

What format should the later in life letter take?

The later in life letter can take a range of formats, depending which will be the most appropriate to the young person. It could be

- A book
- A loose leaf folder
- A combination of the above

although it is more usual for it remain in a letter format.

Remember the age at which you want the young person to get this information and write it to the young person at that age.

Good quality paper should be used to print the later in life letter, whatever format it will take. The later in life letter holds important information for the young person and this should be reflected by being produced to the highest quality possible.

What format should the later in life letter take?

A copy of the later in life letter should be kept on the child's file. A copy should be sent to the adopters' social worker who will give it to the adopters and explain their responsibilities in sharing the information with the child at a later date, i.e. that the information should be made available to the child at a time that the adopters consider is appropriate, usually when they are 10-12 years old but no later than the child's 18th birthday.

The adopters should be asked for written confirmation of receipt of the letter and intention to share the information with the child.

Principles to remember

- Be realistic
- Be non-judgemental
- Try to get into the mind of the young person
- Consider any magical thinking
- Build resilience wherever possible

Adapted from Moffat, F (2012) Writing a later in life letter, British Association for Adoption and Fostering: London

HOW TO...WRITE A LATER IN LIFE LETTER

The social worker who knows the child writes the later life letter. The letter is realistic and sufficiently detailed so that the young adult fully understands their life before adoption, why they could not remain with their birth parents and why they were adopted. The prospective adopters receive the letter within ten working days of the adoption ceremony.

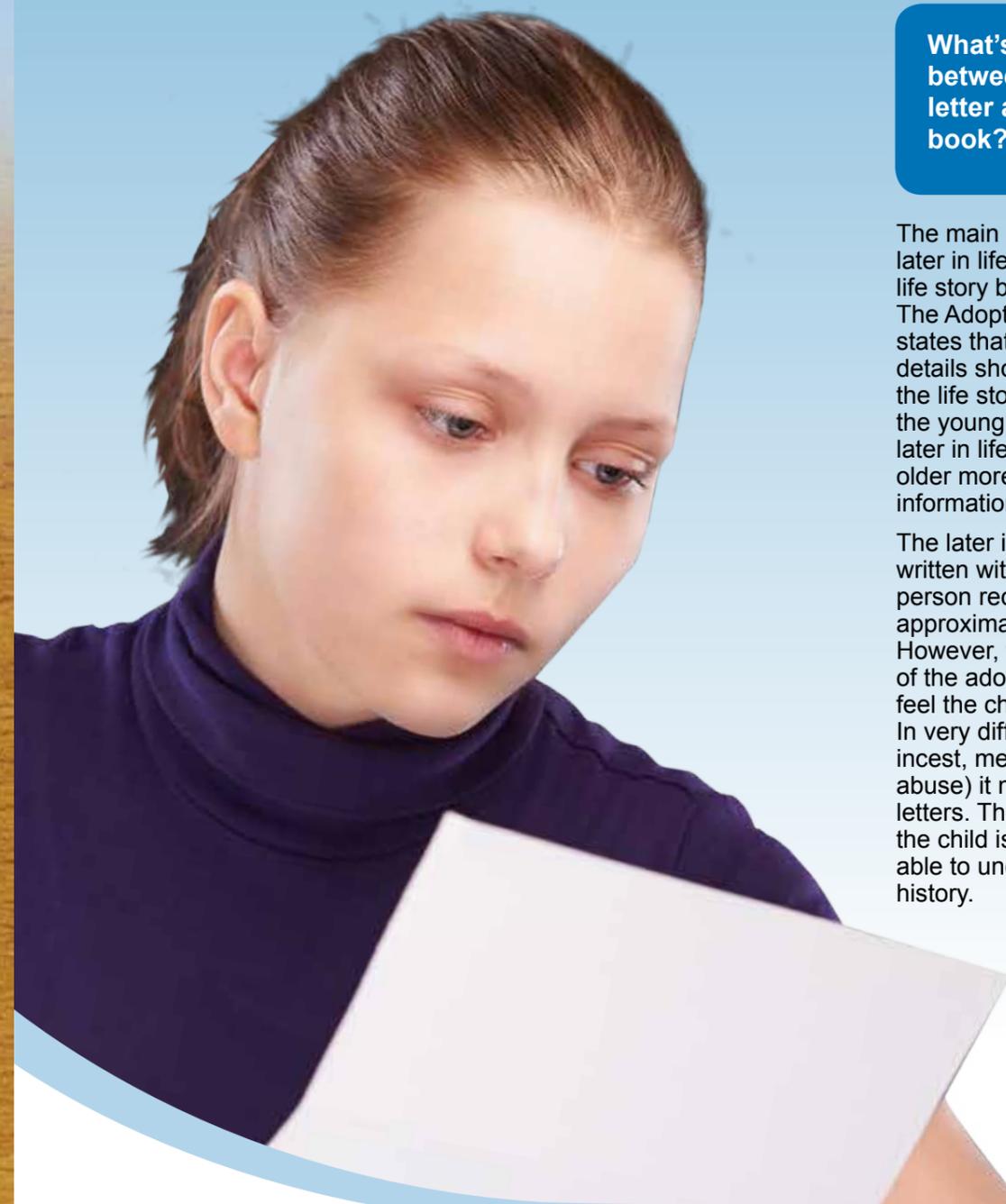
Adoption Minimum Standards 2011, 2.8

There is further information including example letters in the Later Life Letters section of Coventry's child care procedures.

What's the difference between the later in life letter and the life story book?

The main difference between a later in life letter and the child's life story book is the level of detail. The Adoption Statutory Guidance states that explicit or distressing details should not be included in the life story book. However, as the young person will receive the later in life letter when they are older more sensitive and detailed information can be addressed.

The later in life letter should be written with a view to the young person receiving it when they are approximately 10-12 years old. However, this is at the discretion of the adoptive parents when they feel the child is emotionally ready. In very difficult situations (e.g. incest, mental health problems, abuse) it may be better to write two letters. The second one for when the child is in mid-teens, and more able to understand about his/her history.



What is the purpose of the later in life letter?

The later in life letter gives the child an explanation of why he/she was adopted and reasons and actions that led up to this decision made. This should include, whenever possible, the people involved in the decision, and the facts at that time. You must be aware of the pain and anger that may have been around then, and this needs to be reflected in the letter.

What information should be included?

Experience shows that adult adoptees are eager for information collected at this time, even if it is painful.

What you produce will have to be something that you feel comfortable in producing, in each case the written style of the social worker and the information available will be different.

You can write the information in sections, for instance the legal situation could be separate from the more personal information.

Introduction – begin the letter by explaining who you are and how you were involved with the child's life. Then explain the purpose of the letter and how you gathered the information it contains.

Include details of the child's birth family in terms of its culture, religion, customs and sexuality and about the hopes of the birth family for the child.

Child's birth – Give details about the child's birth, time, day, date, which hospital, who was present, what happened next. Who cared for the child after their birth?

The child's life before and during care – where possible, include details about the child's home life, friends, favourite toys, etc. Foster carers will be a great source of information. Young people may also find details about milestones such as when they took their first steps, what their first words were, etc. of interest. Who chose the child's name and why? Include details of foster carers that the child has lived with and for how long.

Reason why the decision was made for the child to be adopted – to begin with, detail the areas of concern and the support given to birth parents to help them continue to parent the child. This will help address any misconceptions the child may have about their past and the reasons why they were adopted.

Edith Nicholls¹ gives five clear umbrella categories to explain why the child could remain with their birth parents

- Their parents may have problems and troubles of their own that make it really difficult for them to care for others and do all the tasks of the parenting parent
- Their parents may never have been taught how to look after and care for others
- Their parents may be too ill to care for others
- Their parents may not be able to learn how to be a parenting parent
- Their parents may have been shown the wrong way to look after the children.

More details need to be given about these categories. For example, giving information about the birth parents' childhood and adolescent experiences may help in the understanding of why they were unable to effectively parent the child.

Permanency – The options for permanency that were considered should be included. Family and friends who were considered as carers should be included, even if viability assessments were negative.

Matching – it is important for the young person to know why a specific family was chosen for them. If birth parents were involved, detail this. You may wish to include how the child was involved in the process for example, or what it was about the profile that drew the adopters to the child.

Where children are not with adoptive families of the same ethnic background the balance that was struck between trying to find a family of a similar background to the child and finding a loving family in the child's time should be explained.

Details about the adoption order – give details of the Social Workers involved, both the child's social worker at the time of the adoption order being granted and the adopters' social worker, the date that the order was granted and the Court.

In the letters the birth parents should be called by their first names, and the adopters describes as "your parents".

Conclusion – At the end of the letter remind the young person of the help and support that they can access and at what age they can access their records.

Finish off in a way that shows your interest in the young person.

As much information as possible should be included in the letter. The information may be lost if it is not gathered now.

Birth parents – include as much information as possible. Try and give a descriptive picture of them. Include their first names, ages, physical characteristics, their personality, academic and employment history, health, their interests and skills. Also note with whom they were living at the time of placement.

Where possible give a summary of the birth parents' situations at the time of conception, birth and where children were placed when they were older, at the time of placement.

You should be honest about any difficulties you may have had working with the child's

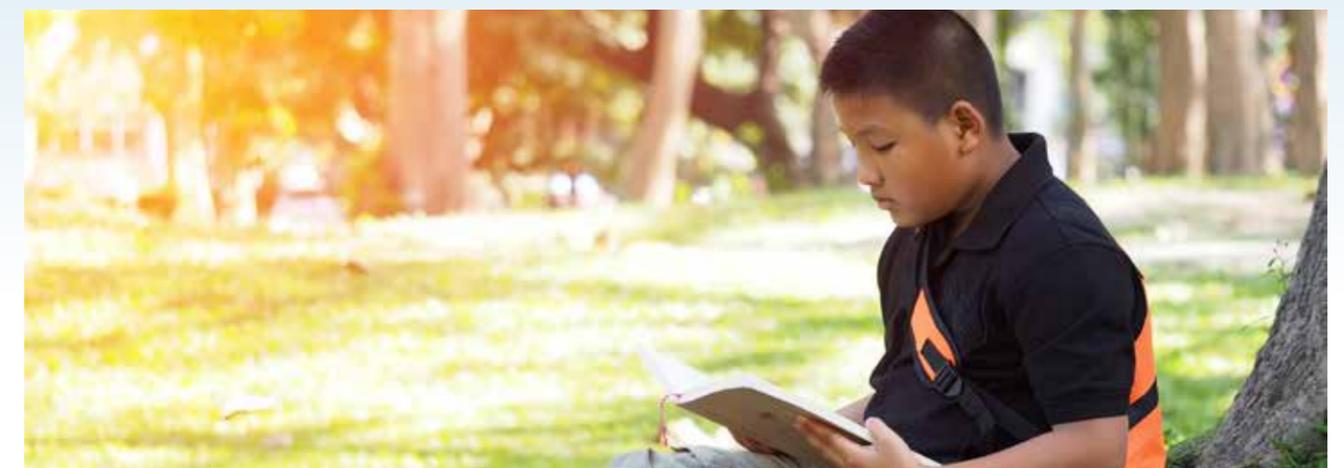
birth parents as this will help the young person understand why certain aspects of the plan for them were developed, for example, face to face contact. However this information should be put into a wider context to help the young person make sense of what is being described.

Include comments by the social worker on any contact between the child and his or her birth parents. And any information about any events that relate to the child around this time.

Give details of how any agreed contact was decided - whether

it is face to face or letter box. The child needs to know that birth parents and relatives want to hear about their progress, and that the adoptive parents agreed to the contact arrangements prior to placement.

Siblings – if the child has siblings similar information should be provided. Are they adopted? If they live with birth parents explain why. The child needs to know what happened to their brothers and sisters, who cares for them, and if relevant, why there is not contact. Be careful to give only first names for all birth relatives and do not use addresses or other identifying information.



¹Nicholls, E. (2005) The New Life Work Model, London: Russell House