos to explore memories, identify gaps or muddles, recall specific events, remember important people and the way they made the child or young person feel etc.

An important aspect of life story work is to acknowledge the child or young person’s feelings about things that have happened to them. It provides an opportunity for the child or young person to explore their identity and understanding of themselves. They can experience a range of feelings during direct work. Some children or young people may be still be grieving, so it is important to recognise that the impact of separation and loss can take a long time to heal; and their sadness must be acknowledged. Children and young people may act out their fears and experiences. It is important that those working with/caring for the child/young person to come alongside the child and young person, accept what they have experienced and reassure them that they are safe now. It is important that the child or young person is encouraged to talk about these feelings with a person they feel comfortable with.

6. The timing of life story work

Where life story work has not taken place, this should be considered within an up to date child's assessment that outlines the child/young person's needs. Ideally, this should have been discussed at the Child in Care Review and be included in their Care Plan, specifying who is to do the work and in what timescales.

Plans for life story work should not be rigid but should meet the needs and ability of the child/young person. The primary planning consideration must be the child/young person and their views, wishes, feelings and desire to engage in the work. Key factors to consider are age, understanding and significant issues impacting on the child/young person for example, family time, court processes and key transition stages. Remember that life story work is a process not an event.

Where the child is not ready to undertake work directly, the information must be gathered for the child for a later time and this process should not be delayed as important links may inadvertently be lost and much harder to capture down the line. On some occasions there may be compelling reasons why painful past issues are not dealt with by a specific professional. In such circumstances this should be carefully considered and a decision made by the social worker and team manager as to who and when the work should be addressed. This should be recorded on the child/young person's record along with the any plan of work so that these details are clear and responded to without risk of them not being picked up again and allowed to drift and become delayed.

A child/young person who does not wish to, or is not ready to, deal with their past will still need an explanation about what happened and to be informed about their plans for their present and their future. In these situations, the opportunity should be taken when the child/young person is receptive to listening and more able to share their views, wishes and feelings, taking into account their age and level of development. For this reason, it is important to see life story work as an organic process that is a-tuned to the child and young person's individual needs and circumstances and responded to accordingly.

7. Activities to promote Life Story

7.1 The use of genograms

All children and young people involved with children's social care should have a genogram. This should be completed at the earliest opportunity to ensure that we have a clear understanding of the child's family and important relationships. This information is crucial to ensure that children have a network of support, and where children may have to live away from their parents, that extended family and connections are included. Whilst genograms are normally completed with the family and partners, children should also be encouraged to talk about people who are important in their lives.

7.2 The use of chronologies

As part of good social work practice, all children should have an update to date chronology. This should include key dates and decision-making about the child/young person and should also consider key achievements and celebrate what constitutes success for the child. This should be a live record and capture meaningful events for the child to outline their story in whatever way is most suitable for the child and young person. In accordance with point 5 above, social Workers could consider the most appropriate way to replicate the child's chronology in a manner that is child and young person friendly.

7.3 Children's Social Work Records.

Social workers should continually reflect on the recording of information on a child's record, taking into account how their background, history and story explained. Since children and young people can, and do, request access to their records appropriate attention should be given to 'language that cares' and pay specific attention to the way in which children and young people are spoken with and about. Social workers should consider their use of language taking into account children's descriptions and good practice such as the TACT 'Language that Cares' guidance which is incorporated into the local recording standards, ([TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf](#))

This should not just be considered in relation to case notes, but to all aspects of the child's record, including visits to the child, home finding requests and details of assessments, care / pathway plans and review meetings to capture their views, wishes and feelings. The voice of the child, young person and relevant others who are important to them should be recorded in a clear but sensitive way. We should always think about the child.

Additionally, children will participate and provide information about their experiences through observation and consultation about their plans. This feedback provides opportunities for lots of exploratory discussions as a way to identify where there is clarity and where there may be some gaps and areas for further clarification.

7.4 Life Story Work Champions

Within each social work team, across MASH and Assessment, Child Protection and Court, Children in Care and the 16+ Service there will be identified Life Story Champions. A Life Story Champion role will aim to be a point of reference for other team/service members to promote life story work with children and young people, to support practitioners and carers to feel comfortable with life story work tools, to provide advice on the development and collation of life story work and to ensure that the team toolkit is replenished, when required.

Life Story Champions can be any social work practitioner within a team that has been nominated/identified and has received core training in Life Story Work. Colleagues in HIPSS can offer consultation and Life Story Work Training. The Principal Social Worker will act as a service wide coordinator to provide additional support and input with the Life Story Champions.

7.5 Direct work with children and young people

All children and young people should receive regular visits with their social worker during their time in our care. These visits are an opportunity to build rapport, relationships and support children and young people to share their

views, wishes and feelings. These visits also provide an opportunity for social workers to focus on key areas of children's lives as part of supporting them to understand their history, identify what is important to them and who the important people are around them. Taking into account point 5 above, 'How do you complete life story work?', there is a list of resources, examples and suggestions attached and referred to at point 8 referring to 'Life Story Resources'.

In encouraging children and young people to engage in these sessions, there will be a range of tools available within each social work team to support this work. The toolkits will include basic arts and crafts, like pens, pencils, paper, playdough, string etc., and some books to support discussions during visits. Life Story Champions in teams and services will act as a point of contact for local advice and discussions about how to use the toolkits with children and young people and they will be responsible for ensuring the pack remains well stocked in liaison with the Social Care Academy.

7.6 The use of Memory Boxes

All children and young people when they come into care should be provided with a memory box. This will be kept by the child or young person, or with their carers if appropriate, and upon it should contain:

- A photo album
- Space for special items, mementoes and keepsakes
- A folder for certificates and special achievements
- An activity pack or for older children something they would enjoy completing
- Children's guides / information (about a variety of relevant topics)
- Details of how to make complaints and how to request an advocate
- In the situation where children move from their placement, the memory box will move with them and will continue to be added to over time.

7.7 The Use of Life Story Books

Children and young people should have an 'All about me' book which provides information about their life story that can be added to as they

grow and mature. The social worker and team manager are responsible for ensuring that children and young people are supported with life story work and have an 'All about me' book and a memory box. These items belong to the child and they can decide who else can look at them. If someone wants to look at their life story book they must have the child or young person's permission.

Children with a plan of adoption will have a life story work and a book completed as part of their preparation to move to their new families outlining their history. A later life letter will also be prepared so that the child can have this to read when they are of an age and understanding to read this. The life story book, memory box and later life letter will be shared with the prospective adopters for them to add to and so that they can share the later life letter at an appropriate point in the future.

8. The Use of Later Life Letters for Children Being Adopted

A Later Life Letter is written by the child's social worker, and is given to the child/young person when they are considered old enough by their adoptive parent(s), possibly around the age of 11 or 12 years of age. A Later Life Letter is an expanded version of the Life Story Book and gives more details about the child or young person's history and the decision making process. The Later Life Letter provides information on the child's life from their birth up to the time of their placement for adoption and explains the reasons and actions that led up to this decision being made, including why they could not live with their birth family.

The child is the focus of the letter and it must be remembered when writing the letter that the child has a need to know why they have been placed for adoption. This is important information and it must be a true account of the process. The letter should be able to give the child a personal sense of their own history and a sense of their value and worth, something that a court report or the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) cannot provide.

The letter should include, whenever possible, the views of the people involved in the process, including the birth family. The letter is a good opportunity for the social worker to include personal anecdotes and comments about the child, from their own experience or/and from the

experiences of other important people in the child's life (such as the foster carer). This personal touch can help the child to understand that they were important and valued. Every child will see the letter at a different age, and so the letter, whilst being truthful, must be written so that a child can understand it. According to research, there are 4 main questions that adoptees ask when they think about their adoption:

- Did their birth parents want them?
- Did the birth parents love them?
- Did their birth parents receive any help?
- Do the birth parents think about them now?

The following are suggestions to help prepare a Later Life Letter:

- Begin by introducing yourself;
- Acknowledge that some time will have passed before the letter is read and that the child may not remember you;
- Talk about your role in relation to the child, the length of your involvement, and the reason for writing the letter;
- Mention other previous significant social workers who were involved (if that is the case) - give their names, and when and why they were involved;
- Acknowledge that it might be difficult for the young person to read the letter and that they can ask for help from their adoptive parents, or another trusted adult of their choice, while reading it.

9. Life Story Work Resources

Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker (2009) Life Story Work – A practical guide to helping children understand their past CoramBAAF : London

[Free social work resources & tools for direct work with children and adults \(socialworkerstoolbox.com\)](https://socialworkerstoolbox.com/)

[Voice of the Child: 20 sheets to gain child's wishes, feelings & views - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com](https://socialworkerstoolbox.com/)

[All about me: Direct work sheets & activities \(booklet\) - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com](https://socialworkerstoolbox.com/)

[TLSW-presentation-for-new-students-2020-Compatibility-Mode.pdf](https://socialworkerstoolbox.com/)

What is a Life Story Book

Child and Young People Services

What is a Life Story Book?

All children with a plan for adoption must have a Life Story Book. A life story book will often be useful for children placed long term away from their birth parents within any legal arrangement e.g long term fostering, kinship care, SGO with relatives. Children returning “home” can also benefit from having a way of understanding their experiences about why they were “in care” or key events leading up to this and events whilst they were a child in care.

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 provides an opportunity for the child to explore and understand their early history and life before their adoption or the involvement of social care.

A Life Story Book should:

- Keep as full a chronological record as possible of a child’s life;
- Record key events including any moves of where they live however temporary
- Integrate the past into the future so their childhood makes sense;
- Provide a basis on which a continuing Life Story can be added to;
- Be something the child can return to when they need to deal with old feelings and clarify and/or accept the past;
- Increase a child’s sense of self and self-worth;
- Provide a structure for talking to children about painful issues.

At a child’s children in care review the need for a life story book should be considered as soon as adoption is identified as a possible future plan. Even if this is part of a multi track process before final legal orders are made. The key people who will collect information and begin the process of writing the book should be identified.

Birth parents and wider family members should be included in this process. Vital key life information is often given freely by birth family members at the stage- before final legal orders are made. It can be more difficult once the final legal orders are in place.

2. Who Should Write the Life Story Book?

The process should be initiated, driven and coordinated by the child’s social worker and carried out in coordination with the other people who know the child well, including carer(s), parents and other relatives.

Time and care should be given to:

- Planning carefully how undertake the work;
- Reading the information about the child carefully and thoroughly;
- Collating the information in chronological order;
- Noting reasons for key decisions;
- Noting gaps in the records and attempting to fill them;
- `Counselling children, parents, friends, relatives and carers etc. as necessary.

3. What Materials are Needed?

Presentation is very important in terms of validating the importance of the life story and motivating the child to want to read it and show it to others.

- Give thought to how it is going to be well presented so it will last for years and repeated viewings. Professional binding so that it looks like a “real “ book is a good way.
- There may be precious items that need a box-this should be a quality box maybe wooden that looks special not a plastic container or a shoe box.
- Always work on clean good quality paper;
- Drawings and photos should be mounted;
- Use neat headings; and accessible script
- If the child is unable/reluctant to write themselves, let them dictate what they want to say making it clear it is their own words;
- Make sure when doing direct work with children, that it is activities they can easily enjoy and access and you have the right new quality materials e.g skin tone crayons
- Use good quality copies/photocopies of treasured photos, documents etc. and not the original;
- Get a balance of words and pictures;
- A responsible adult should keep hold of the book until it is finished;
- Keep a copy of it. Put a number of detachable notes in the back of the book saying where photos documents and a copy of the book will be held.

4. What Goes Into the Life Story Book?

This will be different for each child but would usually include at least the following

- Family tree - back three generations if possible;
- Key family history / identity information e.g, religion, history of emigration
- Photos of maternity hospital (and, for younger children, a clock showing the time);
- Weight, length, head circumference at birth;
- Birth certificate, if possible;
- Photo of them as a new baby- with parents if possible.
- Any items from the hospital/ baby clothes (e.g. identity tag);
- How were they first fed breast or bottle, what baby food did they like, what was the first solid food.
- Dates of first smile, sounds, words, tooth, steps etc;
- Photos of parents; account of how they met, their relationship story
- Photos and maps of all the places where the child lived;
- Photos of relatives;
- Photos of friends;
- A truthful life history which is age appropriate. Ideally shared with and agreed to and recorded as such by birth parents.
- More detailed and potentially distressing information about the reasons why a child was adopted should be included in the Later Life Letter which is given to them when they are older and better able to cope and understand such information;
- Parents' stories; ideally including their own account/s
- Details of siblings;
- The child's views and memories;
- Photos of workers and their roles;
- Story of the court process;
- Photos of carers;
- Story of family finding;
- Details of ceremonies (e.g. baptism);
- Anecdotes;
- Favourite foods, likes and dislikes.

5. Foster Carers

Foster families should be encouraged to record the story of the child's stay with them as fully as possible, including:

- Descriptions of what the child was like when they arrived, what they liked and disliked;
- Details of development (e.g. learning to ride a bike);
- Their own special memories of the child;
- Birthdays, Christmases and other family celebrations/outings/holidays etc. - photos, favourite places etc;
- Details and photos of the foster family (including extended family), home, pets etc., who they got on with and who they didn't;
- If appropriate, times when they had arguments, sulks etc;
- Special rituals the child liked;
- Souvenirs of school - photos, certificates, reports, photos of and stories from teachers;
- Contact visits;
- Illnesses;
- Photos of birth family with foster family;
- Crafts/pictures completed in the foster home/school/playgroup;
- Anecdotes;
- Where appropriate, this memorabilia should be stored safely in a suitable box – a “memory box”.

6. Using the Life Story Book

Children need truthful and honest explanations that they can understand - that means using language they know.

It is important that:

- Questions are answered as honestly as possible;
- Adults admit when they don't know the answer and offer to try and find out (rather than making something up);
- Children are helped to accept that not everything can be explained or understood;
- Information is given sensitively and honestly - protection and evasion leads to confusion and fear;
- Adults help children to realise which feelings are healthy and acceptable by discussing their own feelings frankly. If feelings are ignored, children get the message that to express them is wrong - bottling them up can lead to negative behaviour like aggression or withdrawal;
- Adults never pretend abusive/bad relationships didn't exist.

7. Children who are Adopted

Where there is an adoption plan for children in care, life story work should be part of the preparation of the child for the adoptive placement.

The life story book and “memory box” should be co-ordinated by one person, preferably the child's social worker, and given to the child and prospective adopter in stages. The first stage is at the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopter. The completed Life Story Book should be handed to the adoptive parents, together with Later Life Letters, within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.