

Introduction

Since we started writing about life story work in the 1980s and developing its use, inspired by Vera Fahlberg and Claudia Jewett, it has become a firmly established part of social work practice with looked after children. It is also now a requirement of recent legislation on adoption in England and Wales. Social workers in other countries have also become interested in the concept and practice, and previous editions of *Life Story Work* have been published in German, Serbo-Croat, Hungarian, Czech and Japanese.

Children themselves have asked for the information that the life story work process seeks to elicit and establish. In a booklet written by the Children's Rights Director in England, following a survey in 2006 of what children want from adoption, amongst the top seven things children listed was to be told about their past, including:

- 1 why they couldn't stay with their birth family and so were adopted;
- 2 details about their birth family;
- 3 other information the individual child asked about;
- 4 information about their own life before they were adopted;
- 5 where they were born;
- 6 if they had any brothers or sisters living somewhere else, and why they were split up;
- 7 whether they could make contact with their birth family.

(Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2006)

All these questions can and should be answered as part of the life story work process, as they help the child establish a sense of self and personal history.

As the potential for multimedia to be used has developed, it has become necessary to talk about the life story work process rather than life story books, because all sorts of formats can now be used, including audio, visual and digital. However, it is possible to do this work without actually producing a finished product of any kind since it is the process, rather than just the outcome, that is important. A record, however, is useful not only for the child and others to refer back to but also as an information record of the child's life.

Since the first publication of *Making Life Story Books* in 1985, there have been major developments in social work, that have resulted in changes in practice and emphasis, particularly in working with children and young people. Changes in legislation have only served to accentuate that listening to children and respecting their views and wishes is central to these developments, as it is central to life story work. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (England and Wales) highlights the importance of the views of children and requires that, on placement for adoption, they must be given comprehensive information about themselves, underlining the

fact that some form of life story work needs to have been carried out with children before they are placed for adoption. Elsewhere in the UK, although there may not be the legislative basis for this, good practice requires that life story work be carried out. Recent research suggests that often this work is not carried out adequately, leaving a lot of ground to be covered when the child starts asking about their birth family and questioning their own identity. Whilst adoption usually ensures that some form of life story work is carried out, this is not usually the case for children achieving permanency through long-term fostering.

Although life story work is no longer regarded as a new concept, we have seen its progression in becoming central to planning and preparing for successful adoption and fostering placements. Whilst it is integral to good quality social work, it can also contribute to reducing disruptions and fits in with the Government's objectives of securing children in stable families as the best outcome for children in state care. Interestingly, internationally life story work is of particular interest in countries where child care policy is moving away from placing children in institutional care to permanent family-based care.

Even though carrying out life story work is not a requirement in legislation in Scotland or Northern Ireland, the need to take account of children's wishes and feelings *is* required by legislation, and good practice demands that this be central to social work with children separated from their birth families and requiring substitute families. In recent years, as the need for continued contact with birth family members, where appropriate, has also been recognised and integrated into practice, it is clear that children need to be equipped to deal with the challenges of this continuing contact. The growth of kinship care (also called friends and family care, or connected persons care) presents another area where the issue of identity needs to be addressed. Life story work is ideal for this, giving the child an opportunity to get accurate information about their birth family and examine their feelings about them, understand their troubled past and why they had to be separated from their family of origin, and have the chance of building a secure future. The increase in the adoption of older children also places particular demands upon adopters in requiring them to acknowledge a child's past and everything that it brings to the present. Adoption is a life-long process, not something that has an impact at only one moment in time.

Life story work has its place in all these developments and this revised edition reflects this. Life story work may not, however, always be the most appropriate way to help a child, and decisions as to when and how it can help should obviously be based on practice wisdom and experience and ideally made after consultation with colleagues.

Life story work is a way of working, it is not a therapeutic model. We are concerned to hear of inappropriate applications, where, for example, a child's circumstances demand skilled and long-term therapy, but life story work is used instead, perhaps because resources do not permit the child's needs to be properly met.

Please don't take on life story work, or any work with children, 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.

Developments in information technology and social networking present both a rich source of information, images and contacts but also a potential danger from figures from the past with whom contact could be harmful and destabilising. There has been evidence (Fursland, 2010, 2013) that children have used social networking to contact their birth families and suffered emotional damage because they had not been prepared for this contact in a way that gave a realistic picture of why they were no longer with their birth families and had developed their own back story, which pictured their birth families as victims and as misunderstood. Life story work needs to equip children with a real picture of what happened when they left their birth families and help children to understand that not all parents can be adequate at parenting and that sometimes they can even be a threat to their children.

We can take some steps to protect children from some of the dangers of social networking but we cannot hope to keep them from finding ways to go online. The best protection is to be open and honest with them about the positives and negatives and develop a dialogue that enables them to tell you about their online activity and get your support and protection.

We hope that practitioners and those interested in using life story work to help children will continue to find this guide useful in helping children come to terms with their past experiences, understand changes in their lives, and adjust to a new life in a new family.

This book has been revised and updated to take into account developments and changes in practice, legislation and terminology.