

Brighton and Hove Life Story Practice For Children Who Have A Plan For Adoption

Context

A distinction should be made between life story books, which are “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 (V Fahlberg 2003) and life story work.

BAAF describes life story work as a “project undertaken with a child by a sympathetic adult such as a social worker or a carer. Over a period of time, this person has regular sessions with the child in which they talk about his past, present and future and help him or her to put together a book, photographs, video or some other record of events, places and significant people in his or her life. It is often carried out before a child is placed in an adoptive family”.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 Guidance – First Revision: February 2011

This provides statutory guidance under the Adoption Agencies Regulations, 35 and 36 which must be complied with.

The child’s life story book helps them explore and understand their early history and life before their adoption. It is important therefore for it to be written in a simple and age-appropriate style and that the language and terms used are agreed with the prospective adopter before the book is handed over.... The explanation of why the child was adopted should not include explicit or distressing details. This information needs to be given to the child at a time when they are emotionally able to cope and understand the information.

The child’s birth parents, family, foster carers and other people who know the child should be encouraged to be involved in putting together the contents. They may also be able to provide memorabilia, significant to the child such as the child’s hospital birth wristband; soft toys, letter, and celebration cards,; first drawings and paintings, and photographs of birth parents, siblings, family member and other people who are important to the child. Where appropriate, this memorabilia should be stored safely in a suitable box – a “memory box”.

The lifestory book and “memory box” should be co–ordinated by one person, preferably the child’s social worker, and given to the child and prospective adopter in stages.

The first stage is at the second statutory review of the child’s placement with the prospective adopter.



The completed life story book should be presented within ten working days of the adoption ceremony, ie the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.

The Function and Purpose of the life story book for a child with a plan for adoption.

J Rees (2009) outlines the generally agreed main aims of a life story book:

- To give details and understanding of the child's history
- To build the child's sense of identity
- To enable the child to share their past with their adopters and others
- To give a realistic account of early events and to dispel fantasies about the birth family
- To link the past to the present and to help both the child and the adopter to understand how earlier life events continue to impact on behaviour
- To acknowledge issues of separation and loss
- To enable adoptive parents to understand and develop empathy for the child
- To enhance the child's self esteem and self worth
- To help the child to develop a sense of security and permanency
- To promote attunement and attachment.

The function of the Life Story Book is to assist in life story work. Life story work that is informed by an understanding of attachment theory takes as its starting point the child's need to have information that enables them to put together a coherent story or narrative, that is, one that has meaning for the child, with a beginning, a here and now, and a sense of what the future might hold. The emphasis is therefore upon establishing links between thinking and feeling, and providing opportunities for asking questions about early life experiences that children may otherwise be reluctant to ask.

Life story work aims to give children a structure and an understandable way of talking about themselves. It can produce clarity where there are dangerous or idealised fantasies. A coherent narrative is associated with better functioning and better outcomes in adult life in part because it assists in resolving trauma and minimising shame.

Children need to revisit their past, present and future at key points in their development and Brodzinsky's levels of understanding and the associated tasks for children and their carers offer a helpful way of addressing this need.

<p>Stage One Birth to 4 Years</p>	<p>Children have no intellectual understanding of adoption But – they notice physical differences, e.g. black / white skin, curly/straight hair, boy/girl. They can notice and comment on physical differences between themselves and others. They learn to imitate the likes / dislikes of people around them. These likes / dislikes do not have to be expressed verbally – children imitate attitudes. They can learn terms such as “adopted” and, by association, will learn to attach positive or negative connotations to them.</p>
<p>Stage Two 4 - 6Years</p>	<p>Children cannot really understand the difference between being adopted and being born into a family. They can repeat words but, if questioned, become confused. They ask spontaneous questions about where they came from. As they start nursery or school, they are exposed to different attitudes to adoption, which can affect the value they perceived to be associated with adoption</p>
<p>Stage Three 6 - 8 Years</p>	<p>Children begin to understand clearly that adoption and birth are two different ways of entering a family. They accept the family relationship as permanent, but they do not understand why. They need information about : Adoptive family relationships / The permanence of those relationships / Motives for adoption / Motives for relinquishment or removal. Information given must be simple and factual. Again attitudes are important – the context and the way you give the information, the values attached and the emotional overtones are crucial.</p>
<p>Stage Four 8 - 10 Years</p>	<p>Children understand clearly the difference between birth and adoption. They may be unsure about the permanence of adoptive relationships. They wonder, “can my birth parent reclaim me?” “What if my adopters die / divorce/ give me up?” They have some understanding of the emotions that go with the facts, e.g. the sadness of infertility, the sadness of relinquishment. At this stage, children may become confused and sad or angry. This is called “adaptive grieving”. It is a normal process which takes place as the child acknowledges the loss of his or her birth parents, siblings, the other life that he or she would have had. The child may show either an obsessive interest in or total lack of interest in his or her birth parents. Adoptive parents need to acknowledge the real cause of the change in their child’s behaviour and not allow children to get “stuck” at an early stage of the grieving process.</p>
<p>Stage Five 10 - 13 Years</p>	<p>Children begin to understand the legal basis of adoption and also develop a more sophisticated view of the complicated reasons for adoption. They develop a more secure sense of permanence.</p>



Practice in Brighton and Hove

Lifestory practice in Brighton and Hove takes as its foundation, the model of life story work proposed by Joy Rees (2009). Rees' work is informed by attachment theory and by her understanding of trauma. It recognises that significant harm to children can lead to developmental trauma. It also recognises the short, medium and longer term impact upon functioning that typically results from early neglect and harm, together with multiple changes of primary care givers, and other transitions made without the benefit of a secure and protective primary attachment relationship. This is the experience of children who require adoption due to removal from their birth parents.

The model seeks to reflect current practice in adoption support social work, reparative parenting, and therapeutic interventions which address the child's need for a secure attachment relationship with their primary carer or parent. It recognises the significance of the parent child relationship and seeks to meet the child's needs for information about their history and understanding of that history through an increasingly secure relationship with their primary carer or parent.

In essence, our practice recognises that the most important part of lifestory work for a child happens in the permanent family placement over the course of the child's development, as their developmental capacities change with growing maturity.

The Process

Life story material is gathered by the child's Social Worker, contact supervisors and foster carers throughout the period in which a child is Looked After with agreement made at the outset of a placement about baseline activity – ie contact sessions, photos and details of home address, school or day care, respite provision, carers etc. This should mean that material is gathered during the usual and existing provisions for a child and should not make additional demands on social work time. The Social Worker is responsible for coordinating the recording and collation of this information across the relevant professional network and the following scheme of delegation should help in managing this process.

Scheme of delegation of responsibilities:

The Child's Social Worker;

- is responsible for identifying the need for life story material to be gathered, and for referring to the supervising social worker for the carer.
- Where the child is in an IFA placement, the Brighton and Hove Placement Plan should detail who is responsible for collecting the agreed information.
- is also responsible for collating the information prior to the point of Approval of Adoption Placement

- is responsible also for instructing the Brighton and Hove lawyer in care proceedings to request a judgement in proceedings for retention on adoption file and to provide foundation of the later life letter.
- is responsible for the commissioning of contact supervisors to collect information for the information store for the child.
- Is responsible for collating this information for the child and adoptive family
- Is responsible for ensuring the Child Permanence Report contains sufficient information to make sense of the child's history and for completing the Later Life Letter.

The Supervising Social Worker to the Foster Carer;

- Completes the agreement with child's social worker and carer within the Placemen Plan which governs how the life story material and other memorabilia is to be gathered.
- Agrees with the carer the way in which this will be done in accordance with the Brighton and Hove lifestory strategy identifying any training or support needs for the carer.
- Provides ongoing supervision and support at each supervision session where lifestory for children with a possible or actual plan for adoption will remain as a standing item.
- Including this aspect of fostering in the annual review process.

The Adoption Social Worker;

- Prepares the adopters for considering the child's individual story prior to match.
- Undertakes explicit assessment of the adopters' capacities in this regard and when completing the Adoption Placement Report.
- Coordinates the proposed adoption support plan prior to matching to ensure clarity regarding the support to adopters in sharing the life story with their child.
- Assesses the adoption support needs of all eligible parties.
- Provides ongoing support and guidance in the period of placement prior to the making of the Adoption Order
- Re - assesses the adoption support needs of the family prior to the final adoption hearing.

The Independent Reviewing Officer;

- Establishes at 4 month LAC review, where there is a possible plan for adoption, that the placement agreement with the foster carer reflects the requirement for the child's life material and the timescales and areas of responsibility for achieving this
- Establishes where there is to be case transfer, who is to contribute to the later life letter / life material.
- Establishes at the LAC Review Meeting at which the plan for adoption is agreed who is responsible for collating and producing the life story and who is best placed to write the later life letter for the child.
- Establishes at the first review post placement for adoption that the first part of the life story material has been handed over and that the

adoption support plan reflects any identified needs or work in this regard for the adopters and child.

- Establishes at the 12 week adoption review (or adoption review where Local Authority support for the application for an adoption order is agreed) that the adoption support needs assessment is current. The Independent Reviewing Officer confirms that the completed life story material (ie including the Social Worker's narrative with appropriate photographs/illustrative material) will be given to the adopter within 10 days of the celebration ceremony, together with the Later Life Letter and that copies of both are held on the child's adoption file.

The Adoption Support Service offers training to adopters in the form of workshops in making use of life stories when supporting their children to make sense of their histories. Further support is offered within adoption support plans and new adoption support assessments.

Post Placement and Post Adoption

Life stories for adopted children need to integrate their adopter's story in terms of helping to understand present, separate pasts and shared futures.

Adopters need to be able to make use of language that makes sense to their family and can have guidance in this from their Social Worker. Adopters' needs for support in this regard should be assessed and recorded in the Adoption Support Plan, and reviewed in accordance with the statutory requirements to review adoption support provision.

Where stories are particularly complex, or adopters are finding the telling of the story particularly hard, or, where it is felt that the LA should be telling the story with the adopters alongside their child, this should form part of the adoption support plan at the time of placement if known, or should be part of a review of the plan. Where there is no active adoption support involvement, an adoption support referral can be taken and individual case work support can be offered according to assessed need.

Extract from Rees, Life Story Books for Adopted Children: A Family Friendly Approach, 2009, Jessica Kingsley Publishers



Practice Guidance for Social Workers on Later Life Letters

These letters are written for children who have a plan for adoption.

This letter is written by the child's social worker to the child to explain why they were removed from their birth family, what happened when they were removed, what was concluded in the care proceedings, and the process of placement in the adoptive family.

The letter is written to the child, but it is given to the adoptive parents prior to the Adoption Order being made. The IRO chairing the Adoption Review process will ensure that this has happened.

Whilst the letter is to the child, it will be for the parents to decide when it is most appropriate to share with them. They will have been prepared throughout their assessment and approval process and during matching, to think about their child's changing needs for information, and will revisit this when completing their letterbox exchanges and when thinking about whether direct contact is appropriate at different times in their child's development.

By the time that a Later Life Letter is used in an adoptive family, the Local Authority usually has no mandate for involvement or intervention and so Adopters have to be trusted to meet their children's needs in this respect. They have a right to assessment for adoption support and thinking through how to tell their children of their pre placement history, is a very common reason for people seeking adoption support.

A copy of the Later Life Letter should be held on the Adoption Case Record which is required to be archived for 100 years from the date of the Adoption Order. This means that if the adoptive parents choose not to share the letter with the child, the child will have independent access to it once they are 18 years old. Adopters are made aware of their child's right to access in adulthood.

It can be difficult to know how to pitch the information, and additionally difficult if you were not the social worker who worked with the child prior to removal and proceedings.

The focus of the letter is the child and their need to make sense of their history. They lived their history and may have conscious memories or not, so if the account is not truthful, it will lack authenticity and undermine their trust in other information shared with them over the years.

It will be important that in writing the letter, that you cross reference your work with the Child Permanence Report, as the adoptive parents will have shared elements of this information over time with the child.

Common practice is to write the letter to the child as if they are aged around 11 or 12 years of age. This is because children ask more complex questions about their histories and want more information than they have previously been satisfied by at this time in their development. Like many challenges for adopted children, changes in their need for information and the need for more developed understanding of their history coincides with key transitional points in children's lives, such as the transfer from Key Stage 1 to 2 and Key Stage 2 to 3 at school.

Anxieties in all families at these times can be high, and for children who can, because of early unmet need and loss find times of transition additionally



challenging, there will be additional sensitivity to information which is inexpertly shared or put across. There will of course also be additional parental anxiety.

There will be stories for some children, which still feel challenging at 10 to 12, and themes such as incest and sexual abuse might make it necessary to write a further later life letter for the child as a young adult. This is because the child may not have sufficient context within which to understand the information, or in some cases because it is not age appropriate material for any child of that age. To explain sexual abuse to a child requires the child to have some understanding of normative behaviours for parents, in order to understand why their experience was not safe or acceptable. Different adoptive parents will have different values and levels of comfort with supporting their children's sexual development and so it cannot be assumed that all children will be equally prepared or supported with such information.

The ideal arrangement is that the social worker who worked with the child in the birth family and managed legal proceedings writes the letter for the child as they were there with the family at the time. If cases are transferred between teams, then some thought needs to be given to who is best placed to write the letter by the IRO and relevant managers. The example given below, provided by a Brighton and Hove Social Worker, is one which manages a transfer of case responsibility in the telling of the story.

Information is easily lost or missed if workers don't think about the later life letter until after a child is placed, so it should be part of case planning alongside thinking about life story material and composing the Child Permanence Report.

It will be helpful to request a Judgement within Care Proceedings if this is available to the Court and you should raise this within your legal planning with your allocated lawyer.

It is important to use language which reflects the reality of the child's birth family situation. For example, describing a chaotically substance using parent as unwell raises all kinds of confusion and anxiety for children in the longer term. Describing violence within the family as "a domestic" underplays the severity of the situation to which the child was exposed, and does not necessarily equip them with any scale against which to understand their adoptive parents arguments or disagreements. Similarly, using words like "grown up muddles" to explain acute mental illness, or talking about substances without explaining the effect on the parental behaviour and what that meant for the child will not assist them in making sense of things.

A common concern for children of substance misusing parents and their adopters is that they will be predisposed to substance misuse. Whilst there may be some evidence to support this fear, it is not a given, but it can raise anxiety for families when young people start experimenting alongside their peers in adolescence. Information therefore in the later life letter needs to reflect the extent of the parental misuse, and the impact upon their behaviour and decision making.

This is a personal letter from a Social Worker to a young person, and so it is important that it is personal and not formulaic. Part of the importance of the letter is that someone bothered to write it at all. It is really important that children know that although the people making the decisions were professionals and paid to do so, they did care about them, think about them, worry about them and do something about it. It is helpful to have a structure and the following letter might be a useful guide.



Dear Charley

I am writing you this letter hoping that one day, when you are older, it will help you to understand the reasons why you came to be adopted. You may have a lot of questions about the early part of your life and how you came to be adopted by your two Mums. I hope this letter will help to answer some of those questions for you.

You spent the first six months of your life in the care of your birth mother, Laura Smith, and your birth father, Dale Jacobs. You lived with Laura and Dale in Laura's flat in Brighton. The home was on the top floor of a block of flats. Laura's flat had one bedroom, a large living room, a kitchen and a bathroom. She had big windows in her flat which had lovely views towards the Sussex Downs. You could also see Hillview Family Centre from Laura's flat. This was where you had contact with Laura and Dale after you were placed in foster care. Laura was very proud of her flat and liked to decorate it and keep it clean.

Laura and Dale were young parents. Laura was only 19 years old when you were born. Dale was only 20 years old. Laura and Dale both told me that they were very happy to be expecting a baby. Sadly although they were happy that Laura was pregnant they weren't always happy with each other and they would sometimes fight and argue. Dale sometimes drank too much and sometimes took drugs and doing these things didn't help his moods. Social Workers later found out that sometimes Dale would hit Laura if he was very angry. This would have been very frightening for you as you were only a baby and needed to feel safe at home.

When you were six months old Laura and Dale took you to the hospital as they were concerned that you weren't feeding properly and your tongue was bleeding. The Doctors gave Laura and Dale some advice and sent you home. About two weeks later Laura and Dale took you back to the hospital. This time they were concerned that you had a sore leg. Doctors and Nurses did lots of tests and took an x-ray. This is a special photograph which showed the Doctors your bones. When Doctors looked at the picture they could see that you had a corner fracture of your lower right tibia - put very simply this meant that you had a broken leg. You were only six months old and too little to be walking or running about. Doctors were therefore very worried about how you managed to hurt your leg and kept you in the hospital for about one week. The Doctors called a Social Worker because they were worried that your leg had been broken and that it wasn't an accident.

The Social Worker didn't know how your leg had got broken but was worried about you going home with Laura and Dale especially as she now knew more about them fighting and arguing. She arranged for you to go and stay with your Maternal Great Grandmother. Her name was Mary Warwick and she lived in Burgess Hill. Unfortunately Mary became ill with a sickness bug a couple of days after you went to stay with her. She wasn't able to look after you whilst she was poorly so the Social Worker arranged for you to go into foster care.

Before Social Workers could move you to a foster placement they went to Court to ask a Judge to agree to the plan. Laura and Dale went to Court also. They agreed you could stay with foster carers whilst they worked with Social Workers to see if you could be returned to their care. As Laura and Dale were in agreement it meant you were "voluntarily placed" in foster care under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. You would stay in foster care whilst expert assessments of Laura and Dale were completed and whilst Doctors reviewed all the information about your broken leg and to check that there wasn't a medical reason why your bone had broken.



On 30 May 2007 you went to live with foster carers. Their names were Sharon Stevens and Julie Watson and they lived in a little village called Keymer. You have lots of photographs from the time you spent living with Sharon & Julie.

In June 2007 your name was placed on Brighton & Hove's Child Protection Register. This was because Social Workers were very concerned that you had broken your leg yet Laura and Dale could give no explanation for how this had happened. Laura and Dale repeatedly stated that they thought you had hurt your leg by bouncing in your baby chair however the Doctors from the hospital, and later other Doctors, who were asked what they thought, all agreed that this couldn't have been possible. This meant that someone had been responsible for you hurting your leg and Social Workers didn't know whether this was Laura or Dale.

After you were placed in foster care Laura and Dale continued to fight and argue and in July 2007 Laura applied for an Order from the Court which meant that Dale had to stay away from her and was no longer able to go to her home.

I became your Social Worker in August 2007.

I remember the first time I met Laura and Dale was at a Review Child Protection Conference on the 15 August 2007. I met you for the first time the following day at Sharon & Julie's house. I remember you as a delightful nine-month old baby girl with very blond hair. You were very healthy and happy in foster care and during my first visit Sharon told me that you had a very good appetite. Sharon told me that you enjoyed having "Weetabix" for breakfast. Sharon and Julie were also fostering another little girl at this time and you shared a bedroom with her. Her name was Daisy. You used to like watching Daisy play and would try and join in. I really liked visiting you at Sharon & Julie's as we would play with your toys together or sometimes, if the weather was nice, we would go outside in the garden. I remember one day you picked up a clothes peg from the garden and, before anyone could stop you, you had put it on your finger. This must have pinched your finger as you started to cry but quickly stopped as soon as the peg was taken off!

Whilst you lived in foster care you would see Laura three times a week and Dale once a week. We used to call this going to "contact". You would see Laura and Dale at the Hillview Family Centre and sometimes Laura would take you to the park or to a children's soft play centre. I remember one time Laura, you and I went to Washbrooks Farm together in Hurstpierpoint. You have some photographs from this day. Laura and Dale were both very committed to contact and always attended every session offered to them.

In November 2007 the Courts heard all the evidence from the Doctors and experts who had been working with you, Laura and Dale. All the information was presented to a Judge called Her Honour Judge White. It was her job to decide how you had come to break your leg six months earlier in the May. HHJ White decided that your leg was injured non-accidentally by either Laura or Dale whilst you were in their care. She also said that she was very worried about the level of fighting and arguing between Laura and Dale and that you would have both heard and seen them fighting. HHJ White was very worried that as a result of witnessing domestic violence between your birth parents you had been at risk of suffering emotional and physical harm.

HHJ White was also concerned that if you went back to live with Laura you would once again be at risk of significant harm. This was because people were worried that Laura and Dale weren't being honest with Social Workers and other professionals

working with them. Social Workers were concerned that Laura and Dale were seeing one another again.

It is important that you know that Laura always wanted for you to be returned to her care. She loved you and felt that with the right support and help from professionals she would be able to keep you safe and offer you the stability and security professionals said you needed. The Local Authority social workers and experts who filed reports in the care proceedings did not have Laura's optimism and didn't agree that she would care for you and meet all of your needs as you got older.

Dale also loved you and, whilst he accepted that because of his lifestyle he wasn't able to look after you, he had hoped that you would be able to live with Laura.

On 20 May 2008 the Court granted a Care Order and Placement Order in respect of you. The Placement Order allowed the Local Authority to properly plan a move for you to your adoptive family.

Mary & Gillian are your adoptive parents. I remember that they were so excited when they were told that they were going to become your parents and also how nervous they were about meeting you for the first time. This meeting took place at Sharon and Julie's home in Keymer. You were still very young so didn't really understand what was happening but nonetheless you seemed excited. I remember the day well as it was sunny and we played outside in the garden. Sharon and Julie's garden was underneath a flight path and you kept telling everyone to look at the airplanes.

You eventually moved to live with your new mummies and your new brother, Andrew, in July 2008. Between July 2008 and March 2009 I would visit you regularly at your house and we would play with your toys.

You were legally adopted by your Mummies on the 26 March 2009. It was such a happy day. Mummy Mary, Mummy Gillian, you and Andrew attended Brighton County Court. I was there to see the Judge grant the Adoption Order. When Court was finished you and your new adoptive family went to Giraffe Restaurant to celebrate.

It is now three months since you've been adopted.

I would like to end this letter by saying how much I enjoyed being your social worker. You have made a big impression on me and I won't forget you. I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with you both at Sharon & Julie's house and at home with your mummies and Charlie.

Charley, you had an uncertain start to your life and I am so pleased to know that you will be loved and protected and will always have the certainty of being part of a loving family for the rest of your life.

I wish you all the best for a very happy future.

With warm regards

*Andrea Jones
(Your Social Worker from 16/08/07 – 26/03/09)*