

‘A life book is the child’s story... It tells your child that s/he was born just like everyone else, that s/he has birth parents... and then that s/he was adopted’... ‘It starts with the child’s birth, not their arrival into the adopted family’

Beth O’Malley – *Adoption Life Books: Do’s and Don’ts and Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child*

‘A Life Story Book provides a chronology of the child’s life, helping the young person to understand and remember what has happened to him or her in the past’.

‘It is difficult to grow up as a psychologically healthy adult if one is denied access to one’s own history’.

Vera Fahlberg – *A Child’s Journey through Placement*

## **The Backwards Lifebook**

*Using a different technique makes a book that is accessible to all who need to use it.*

by Joy Rees

A Life Story Book is a ‘tool’ to be used by adoptive parent to help their child gain a sense of identity and an understanding of their history. To achieve this it usually starts with the birth family and progresses to the present, chronologically ending with the adoption. This format can prove uncomfortable for both adopter and child, and the book is often put away by the former or damaged by the latter.

With a greater understanding of child development, attachment theory and neuroscience it is clear that for many adopted children, a less direct approach would be a more effective way to achieve these aims.

***With this in mind, perhaps it is time to review the traditional format...***

### **What is the purpose of a Life Book?**

- Build a sense of identity.
- Give details and understanding of the history.
- Enable a child to share their past with their adopters and others.
- Give a realistic account of early events and to dispel any fantasies about the birth family.
- Link the past to the present.
- Help the child understand how early negative experiences continues to effect them.
- Acknowledge the separations and losses the child has experienced.
- Enable adoptive parents to understand and develop empathy for the child.
- Enhance self esteem and self worth.
- Enable the child to develop a sense of security and permanency.
- Help adoptive parents promote attunement and attachment.

I believe that we need to start at the end of this list. – If Life Story Books are prepared sensitively and the adoptive parents achieve these early in the placement, many of the others ‘purposes’ will just ‘evolve’.

### **Who needs a life storybook and when is it needed?**

Children brought up with their birth family are surrounded by their history. Who they are and where they come from is reflected back to them on a daily basis in all kinds of different ways. Children who are



not living with their family of origin, especially those who have experienced multiple moves prior to their adoptive placement, will have a very fragmented sense of their history and a very fragile sense of who they are. A Life Story Book will begin to address this, and it opens the door to further communication. All adopted children need a Life Story Book. Whatever their age, it is never too early to start a book, and it is never too late.

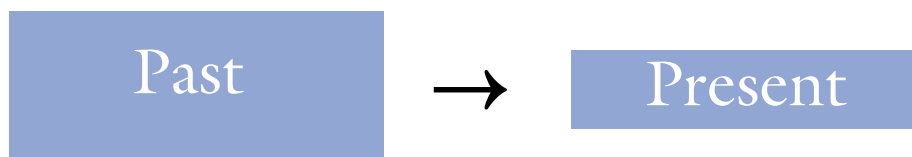
### **Why share a difficult history?**

If adults seem reluctant to share information about the past with a child, this may suggest that there is something so ‘bad’ that the child will not be able to cope with it. On some level, conscious or unconscious, the child will have memories of their early neglect or abuse. Not acknowledging the past could feed the child’s sense of shame or ‘badness’, and increase the fear of further rejection, if their adoptive parent discovered their ‘awful secret’. The past may be painful, but remember that your child has already lived through it and survived. Recalling it with a safe, trusted and nurturing adoptive parent should not re-traumatise him/her, and on the contrary it may be the beginning of the healing process.

### **Why is a child’s history important?**

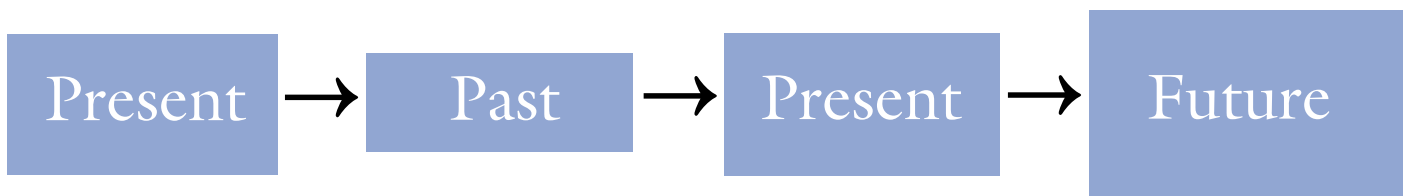
History gives us a sense of who we are, so that we can live comfortably in the present and plan for the future. – But when preparing Life Story Books for adopted children, are we allowing their history to overshadow their present and obscure their future? We need to get the balance right.

### **Is the traditional format always the most appropriate?**



Life Story Books are used to bridge the past and the present and the events of the past are of the most importance and carry the most weight. With this in mind, most are traditionally written starting with the child’s birth, adding details of the birth family and their history, detailing circumstances leading to placement with foster carers, various meetings and court proceedings, etc. Often most of the Life Story Book is written before the child is placed with you, the adoptive parent, or shortly afterwards. The book therefore generally ends with a little information about you, and finishes with the adoption hearing and the ‘forever family’, with the implication that the child fully understands this concept!

Surely promoting a sense of security and permanency, and encouraging trust and attachment to you, the adoptive parent, should be the prime objective. This would be best achieved by using a different format. One in which the history is incorporated, but safely ‘contained’ and literally held either side by the adoptive family. The present is heavily featured with you, the adoptive family having a much higher profile, and most importantly your child is given a sense of a positive future. i.e.



### **Attachment and the Child’s ‘Inner Working Model’**

All adopted children have experienced a primal separation and loss, and they will have some attachment issues. Those who have been neglected or abused will have further difficulties resulting from their insecure attachments, and a very negative ‘inner working model’. They will have a low sense of worth, a mistrust of adults and a perception of the world as an unsafe place. These limiting ‘blueprints’ are laid

down in the child's unconscious memory so will need to be addressed on an unconscious level.

### **What are the important subliminal messages?**

With this in mind, your child's history can either be presented in a sensitive and honest way that will help the child to understand and accept the past, while raising self-esteem, or in a way that overburdens and leaves the child feeling in some way responsible for the abuse or neglect, and thus lowers self worth. The messages through out the book should be: - The child was lovely and loveable from birth, that any neglect or abuse was not their fault, that they deserve good parenting and that they are indeed very precious and loved - and that they have a hopeful positive future.

### **A Life Story Book is not:**

- A 'Later Life Letter' (explains events up to the point of being adopted geared for an 18 year old)
- A background history
- A chronology
- A family tree
- A photograph album
- A trauma time line/life graph
- A foster carers memory book
- A memory box
- Life Story *Work*

Ideally the adoptive parents should have access to all of the above, and depending on their age at the time, some life story work would have been undertaken with the child to prepare for the move to you, their permanent family. Some elements of the above could appear in the Life Story Book, or the adoptive parent and child can use them, either directly or indirectly, at the appropriate time, to build on the information in the Life Story Book. For many children the Life Story Work leads to the Book, but for some children the book needs to come first.

### **Using Life Story Books to promote attachment**

You may be creating your own book or doing it with him/her or as is sometimes the case in domestic adoptions, your social/case worker may have provided one for you. As a parent, you need to be involved and contribute to this. The finished book should be shared with you first, so that you can explore the significance of the information or relevance of the comments included. You, the adoptive parent will need to feel comfortable with it, and feel able to reinforce those hidden messages.

Encouraging you to share the content of the book with your child is vital. It will reassure the child that mum and dad know all about them and their past – and that you still find them loveable, so they don't have to carry any 'secrets'.

The actual process of telling their story will also help with attunement - the foundation of a healthy attachment. It is not just the words, it is tone of your voice, your facial expressions and gestures you make as you read the book with them that are important, and the child's feelings and emotions can be gently explored and explained. The book can be divided in to short 'chapters' and read in 'bite-sizes'. Your child may only want to read a particular section. Adopters need to go at the child's pace and the book needs to be read in an unhurried way.

### **What if your child does not want to use the book?**

Even when explained very sensitively, for some children the history is so difficult that this approach may still be too direct and too painful. – For this reason writing the book in the 3rd person and using the child's first name may be a more effective and gentler way of sharing difficult information, especially for a young child. If this is still too direct, adopters may need to put the book to one side for a while – perhaps more work on the present and developing a sense of permanency is needed, before helping the

child to understand and process past events.

There are many other children's books that could be used to help children explore elements of their own story in a very indirect and unthreatening way. Many of the popular children stories can be used therapeutically to help your child to heal, or you may need to explore other professional therapeutic help.

### **Can the adoptive parent make changes to a book prepared by the social worker?**

Adoptive parents should be involved and need to contribute to the final book. You know your child better than anyone else and are in the best position to judge when they are ready for further elaboration or if the wording needs to be changed, etc. If you, the adults, feel uncomfortable with part of the book, better to amend it so that it can be used, rather than discard it!

### **What should be included in the Life Story Book?**

All children are unique, and no two books are alike. It is not a case of 'one size fits all'. Primarily it needs to be 'child - friendly ' and social work jargon should be avoided! The book should be colourful and may contain scanned photographs, appropriate clip-art and illustrations, copies of some documents and any other information as appropriate: Remember those positive subliminal messages throughout, that the child is wanted and loved.

#### **Present:**

Starting with the present and current information about the child should be a fun and non-threatening place to begin, and writing in the 3rd person is generally more appropriate. Use the adoptive name, give age, description, likes, interests, details of adoptive family and just refer to mum and dad, (not new mum and dad or adoptive mum and dad). Include details of home, bedroom, pets friends, school, etc. Then gently move into -

#### **Past:**

Details of the child's birth – date, where, time of birth, day of the week, weight and length, origins of name, etc. For all domestic adoptions this should be available, but I appreciate that for many intercountry adoptions the information will be very limited.

Details of birth family – and once the concept of birth mother and birth father has been introduced just use their first names. Give ages, descriptions, ethnic origin, religion, health, interests, employment of birth mother and father. Details of siblings and any other significant family member. Again all of these details should be accessible for domestic adoptions, while for inter country adoptions, such information is unlikely to be available.

An honest, sensitive but simple account of events leading to the placement in a foster home or residential care should be included. Again this could refer to the birth parents inability to provide the care needed, or to the political policy or economic climate of a particular country (obviously using very simple language). The underlying messages for your child needs to be the same – none of this was their fault!

Details of foster carers, and if more than one placement an explanation for each move, emphasising that this was not because the child was 'bad' or 'naughty' in any way.

A simple account about the decisions made by the social workers, police, judge etc. There is no need to list all of the various conferences and meeting and give dates. This is just too confusing for a child and detracts from their understanding of their story.

Meeting adopters and moving to their current home, acknowledgement of the mixture of emotions and

the process of getting to know each other. All those different sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations to get use too. All so scary for a little child! Going to Court and the Adoption Order and the concept of 'forever'- but do not end the book here.

#### Present:

Bring the child back to present and family life now. Perhaps mention some of your family rituals and routines - all very grounding for a young child.

#### Future:

The child's plans, hopes and aspirations. End on a positive note and by reminding the child that wherever they go and whatever they do they will always be loved by and be part of the adoptive family!

**There is danger in trying to incorporate too much detail into the child's book. It can become far too 'heavy' for a child to cope with - both physically and emotionally. Such books have a tendency to end up 'in the attic'!**

#### Final Thoughts – 'Whose Life Is It Anyway?'

There is clearly a legal and moral duty to gather photographs and record as much information as possible about members of the birth family and other significant adults. A clear account of the family history and the circumstances leading to your child being accommodated and adopted is vital.

As adoptive parents you will need to parent therapeutically - with empathy, with understanding of your child's 'inner world', and with an awareness of the impact that early experiences continue to have on your children's behaviour. To help you achieve this you should have a 'Later Life Letter', a chronology and a detailed history to share with your child at the appropriate times. Meanwhile, to enable you to start the re-parenting process you need a sensitively prepared Life Story Book. The book is intended to be just the basic tool, the first 'tier' for you to build on, at the child's pace

There are lessons to be learnt from our knowledge and work with adult adoptees, and the closed/secret adoptions of the past. Adopted adults' 'need to know' and their quests to find the 'missing pieces of the jigsaw' are well documented, but we must not overcompensate for this and overwhelm today's adopted children. The book is the child's life story, not the birth parents'. While acknowledging the difficulties, the sadness and the losses experienced, the book should also be a celebration of the child's life. It should leave the child with a positive sense of who they are and with hope for the future, and not weighed down and overburdened by the birth parents' troubled history.

©2006 Joy Rees *Joy Rees is a Senior Adoption Support Worker and a Family Futures Associate with 30 years experience of working for London Boroughs and County Councils. She has a particular interest in promoting and prioritising permanency and strong family attachments through her sensitive construction of "family friendly" life storybooks. Her knowledge of attunement and attachment theory and understanding of the "inner-world" of the child is reflected in her innovative approach to this work. Purchase her guide Life Storybooks for Adopted Children: A Family Friendly Approach by emailing her [mjoyrees@hotmail.com](mailto:mjoyrees@hotmail.com)*

*EMK Press offers free parent resources, a Yahoo!Group called AdoptionParenting, one called Adoptionlifebooks, and publishes books for adoptive families.*

'...to be able to develop new and satisfying relationships as an adult, the young person needs .... the security, the sense of belonging, being loved and loving that go with it - combined with the knowledge about his/her family of origin, past relationships and the interconnections between the past and present'.

June Thoburn – *Child Placement: Principles and Practice*

