

Life Story Guidance

Introduction

We at Telford and Wrekin are committed to promoting the longer term resilience and emotional wellbeing of all children Looked After. Life story work has a purposeful role in mapping out the life journey for a child, including significant events, relationship networks, and achievements that have occurred in their life. This guidance sets out the minimum standard of practice for all children who are not placed at home with their birth families.

Our legal responsibility as set out in the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 is to ensure that children and young people are at the heart of any process that affects their lives and their active involvement is sought in this work, based on their developmental stage and understanding.

We endeavour to consistently listen to the views, wishes, and feelings of children and young people when progressing their personal life story work. This is achieved by giving the child or young person ownership of the life story workbook and encouraging them to participate as much as possible. Through this process of involvement their sense of identity is established, which in turn promotes their sense of resilience and self-esteem, and equips them for a healthier future.

What is Life Story Work?

Many Looked-After Children have had profound experiences of loss, separation, abuse or neglect, and placement change. Life story work can help them understand and integrate their past, make sense of their present and develop a clear sense of identity for their future. It is an invaluable tool in helping them make sense of what has happened, and is happening to them.

There are three core elements to life story work.

- The creation of a written story that explains the reasons for the child's moves from their birth family;
- The gathering of treasured objects from the past, which includes photographs and mementos, of childhood;
- Providing information about their birth family and other significant relationships in their past and present life.

Although life story work is not a therapy, it may be therapeutic and can be used during transitions when a child may not be able to cope with therapeutic interventions. Life story work can help a child in very difficult circumstances to understand what is happening to them, to express their feelings and contribute to decision making and share their story with their new family.

The development of a life story book should be part of the outcome of life story work, to enable the child to refresh his or her memory of past events and people.

When do you Begin Life Story Work?

Life story work with children will be considered at the initial and subsequent Looked-After Reviews and will begin at the point the decision is made at the LAC Review.

Children through the process of this work must be given an explanation that is truthful, yet compassionate and is pitched at their level of developmental understanding.

The explanation should be one that is agreed by all professionals and consistently used by those involved in the child and young person's care.

Life story work is an integral part of working with Looked After children and should not be a separate process that is progressed when time permits. The progression of life story work should be closely monitored.

As part of the resilience building process, effective life story work can assist the child or young person with their:

I am;

I can and I have...

The process can purposefully assist a child to answer the questions:

Who am I?

How did I get here and who are my networks of support from the past and present?

Where am I going, and help identify strengths to achieving their future goals.

- Michael Rutter, *Resilience* (1997).

Who Needs Life Story Work?

- Children living with foster carers;
- Children and young people living with independent fostering agencies;
- Children living in residential units;
- Children placed for adoption;
- Children on Care Orders placed at home.

For some Looked After children this story of their life never happens or is very disjointed. It is therefore important that you try and keep a record of their time with you. If a child only stays a few nights this will not always be possible. But if a child stays for weeks or months you will begin to hold an important part of their life history.

For children who are adopted, the life story book will usually be handed to the adoptive parents, together with later life letters, within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.

Life Story Work with the Child or Young Person

The life story book is part of the process and is a tool to help the child make sense what has happened to them and what is happening. It is important to know the child and understand their ways of communication. It should begin with trying to establish what the child knows and understands and their state of mind emotionally. Some children will have a clear view of what happened to them but may not know why. Others will be very confused.

At times children may act out their fears and experiences of their birth family e.g. violence. It is important that those working with/caring for the child come alongside them and accept what they have experienced and reassure them that they are safe now. Some children may be still be grieving and recognising that the separation and loss can take a long time to heal, their sadness must be acknowledged and not suppressed.

A child who does not wish to face up to their past still needs the same level of explanation about what happened and to be informed about their plans for their present and future. In these situations, the opportunity should be taken when the child opens a window to listen and or share their views, wishes and feelings.

The life story work and book should not be merely a photo album but include the active contribution of the child's input of the way they viewed their past, present and their hopes for the future. The person leading the work should offer the child a safe, supportive environment to sensitively explore their feelings of the past and what will happen next. By knowing the child or young person, it is possible to consider with them the safe and appropriate medium to sensitively facilitate communication.

The use a range of creative and abstract approaches along with story-telling techniques, genograms and life mapping can facilitate the process. It is not unusual for children to seek out consistent explanations of what happened to them on a regular basis. This is part of their healing process of coming to terms to not returning back to their birth family.

Children need to be involved in the decision to start life story work and it is important to give them a choice at the time that is right for them to begin the process. Shropshire's children's services responsibility is to make the information available to progress this work in a sensitive way. There will be time that the child may not wish to consider elements of their life narrative and it is important that practitioners respect the child's boundary of considerations and promotes a child led journey. Work can still take place in collecting suitable materials by the child's social worker, foster carer and parents, so as not to lose valuable memories, and information of the past.

Who Does Life Story Work?

It is the usual responsibility of the child's social worker to undertake the life story work with the child. It is the judgement of the Children's Team Manager whether this is delegated to a skilled Family Support Worker, foster carer or residential worker who is well known to the child and has regular contact with them. If life story work is undertaken by a Family Support Worker, foster carer or residential carer this should be closely supervised by the child's social worker or their line Manager to monitor its suitability.

On some occasions there may be compelling reasons why painful past issues are not dealt with by the child's carer and in those situations the child's social worker may be best placed to carry that element of the life story work. Occasionally it may be desirable to bring in an independent person to work with the child; someone who the child does not associate with responsibility for removing them from their birth family and home.

Foster and residential carers do not have access to, or responsibility for, the child's history before placement with them and are reliant on the social worker for their contribution of an accurate chronology of events, and support during the process. Foster carers who do not lead on this work should be supported to provide the child with their own visual record of the time spent with them and contribute to the child's life journey and story wherever possible.

The role of the child's social worker in life story work is to:

- Gather full and accurate information on the child's history and reasons for he or she being in care;
- Develop an on-going chronology of significant events, significant relationships with family and friends, moves of placements and schools in the child/young person's life;
- Record all decisions made on behalf of the child about their future. Children's Guardians could be approached to write a letter to the child to explain their role, events and decisions made for the child in the court arena;
- Record the child's views wishes and feelings about the plans and decisions made or endorsed at their reviews;
- Collect photographs, certificates and documents to support the life story work;
- Ensure the child's contribution is included as far as it is practicable in the gathering of information based on their developmental understanding;
- Where there are gaps in important information make it clear to the child that the information is not fact and cannot be confirmed. Record this uncertainty clearly within the child's file;
- Maintain a copy of the life story book on the child/young person's file.

Timescales

There are no set timescales for the life story work as it is an on-going process whilst the child/young person is in care. However, if the plan is to place a child in a permanent placement the work should be completed and the child enabled to make sense of their permanent move to their new family.

Ownership of the Life Story Book

The child should always have ownership of their life story book as it is their history and their life. Further the ownership of their life story affords value to the child and young person. However, good practice is for the child's social worker to be the guardian of their memories and also keep a copy on the child's file. This is a key responsibility of the practitioner undertaking the work with the child/young person.

It is important to consider how the book is handed over. Although the child will be aware of what is covered in the book, seeing it in front and reading it for the first time could still be a traumatic experience. To this end, the decision as to how and when this is given to the child should be a collective one and should involve all Core Group members or at the very least by Team Managers, Carers and Support Workers.

Role of the LAC Review and Quality Assurance that Promotes Continual Improvement

There is an important role for the IRO in ensuring this work is progressed continuously and considered as part of the child's statutory reviews. This should form part of their advocating role for the child's identity and lifelong needs, the child's involvement in the process should also be considered.

The decision to commence life story work, including who is responsible to progress this work, will be made at the appropriate statutory review; this will likely be at the second review where permanency plans are considered.

The later meetings will ensure that all relevant professionals and carers are clear about the nature and purpose of the work being undertaken and ensure a common explanation is shared by all in order that consistent messages are given to the child or young person involved. This work will be monitored and relevant information will be shared to enable appropriate and consistent support throughout the process.

Changes of Social Worker

When a transfer occurs between social workers, which often means a change of team too, a transfer summary should be completed which explicitly includes the nature, purpose and stage of the life story work and any commissioning arrangements.

It is crucial that the transfer of case management responsibility between social workers is undertaken thoughtfully, with good communication between current and perspective social worker, and with due consideration to the plan for life story work.

Outcome for Telford and Wrekin's Looked-After Children

Ensure life story work is embedded as part of a core service delivery in respect of every child in the care of Telford and Wrekin.

The purpose and aim of Life Story work understood by all frontline practitioners delivering the service.

To effectively achieve a systematic approach and qualitative outcome of service delivery for every Looked-After child in Telford and Wrekin.