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A decorative graphic of a winding road with dashed yellow lines, featuring three yellow location pin icons at various points along the path.

Child Protection and
Family Support Services

Life Journey Practice Guide

The Ofsted logo, which includes three stylized human figures above the text 'Ofsted Outstanding Provider'.

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LIFE JOURNEY – PRACTICE GUIDE

This guide is for practitioners working with children and young people who are open to children’s services. The guide includes principles of documenting the life journeys of children and young people open to services, whatever their level of need is. It also contains best practice around therapeutic life story work, life journey work and direct work, as well as guidance for how we record key events for young people and their families.



The guide has been created following:

- consultation with practitioners through a working group of practitioners, each sharing their own knowledge, experience and best practice examples;
- consultation and engagement with children, young people in care and adults with lived experience; and
- it has also been informed by recent best practice guidance and research.



PURPOSE

It is well known that children and young people's sense of identity is formed by understanding their lived experience and why decisions have been made in relation to the involvement of children's services.

If children and young people do not understand their story, this can affect their identity, sense of shame and self-esteem throughout their childhood and adult life. The importance of understanding a life journey is of particular importance for children and young people who are not able to reside with their birth families.

Life journey work provides the key information to support them to understand their life history and why decisions were made. Often young people are reliant on gaining this information from professionals, as they have an adult focused story given to them by their birth families (or they may not be able to have contact with their birth family).

The core principles and values of enabling children and young people within Telford and Wrekin Children's services are:

- We record information which clearly evidences their lived experience. This is important for all children and young people receiving support from us.
- We ensure key events that occur include information from the perspective of the child/young person. This requires triangulation of information gathered through observation and through relationships held with professionals.
- Recordings should be 'person-centred'.
- We ensure we capture key information relating to their experience, strengths and relationships and these are evident on all records.
- We encourage all agencies to take into consideration the child's lived experience.

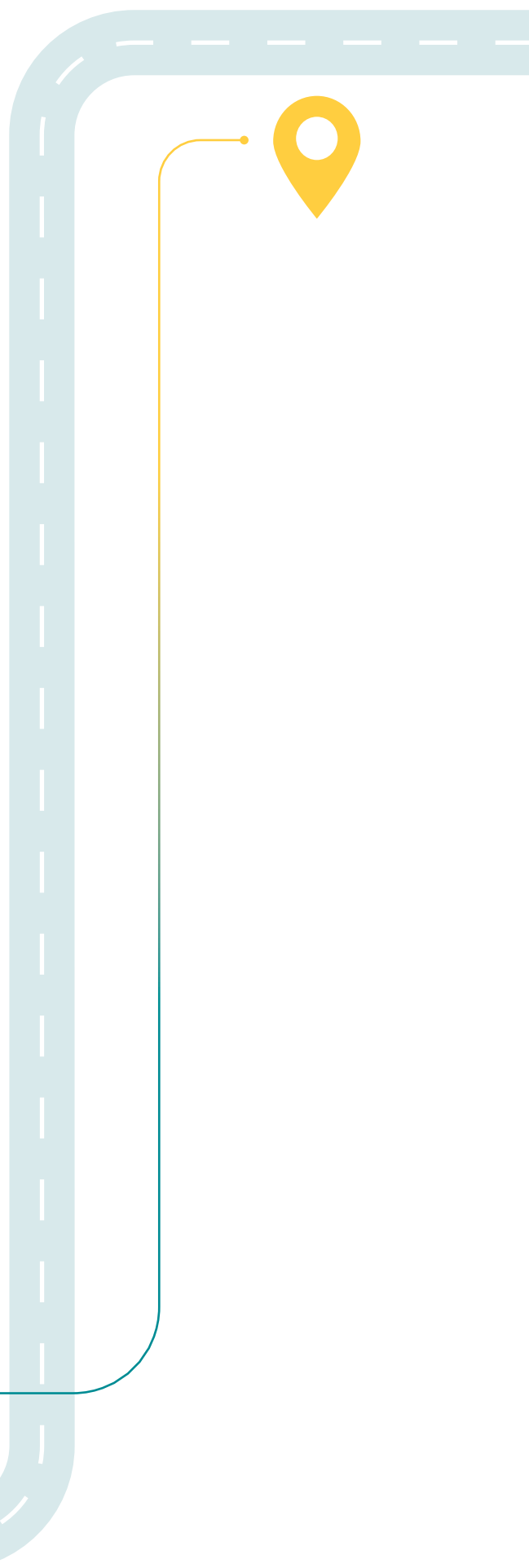
- We ensure that children and young people are consulted and can participate in relation to their circumstances, decisions made about them and the support they receive, in an age-appropriate manner which considers their individual needs.
- We ensure that their life journey is shared with them in a sensitive, balanced manner.
- We ensure birth family members can contribute to the child/young person's journey.
- Where direct work is completed with the young person or child, this is underpinned by playfulness, curiosity, acceptance and safety.
- Direct work will consider the child and young person's age, understanding, developmental needs and identity.
- Direct work enables children and young people to understand their past and to move forward with their future.
- Direct work is curious about the child and young person's own account of what took place and provides alternative voices and perspectives alongside their own to support them to make sense of their experiences.
- Recording is completed considering the possibility that the child or young person will read this information as an adult.
- Life journey work considers the individual nature of the culture of the child and family, and this information is included.

It is our aspiration for all children and young people receiving support, that any written recordings we make will be part of documenting their journey. All children and young people will understand the reason for the involvement of services, considering their individual age, stage of development and understanding.

In respect of statutory intervention, children and young people will be supported to understand the role of the social worker, understand any actions/decisions taken. Their views in relation to these will be explored and recorded. In addition, dependent on their age and understanding, they will be encouraged to participate with respect to their needs and the needs of their family.

All work undertaken with children and young people will consider their identity, relationships, the impact of their current situation and the support provided to them. All work will consider their individual lived experience, the impact of these experiences may have on them and will include their views, views of extended family members (where appropriate), views of wider agencies and a hypothesis of their lived experience based on professional judgement, observations and the triangulation of information. The child and young person will be included in direct work with the family and their voice recorded.

When the involvement ends, a clear rationale for this will be provided, again considering their lived experience.



CARE EXPERIENCED CHILDREN

Every child/young person living outside of their birth family needs to be able to understand why decisions were made and to make sense of their life journey. Children who are not residing with their birth parents are often confused as to why decisions were made. They often have elements of their story missing or have internalised their story as a reflection on them, which induces shame, confusion and can contribute to a poor sense of self, self-esteem/self-worth being low and questions around their identity. These factors can then contribute to depression and anxiety in their later years and throughout adult life.

In addition, they can be presented with multiple conflicting stories of their life journey. It is our role to ensure that a balanced narrative is facilitated for the young person, considering a range of perspectives. Consequently, we have a responsibility for promoting people's memories and identities within our recording.

Often children and young people rely on the information contained in Local Authority records to reconstruct personal stories. The quality and content of records has a significant impact on lifelong wellbeing and sense of self. The information written has a big impact on the way young people view and understand themselves.

Often recordings can reflect adult focus or events from a professional perspective. This can then create a version of negative memories. It is important that a balanced narrative of the child's journey and story is evident.

It is important for life story work to commence as soon as children enter the care system. This work helps with their emotional regulation, relationships with their carer's and increases placement stability.

Following a child being removed from their birth family, the decision making around this should be clearly recorded. This should include all the information that was considered in making the decision, the impact of this on the child's lived experience and likely future outcomes.

If this is considered as a temporary arrangement (for example a child/young person subject of section 20), this should be explained to the child in an age-appropriate manner as well as what will happen during this period.

If the child is of an age or understanding, the reasons for them being removed from their birth family should be discussed with them. Their wishes and feelings should be considered, heard and understood.

Where possible, birth family members should be requested to provide meaningful items for the child as well as details of their likes, dislikes and anything that they feel helpful to share about their routine.

When placed in a foster family, the family should commence the child/young person's life story book straight away. This should include their likes, dislikes, relationships with the family, photographs of places visited, family members they have had relationships with and this should become a journal of their time with them.

It is important that the social worker for the child and the fostering supervising social worker plan for this to be completed at the outset. All professionals including the carer should also have a narrative to provide to the child around the decision making and care planning.

The foster carer should be supported through supervision from their social worker and by the child's social worker throughout their time caring for the child, both with the life journal and supporting the child/young person to understand their thoughts and feelings around decision making.

Throughout the care planning stage, the wishes, feelings and lived experience of the child should be sought and included in the planning processes.



When decisions are made in relation to the care plan, these should be considered from the child/young person's perspective. They should also be explained to the child/young person by the social worker and the narrative should be communicated to the foster carer or residential provider so that everyone supporting the child/young person has the same narrative and can talk about this with the child/young person.

When the child/young person moves to be supported by a new worker in the children in care team, a letter from the original social worker should be included on the file. This letter should include factual information about their journey and personal reflections of the social worker's relationship with them.

This information supports the child/young person's understanding of their own journey and provides the social worker with a way to document their understanding of the child/young person's journey and a way for them to share this with the new social worker.

If a family member has a significant relationship with the child but is unable to care for them on a permanent basis, the family member should be supported to contribute to the life journey of the child. Examples of this are letters, cards, photographs or life history information which offers information in relation to their relationship.

If the child is placed in the care of connected people, life journey work should be facilitated and coordinated by the social worker and supervising social worker. It can be especially difficult for connected carers to provide a neutral narrative in relation to the child's story.

If a plan is progressed whereby the child cannot return to their birth parents' care, the birth parents should be supported to contribute to the life journey of the child. Examples of this are letters, photographs, memories, reflections of their relationship with the child, any relevant health information and any reflections for the future. This should also include information about the family's culture and the story of the child in this context.

Prior to conducting discussions with birth family, it is important to reflect on the information that the young person may wish or like to know. For example, why their name was chosen. Whilst this may be a difficult thing to do for all concerned, it aids birth family in considering the story from the child's point of view and values their contribution.

If a birth family member is not able to engage in a discussion face to face about this, a letter could be sent to support them to share their thoughts (with a structure) if they would find this easier. Asking the birth family what they would wish the child to know about them or their aspirations for the child may provide some structure, but anything that the family wishes to share can make a valuable contribution and express love and support for the child. Given the difficult nature of this and the sensitivity of this, the social worker may be required to provide information to aid any missing information or gaps.

If a child is placed in residential care, it is important that the expectations of the provider regarding the child's life journey are clear from the outset and that it should include the need for them to formulate a journal of the child's time with them. Similarly, the residential provider should also be provided with a narrative for the child/young person in relation to decisions that have been made. Any expectations around recording this should be made clear to the provider from the outset and should be clearly recorded by the social worker for the child.

If a child returns to the care of their birth family, it is important that the foster family or residential placement provides an overview of their journey with them. A record of this should also be included on the child's record.

Throughout the time the child/young person is placed in the care of the Local Authority, the Independent Reviewing Officer will also contribute to their understanding of their journey. This will include ascertaining their views, wishes and feelings prior to their review and following their review. Wherever possible, the IRO should meet with the child/young person directly. In addition, the outcome of their review should be shared with them in a letter, considering their age, stage of development and identity. In addition, the IRO should ensure that at the review life story work is discussed and assurances that it is taking place.

It is also important for any significant professionals to contribute to the child/young person's story. This may be a family time worker who can provide an account of the time the child spent with their birth parent and family members and their reflections of this time. A teacher or school representative, which is particularly relevant when a child is transitioning to another school. Any transitions are required to be included within the child's journey, including any placement moves and where possible letters written from the previous carers.

Where a social worker leaves the Local Authority, a letter should also be included for the child and a record of this retained on the child's file on protocol.

DIRECT WORK WITH THE CHILD IN RELATION TO THEIR LIFE JOURNEY

This is usually led by the social worker for the child. However, it is likely to include the wider team around them. It is important that the child has a consistent narrative to their life journey from all professionals. All professionals will also have information relating to the child's journey to share. It also enables the team around the child to support the child/young person.

Within the pre-planning phase, it is important to reflect on the information the child would need to know about their journey. Important questions such as why their name was chosen are important to consider in preparation for the work.

Life journey work is complex and emotive for all involved. It is important to seek support from colleagues and managers around any concerns that practitioners may experience when completing the work. Although social workers when completing direct work draw on principles of trauma-informed relational practice, there may be occasions where a more specialist focused instance of life story work is required.

Direct work should be completed with the child/young person in relation to their care plan. This may be completed alone, with siblings, with carers or with birth family.

The aims of the work vary but usually the purpose of direct work is completed to:

- Form a relationship with the child/young person.
- Gather their wishes and views.
- Support their understanding of their life experiences.
- Share new information about their care plan or birth family.

This work can be adult led, for example, to explain a Court decision. It could be the result of questions from the child. There are a wide range of tools used to communicate with children/young people in relation to their life journey.

The purpose of life journey work is to provide the child with a mechanism to develop a factual, balanced, sensitively worded story about their life. The child/young person should be supported to feel safe enough to understand their story, the feelings this may provoke for them and time to work through these with support around them. Consequently, the planning and support provided following the session will need to be carefully considered, including emotional support and relaxation for the child.





It is also important to ensure the child/young person knows who they can gain support from if required following the session.

In addition, any support the worker requires is an important part of the process. Life story work can evoke many traumatic feelings for the child and in turn may impact on the worker.

Life story work should include the present, identity, relationships, strengths, and the past. It should also include reasons as to why the child cannot reside with their birth family, their placement journey including any placements that have ended and the impact this has had on the child, important memories and relationships. It also should include the future, building independence, hopes, aspirations and dreams. This element of the work is important for children and young people to move forward from their experiences.

Life journey work with young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds requires a level of cultural competence and appreciative enquiry. It is important for practitioners to be aware of the cultural identity of the birth family and the meaning this has for them for all children. However, for children and young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds this is of particular significance. If an interpreter is required, ensuring that the interpreter is aware of the content of the discussion and can also aid the understanding of the cues of the young person.

It is also important to acknowledge and promote the child/young person's religious and cultural identity, including how faith impacts on the child/young persons lived experience in terms of their beliefs, religious practices and traditions that will vary for individuals.

Therefore, it is important to retain curiosity and explore these with the young person and how this can be promoted in everyday life. In addition, making these enquiries with birth families to ensure that any aspects central to the young person's identity continue throughout their journey.

The role of faith and the impact that this has on the child/young person's sense of belonging, their sense of loss and sense of hope for the future needs to be understood and explored.

It is also important to acknowledge that owing to their experience, some children/young people may wish to exit from their faith - particularly whereby it has factored heavily in the abuse/child/young neglect they have experienced within their birth families. In these circumstances, children and young people's choices need to be understood and they need to be supported in exploring these dilemmas.

In addition, other aspects of the child's identity also need to be considered such as gender, sexuality and any disabilities.



LIFE JOURNEY WORK FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE PLACED FOR ADOPTION

If a child is placed for adoption, the social worker should co-ordinate the life journey information. This should include the journey of the child within their placement, information from wider family members and birth parents, other professionals that have worked with them, it also may include photographs of their birth home, where they were born and family time sessions with family members. The foster carer will also complete a life story book documenting the child's journey with them.

Following the Adoption order being granted - within 10 days of the ceremony, a later in life letter should be provided to the adoptive parents for the child.

The later in life letter should include details of their life journey to date, including birth, places lived, and schools/nurseries attended, significant relationships, pets, personality, likes and dislikes. The letter should provide information around their relationships, key family members/child/young connected people and the reason why they were placed for adoption and how their adoptive family was chosen.

Life Journey Work for children who are placed under an SGO

Prior to the SGO being granted, the support plan should clearly include a plan around life journey work. It is important to ensure that the Special Guardian is aware of the child's story and is supported to talk to the child about their journey as their age progresses. The Special Guardian should be supported to form a life story book for the child

and the need to add to this as the child develops. The life story work should include contributions from wider family members.

Following the SGO being granted, the social worker for the child should provide a later in life letter detailing the child's journey to date.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

There are additional considerations to consider when working with asylum seeking children and young people around their life journey these are:

- often a traumatic journey to their place of safety - including trauma in their country of origin and from the journey itself;
- the need to learn a new language and understand a new culture - including customs, foods, climate;
- fear of the future and uncertainty;
- separation, grief and loss.

It is important for the worker to explore the country of origin of the child/young person including culture and customs. These should also be discussed with the child/young person as an individual experience. If an interpreter is required, it is important to ensure that the interpreter is aware of the context of the discussion as this can also aid the understanding of the cues of the young person. In addition, religion can often be a protective measure and improve security for these children/young people when they are adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms within a host country.

WRITING TO THE CHILD

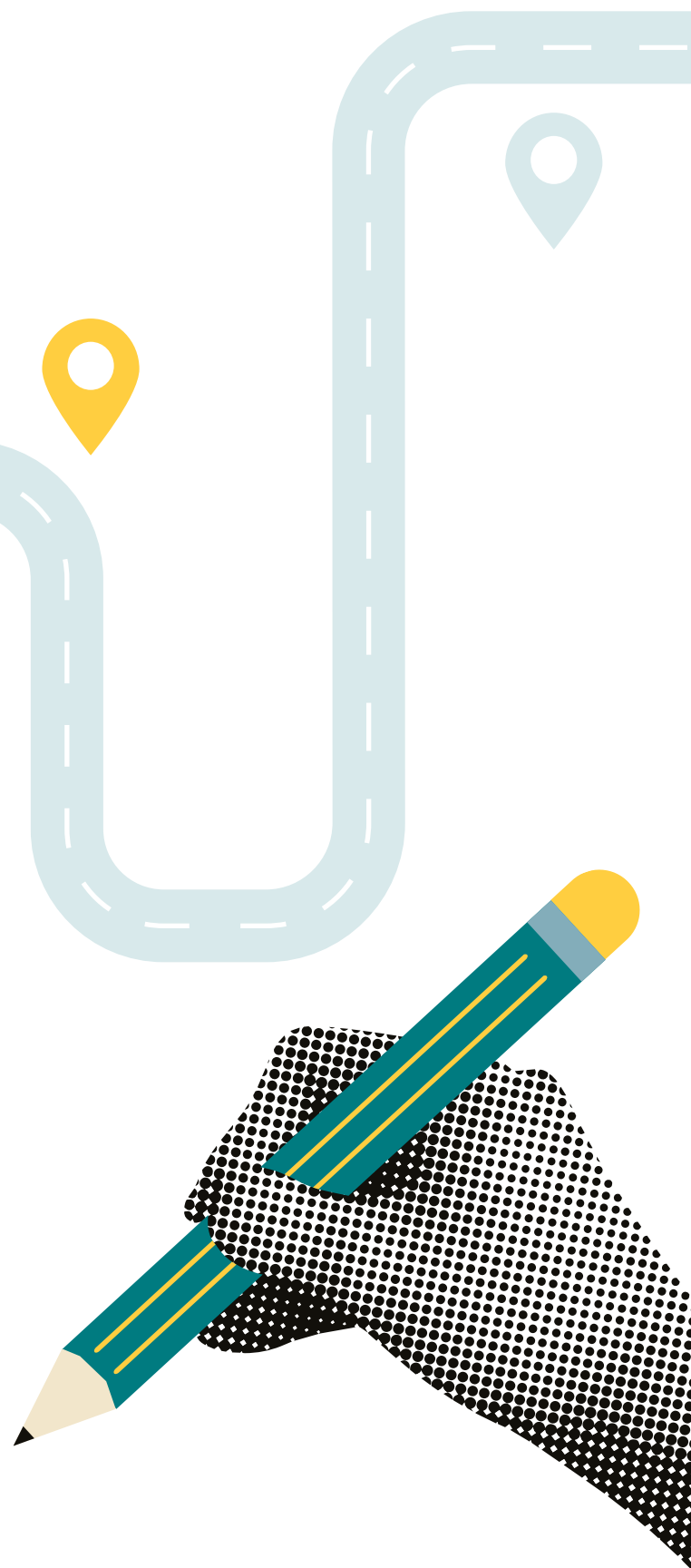
Where possible, there should be life journey minded recording completed. This is a way of capturing, events, decisions and outcomes – the professional story, the child or young person’s sensory and emotional experiences of those events, decisions and outcomes.

Records should include the experiences, positions, perspectives and feelings of family members including events important for the young person’s life journey. In addition, capturing direct work completed with children and young people from their perspective. This type of recording can include enhanced personal details that are important to the child and their identity.

This supports the capturing of the child or young person’s journey from their perspective now and as an adult and the information that would aid their sense of life history and identity. It will also capture information about the people who cared for them, their likes, dislikes and strengths.

When recording in this way, capturing the behaviour of children/young people it also aids an understanding of their experiences, any trauma, or triggers for emotional dysregulation or how to support regulation moving forward.

It is important that the child/young person has a copy of their life journey/child/younglife book but that all information is also saved onto the child’s file, in the event that their copy is damaged or lost in the future.



RECORDING LIFE JOURNEY WORK

Any discussion around life story work should be recorded on Protocol under the “life story” tab. This is the responsibility of the allocated social worker and or Independent Reviewing Officer. A work plan with proposed frequency, content and duration should be completed by the social worker/specialist life story worker and uploaded to Protocol. Updating the progress of life story work should be discussed along with what has been completed in subsequent looked after child reviews. Where adoption is the plan, a life story book and later life letter must be given to the adoptive parents within three months of the adoption order being made. Life story work should also be incorporated in the care plan under ‘life story work’ and progress discussed at matching, reviews, and planning meetings.

Therapeutic Life Story Work

Some children/young people with complex needs following trauma may require therapeutic life story work to aid their emotional regulation, behaviour and to understand their individual life journey. Therapeutic life story work is a short-term intervention which seeks to enable children and young people to make sense of their story. This in turn supports with emotional regulation and the formation of relationships with others. Children who have trauma responses in respect of their journey can require a short term focused therapeutic intervention. This is specialised and structured direct work for children and young people who require skilled support to understand trauma. It will take place with an appropriately trained worker with the expectation that any further discussions follow the narrative provided which will then continue with the ongoing support of the social worker and carer.

For these children and young people, a referral for therapeutic life story work may be completed. The starting point for this is to consult with the internal therapeutic life story workers in the first instance. Where possible, they will then complete the therapeutic life story work with the child/young person – using the ‘request for non-accommodation’ referral form.

This is of particular relevance when working with young people with an SDQ score above 17.

The life story workers can provide support with the following:

- Direct therapeutic life story work.
- Contribution to sibling assessments.
- Preparation of a child who is required to transfer to another placement – this is of particular relevance if their previous long-term placement has disrupted.
- Consultation for the social worker or practitioner undertaking the life story work.
- Assist with the preparation of older children for adoption.
- On occasions a referral to an external provider may be required when it is considered in the child’s best interest. There will be a clear focus and timescale for the life journey work to be completed as well as how this will be presented to the child/young person and a copy will be provided to the Local Authority for safe keeping.

PRACTICE GUIDANCE

- www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/late-life-letters-guides-examples – provides some best practice examples.
- Examples are detailed on resource bank.

References

In order to complete this document, the following sources have been referenced:

- Training delivered by Saira-Jayne Jones – Artifacts founder, and valuable contributions from the late Yusuf McCormack. Saira@ylys.org.uk
- Your Life Your story – www.ylys.org.uk
- Mary-Ann Hodd – mahodd@gmail.com
- Smash Lives – <http://smashlifeuk.com>
- 'Wishes and Feelings': Misunderstandings and Missed Opportunities for Participation in Child Protection Proceedings

This paper is drawn from a 3-year study into participation in child protection social work. It includes findings from qualitative interviews and a focus group, with participation from social workers, parents, and children in three local authorities in the United Kingdom. Read more:

- The Experience of Life Story Work: Reflections of Young People Leaving Care Anna Buchanan, May 2014
- Lisa Cherry – Circles and threads learning event - Trauma informed record keeping www.lisacherry.co.uk
www.lisacherry.co.uk/trauma-informed-ways-of-being
- Australian childhood foundation has a number of resources: <https://professionals.childhood.org.au/training-development>
- 6 Guiding Principles to a trauma informed approach – <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/56843>
- The Genderbread Person - has resources online for discussing the concept of gender
www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2018/10/the-genderbread-person-v4/
- www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/late-life-letters-guides-examples

Circles and Threads: Trauma Informed Record Keeping

Lisa Cherry

CREATING
SOCIAL
CHANGE
ONE CONNECTION
AT A TIME

CORE PRINCIPLES

The CDC and SAMHSA have worked collaboratively to lay out the core principles of trauma informed practice to shape their work. These are:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness & transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration & mutuality
- Empowerment voice & choice
- Cultural, historical and gender issues

TOP TIPS

- Use the Core Principles as a barometer to support trauma informed record keeping
- Think about the child's life holistically rather than something that can read like a catalogue of negative events when read in large chunks (as it may well be read by the adult accessing their file)
- Use language that is acronym free and jargon free
- Write notes that avoid the need to be redacted so that a file does not arrive with lots of text literally blocked out, supporting a feeling of powerlessness over one's own life and history

REFLECTIONS

- Are you writing something that can be thought of as a fact? Or is it an opinion? If you are writing an opinion, how have you reflected upon the information you have to form that opinion? Where is that opinion from? Are you making clear this reflective process in your writing? Is it helpful for the adult that the child will become to read this opinion? In what way will it add to their healing journey?
- What language are you using? Are the words you are using reinforcing the power imbalance or does the language support agency?
- Are you writing your notes *for* the child or young person, *to* them or *with* them? Are you writing your notes as though they were reading them as an adult or are you writing them to access a service/for court/to gain a diagnosis? In balancing this tension, are you thinking about how to make that distinction for the child or young person so that this can be made sense of as an adult?
- If the person were sat in front of you as a 25 year old, a 35 year old, a 50 year old, would you be able to explain to the adult why you made the decisions you made?
- What important parts of the story are being held right now that might get lost forever? For example, how was the child's name chosen? What colour were their eyes when they were born? Who held them in their first few weeks?

Across the life course, we experience love, loss, bereavement, illness. An adult can read their files during any one of these events and the desire to read them may in fact be triggered by a defining life event. Hold that adult in mind as you do your healing work.



I APPRECIATE YOU AND ALL YOU DO. THANK YOU!

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