

Life Story Work and Open Adoption

What is Life Story Work?

Life Story Work is the collection of information and documentation that records activities, milestones, and stories so that the child can re-visit, explore, reminisce, and remember. It is a creative way of helping the child see themselves and what has happened to them, through strong and resilient narratives. Life story work helps a child to:

- have a meaningful understanding of their own unique story
- develop a strong sense of identity, family, culture, belonging and their place in the world
- link their feelings, thoughts, and behaviours to past experiences so they can understand why they act and respond in certain ways
- understand their past, make sense of their present and think about their future.

Adoption life story work is more than a collation of memorabilia and records of the child's life whilst in out of home care. It:

- acknowledges that the child's story starts well before they entered care, and begins with their family: history, culture, and story
- gives an understanding of why the child is living permanently in a family they were not born into.

Life story work is a process rather than being a one-off event. It should be worked on throughout the life of a child, well after their adoption order is made. A child's life story can take many different forms, including a book, memorabilia box, computer app or video.

It is essential carers know the child's complete life story (from birth and before birth if possible) so they can help the child value, share, and continue their personal story.

It may be tempting to only include the positive parts of a child's life in their life story work. For example, if a child is being adopted, you may feel their life story work should focus on the joy of becoming a legal part of their adoptive family and ignore the grief and loss felt by their family. A child is entitled to a complete understanding of their own life, and the factors that contributed to the decisions being made for and with them.

Honoring the truth of a child's life, even the painful parts, is vital to meaningful Life Story Work

Carers and Life Story Work

A carer must demonstrate their ability to undertake life story work independently with the child in their care before an adoption can proceed. Life story work is best achieved when the carer has a positive relationship with the child's family and an understanding of the child's cultures.

If a case plan goal of adoption is being considered for a child, now is the time to help upskill the carer in being involved in life story work by:

- modelling appropriate behaviour and attitudes towards the child's family
- modelling that reminiscing and remembering are important shared activities that help people to feel like they belong and connect
- facilitating discussions between the carer and child about what information the child wants in their life story. This could be information the child already knows, or wants to know
- facilitating discussions between the carer and child about how the child wants their life story to look
- encouraging the carer to ask the child's family curious questions, to help build on the child's story
- encouraging the carer to, where possible, take photos and videos of the child with family members
- explaining the impact of life story work on the child's sense of identity and wellbeing
- helping the carer to plan and set aside time to work on the child's life story work
- directing the carer to the [My Life Story Book](#).

Once a case plan goal of adoption is approved, the carer's ability to keep their child's life story work up to date will be considered during the adoption assessment.

Family and Life Story Work

Family members are the master of their own story. It is critical we ask them for information about their and the child's background, cultures and lives. You may collect information from family for a child's life story during pre-planned meetings. Family may also choose to share information with you informally and in an unplanned manner, such as during family time. Regardless of how you receive the information, make sure you record all the details.

A child's life story should include more than just factual information about their family. Ask family members curious questions, such as:

- family traditions, stories, mannerisms, likes and dislikes
- nicknames
- names and details about new family members never spoken about before.

A child's life story should also not be just a collection of family information documented second or third hand. Children gain a sense of belonging from hearing stories directly from family members. Knowing old and new stories about people, places, and events specific to their family, allows the child to share a common history. It can assist with a feeling of connectedness and sense of belonging, which may help strengthen their own identity. Stories can also help give context to family members' behaviours, attitudes and possibly why their parents could not look after them.

If family stories can't be shared directly, you or the child's carer could meet with family members and record (audio/video, writing) stories for the child. It may take time to build trust between you, the child's carers, and their family members, before these stories are entrusted to you.

Therapeutic Life Story Work

For many children, the process of life story work, and revisiting previous abuse, neglect, trauma, grief, and loss, can be very challenging. The child may require appropriate therapeutic support during their journey of reflection.

Therapeutic life story work is a structured therapeutic approach developed by Richard Rose. It enables a child who has experienced the trauma of child abuse and neglect and

who is struggling with the pain of their past, to reflect, develop compassion for themselves and move forward.

‘Life story therapy is not just the who, what, where, when, why and how of events – it is also about the consequences of those events, and how they drive the child, and the present issues and difficulties’

- Rose, 2012, pg.26

Therapeutic life story work can only be facilitated by a trained practitioner. If you believe that a child you are working with would benefit from therapeutic life story work, speak with your manager. You can read more about therapeutic life story work on this [website](#).

How Else Can I Support Life Story Work during the Open Adoption Process?

You have a unique opportunity to contribute to a child’s life story work by making sure your file notes and assessments about the child are detailed and strength based.

If an independent adoption assessor is completing the child’s adoption assessment, you may wish to consider also contracting them to:

- undertake life story work with the carers and child
- make sure the life story work that has already been done for the child, is accurate and comprehensive.

Consider writing a letter to the child that explains why the decision was made to pursue open adoption. Include what you saw and heard from their parents and carers. Writing about a child’s family in way that is honest, yet compassionate and strengths-based, can help a child make sense of the decisions made on their behalf and give dignity to the family. The letter will be given to the child’s adoptive parents when the adoption order is made. Most importantly, a child should be supported to contribute to their own life story work, allowing them to weave together the stories of their two families.

References

Rose, R. 2012. *Life Story Therapy with Traumatized Children*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.