

	Action/Date
Title/Status-	Practice guidance
New document or revised	New
SMT sign off	August 2019
Responsible Head of Service	Head of Service Children in Care, Virtual Schools, Adoption & Fostering
Date due review	August 2020
Date SMT approved (review).	

Report to Senior Management Team- Thursday 1st August 2019
Life Story Work Practice Guidance

1. Purpose

- 1.1 Leicestershire County Council is committed to delivering quality life story work to children in our care. We want to ensure that children in foster care and those moving into adoption placements have their story written in a way that gives them a detailed understanding of their life journey and identifies the key people for them in their early life and explains the role they played.
- 1.2 This story will be hugely significant both to the child and to their carers or new family in making sense of where they have come from and their life experiences. This work is critical in supporting children's developing sense of identity and their emotional, social and cognitive development.

2. Our commitment

- 2.1 We are committed to ensuring that children in our care have their life story, memories and keepsakes treated with respect, and that this information is collated and stored for them so that these can be accessed easily by each child – just as any parent keeps and safely stores photos, memories and keepsakes for their children. We are committed to ensuring that all children's early origins are fully valued – this includes their past experiences and first family identity.
- 2.2 We are committed to ensuring that the work completed with children is accurate, empowering and meaningful. We will make all efforts to engage with birth families to ensure they can contribute as much as they are able to.
- 2.3 We are committed to providing a high-quality therapeutic story which gives each child a carefully balanced narrative which explains the challenges faced and honours the struggles of parents.

3. Principles

- 3.1 The child's wellbeing and understanding is paramount to this work.
- 3.2 Parents and other key carers will be supported to contribute to building their child's life story – their contribution is seen as central and is highly valued.

3.3 We will be tenacious in seeking out information and be creative in gathering and recording information for the child.

4. Introduction

4.1 Life journey work and preparation for adoption work go hand in hand and offers both independent and direct work with the child. The aim is to promote a smooth transition from their birth family, through foster care and into a new adoptive family by promoting an age and developmentally appropriate understanding of the reasons why such a fundamental and permanent change has been necessary.

4.2 Good preparation for adoption is one of the contributing factors towards a successful adoptive placement.

4.3 Children who live with their birth families have many opportunities to know their past and to clarify past and present events. However, children separated from their birth families are often denied these opportunities; they may have changed families, social workers, schools, homes, and moved away from familiar neighbourhoods and communities. Children who lose track of their past and who are confused about the present, are likely to find it difficult to develop emotionally and socially. They will struggle to develop a secure understanding of who they are, have difficulty in developing secure attachments to other adults, and may get 'stuck' in damaging fantasies they form to make sense of their confusion.

4.4 This guidance sets out both an attachment theory-informed appropriate and Signs of Wellbeing approach to life story work:

"An attachment theory-informed approach to life story work would take as a starting point the child's need to have information that enables them to put together a coherent story, one that has meaning for the child, has a beginning, a middle, a here and now - and a sense of what the future might hold. Attachment theory would emphasise that what children need above all if they are able to reflect on themselves and present themselves to and communicate openly with others, is a coherent narrative that makes sense, and which leaves them with a view of themselves and their history that can be reflected on without being overwhelmed or having to defend against thinking about the past. If children have to work so hard to exclude the past from conscious thought, it can limit their capacity to engage with and experience the world differently in the present"

(Schofield, G. and Beek, M. 2006)

4.5 For the purposes of supporting a child through adoption, using 'Family Network Meetings' is a great way to work collaboratively with the wider network including family, friends, carers and professionals. The goal is to capture information and in pooling this to co-develop a shared story about the child's journey and life experiences and to describe the role different key players had in these experiences.

5. Definition

5.1 When discussing this area of work a number of terms tend to be used interchangeably, although they describe quite different activities. The following

definitions are provided to provide for greater clarity to promote a respectful relationship between all who are contributing to the child's life story work:

- 5.2 "Direct work" describes working face-to-face with a child using a variety of methods, according to the age, level of understanding and preference of the child. The focus can be on any subject. Methods include play, story books, workbooks, family trees, ecomaps, timelines, etc.
- 5.3 "Life journey work" means telling the story of a child's life history to enable the child to understand their past. In the majority of cases this will involve direct work with the child, since even very young children can be involved in an age-appropriate way.
- 5.4 The "life story book" is the means of recording information about the child's past in an accessible way for the child. It will include both photos and narrative. For the majority of children this will be the tangible outcome of life story work. For those children who cannot be engaged in direct work (mainly the under 2s) the book will be prepared on their behalf for the future.

6. Practice Guidance

Getting the foundations right

- 6.1 In Leicestershire, we routinely use a Words and Pictures explanation to help children understand the reasons they are unable to live with their birth families. The Words and Pictures are co-created between the social worker and the birth parents. This is a very important piece of work and takes time and careful planning but when done well can be hugely therapeutic for parents. Ultimately it helps children hear directly from their parents why they came into care, and why they could not be returned home.
- 6.2 Life journey work can only be undertaken when this first stage work has been completed. Children must first be supported to understand why they cannot live at home and what efforts people made to try and make it safe for them to return. This is the foundation of all future work.
- 6.3 If children have this foundation understanding of their situation, the transition into life story work is a logical progression for work when it is clear that the child is not going to return home. This pivotal point in a child's journey marks the beginning of the first phase of life story work. This phase of work is about helping the child to understand the reasons why they are unable to return home and to express their feelings about this, so these are processed, and grieving can take place.

7. The role of the life story support worker

- 7.1 The life story support worker will be allocated at the point that the child is referred to the permanence team for completion of the Child Permanence Report. Initially their work will focus on the gathering of factual information and should start as soon as the child becomes looked after. If this information and memorabilia is lost, it may never be regained for the child.

7.2 Birth families, workers from Children's Services Teams, foster carers, and other professionals such as Health Visitors or Children's Centre staff for example - all have a role in collecting memorabilia of all significant events/achievements for the child. This information should be recorded for the child, and any memorabilia given to the young person (or held in safekeeping by the carers according to the child's age and understanding). Working with others the life story support worker will co-create an account of the child's life in words, pictures and photographs and mini stories. They will provide support and guidance to carers to understand how it can be used as a tool to help a looked after child to understand their past and we hope to positively shape their future.

7.3 Foster carers are often in the best position to gather information about the child's daily life and significant events. For example:

- Hospital birth tags etc (newborn babies);
- Developmental milestones;
- Health records, illness, injuries, accidents;
- Favourite activities and achievements;
- Birthdays and religious celebrations;
- Holidays;
- Special friends;
- Pets;
- Photos of significant people e.g. birth family, friends from their community, foster carers and their homes;
- 'Funny' moments caught on photograph;
- Photos, anecdotes, stories about birth family contact; time with siblings
- School reports;
- Special activities at school e.g. sports day;
- Educational achievements e.g. Certificates;
- Special interests e.g. Scouts, sports or leisure activities (certificates, photos etc);
- Church, religious activities and significant events.

It may be that many of these have already been uploaded to the child's memory box by the child's social worker, the foster carer or Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

8. Pace

8.1 The pace, progress and timing of life journey work must be consistent with other processes that are underway, particularly the court and Adoption Panel processes. However, even if direct work with the child is not possible at certain times, it will still be possible to plan the next phase of work and gather the information that will be needed. Indeed, information about court and Adoption Panel processes can be built into the work being undertaken with the child to help them understand what is happening (and in particular an explanation of why certain decisions was made).

8.2 In practice, it is impossible to separate good preparation for adoption from good life story work. The life story should go with the child into the adoptive placement. Their book will be key in assisting adopters and children to have early conversations about the child's past and their heritage.

8.3 As soon as a Review of Arrangements meeting agrees that the child's permanence plan should be adoption, the Permanence Team should clarify with the Support Worker and the allocated CCSW what stage of life journey work has been reached

and ensure that the support worker will be able and informed to begin preparation work for child for adoption. The social worker should provide a copy of the Words and Pictures explanation and must identify the key themes which need to be addressed in life story work, key professionals who can contribute, foster carers, family and friends who also may have positive contributions to make. As stated earlier, the approach of using network meetings can be helpful in engaging the wider network in both collating information and developing the narrative. These meetings require good preparation and often need a co-worker involvement.

8.4 The information contained in the Child's Permanence Report is intended for the prospective adopters at this stage of the process and will be shared with the child when he or she is older. The life story book, however, should be the most accessible and child-friendly explanation of how the child comes to be where he or she is today. Workers will need to be brave in tackling honestly and sensitively the often-painful facts of a child's lived experience and describing factually the efforts made to turn things around. The book must also contain anecdotes, stories and aspirations that family, friends and professionals have for that child. Balance with positive life events, memories, successes and joy is essential - a child must not be left with a feeling that all they are is a collection of painful past events.

8.5 Life Story Book (LSB) purpose is also about securing the child to the permanent carers, rooting children in their adoptive families and supporting their attachment and safe relationships with carers, locating them within their adoptive family and providing them with factual information about their past experiences and trauma, enabling them an understanding of this from a place of security.

8.6 As much of the child's life story work as possible should be copied into the child's electronic record and agreed within the statutory review who will retain the hard copy. When the child moves to a permanent family placement, the life-story book should go with the child and be handed to the child or the child's new carers. It should be recorded who has the hard copy.

8.7 The life-story work can help to:

1. Organise past events in chronological order;
2. Aid the child's development by resolving past confusions and self-blame;
3. Increase the child's self-esteem;
4. Recall painful past events at the child's pace (including fresh disclosures);
5. Enable the child to share their story with others in an appropriate way and in a way they feel confident about;
6. Provide concrete evidence of the love family and significant people had/have for the child
7. Build a sense of trust between the child and the worker who aids in compiling the book;
8. Enable the child to gain acceptance of all facets of his or her life – both positive and painful;
9. Facilitate bonding and forming new healthy relationships.

8.8 Information to be included in the book can include:

1. Information about the child's birth including the birth weight and height, a photograph if possible and the birth certificate;
2. Photographs of the child's parents and any information about them including a family tree;
3. Information about the child's life in foster care or residential care including photographs of the foster family and foster home or the children's home and staff;
4. Developmental mile-stones;
5. Information about injuries, illnesses and admissions to hospital;
6. Favourite activities;
7. Favourite birthday and Christmas gifts;
8. Special trips the child has been on;
9. A life map
10. School reports and names of teachers and schools;
11. Exam results and certificates;
12. School photos;
13. Information about previous placements and significant people with photographs if possible;
14. Small mementos connecting the child with his or her more distant past, such as the first tooth lost, a lock of baby hair or the 'bracelet' from the hospital where they were born.
15. Letters, cards or other contributions from members of the wider family including grandparents, aunts and uncles.

8.9 Life Story books should be:

1. Simple to understand.
2. Completed in accessible language, neutralise Social Work language.
3. A Fun and friendly book.
4. Not to create a Story as though it was a script for a serial drama, poor LSB's reflect this.
5. Use the third person throughout the Story.
6. Use of PowerPoint for the book allows it to be added to or amended more easily.
7. A chronological presentation of the LSB is no longer acceptable for secure base purposes
Exclude surnames of birth parents.

9. The network meeting

9.1 These meetings are an opportunity to collect positive information, recollections, physical keepsakes, about a child. They are a way to help the birth family and their wider network to collaborate with the development of the child's life story. Parents attendance and engagement with these meetings is crucial and the support worker will work carefully and sensitively to prepare them for this approach and what it may entail.

9.2 The success of these meetings is directly linked to the quality of the preparation of participants. Meetings can be painful and exposing and need sensitive and careful management. It would sometimes be helpful to have two workers involved. In some situations, one or two meetings will suffice; for others there may need to be multiple meetings. Careful thought should be given to venue, timing and breaks for the participants. Sometimes shorter meetings may be more emotionally manageable, but this should all feature in the preparatory work with participants. There is training and guidance available on the use of network meetings. Preparation of parents will include visiting them, sometimes several times to explain the purpose, provide reassurance and explain how the meetings will be run. The key message will be

about the network working together to help prepare the child to move on and take with them all the positives from their past – their culture, their heritage, their sense of where they came from for example since this is key for their future development.

9.3 In some circumstance's parents may not be able to do this work – it's simply too painful. Workers must leave the door open for parents to change their mind and consider more creative options such as film or written materials which could be used to ensure parents felt included. This work is critical – it is important that children can have a rounded picture of their parents and family – their likes and dislikes, their memories of how their parents met, their thoughts about being pregnant, their child's early days, their hopes for their future.

10. Work Flow

10.1 Please see attached flow chart (Appendix 1)

11. Roles and Responsibilities

11.1 The allocated Child's social worker

- The allocated social worker retains case management responsibilities and is responsible for statutory visiting and progressing the care proceedings.
- Undertaking assessments as per directed in court – e.g. viability assessments.
- Maintaining chronology
- Completing a words and pictures explanation with the parents which can be then shared with the children to explain why the child is not living with their birth family.
- The child's social worker needs to write later in life letters to the child, and these need to be available to the adopters at the point of the adoption order. Later in life letters are crucial to explain and provide in more detail to the adult "adoptee" (or "mature adoptee" young person) the background of the birth parents, significant chronological events that may pre-date the adoptee's birth , legal information, explanation of why significant pictures are absent in the Life Story Book, where to seek further information.

11.2 To attend and contribute to any meeting convened by the life story support worker as part of the life story work. Where it would not be helpful to be present in meetings with the family, separate meetings may be required.

12. Permanence social worker

- To complete the CPR and Pack A
- To undertake matching, plan transitions and introductions
- To support the placement through to adoption order.

13. Life story work support worker

- To gather organise and collate information on the child which may be relevant or useful for the life journey work and book.
- Work directly with birth parents and other relevant extended family members, foster carers and/or other placement providers to develop a shared/co-constructed life story. This can be done through 1-1 sessions and/or through network meetings.

- To work with the professional network to ensure that information they hold is captured and stored appropriately for the child. To complete a visit to matched adopters to help them understand the life story book as a tool for shared understanding.
- To contribute to the support plan regarding any needs the adopters may have in using or sharing the child's life story book.
- To undertake direct life story work with children both pre and post placement
- To put together the life story book for the child
- To contribute to foster and adopter carer training around life story work and life story books.

APPENDIX 1:



