

## **Practice Guidance for Children’s Social Workers when commissioning and producing life story material for children with a plan for adoption.**

The information that needs to be collated by the child’s social worker needs to include the following;

Date of birth  
Time of birth  
Place of birth

Photo of child as baby – as young as possible also a scan if possible – if no photo available, some explanation that there are no photos.

Some contextual information – who was present, what was the weather like that day, any anecdotal information from birth parents ..... Hospital wristband. Whether birth unusual eg breach, forceps delivery, very long, etc. Condition at birth APGAR scores? Incubated? Born addicted etc\,

Weight size with some comparative information (eg – how many bags of sugar this equals) also is this large or small for a baby –

Hospital care – if prem or small and in need of special care, some information about why this was.

Some information about the day of birth – eg day of the week, some people include some general information about for example birth stone, flower, zodiac sign - other information which can offer some broader context for the child.

### **Information about birth parents:**

This information can be introduced as follows:

*Like all new born babies, Alex had a birth mother and a birth father.*

*Birth mother name*

*Birth father name*

Information that a child will want to know will include;  
How birth parents felt at time of child’s birth and what they did to let people know about the birth – did they phone family and friends etc? Who came to visit in hospital or at home when he was born if anyone.

Choice of name and reason for that choice, significance of choice. Which surname was used and why.

Physical description of birth mother, and some biographical information eg:

*Lucy has green eyes and when Alex was born she had short blond hair, but later she grew it long and she used to change the colour too. Lucy was born in Brighton in 1988 so she was 17 years old when Alex was born. She was 5 ft 8, quite tall for her age, and she was quite slim. Lucy wore glasses sometimes.*

*Lucy didn't really like going to school and very often she would stay at home to look after her brother and sister because her mum didn't know how to do this very well. This meant that she did not get the help she needed to learn enough to do well in her exams and so she left school without any qualifications. After she left school she found a job cleaning offices with her aunt, but very soon she became pregnant with Alex and left her job. Lucy is a very friendly person and she likes to spend time with new friends. Her favourite colour is red and her favourite dinner is roast dinner, especially chicken.*

Physical and biographical information about the birth father eg.

*Andy is shorter than Lucy – he is 5 ft and 5 inches – and he is well built. He has brown hair and brown eyes. He was born in 1984 so he was 21 years old when Alex was born. Andy is four years older than Lucy.*

*Andy was born in London and he moved down to Brighton with his Dad and his brother when he was very young. Andy's mum had died when he was little and his Dad wanted Andy's Nan to help him to look after Andy and his little brother.*

*Andy liked school when he was younger but he found it difficult to learn and ended up finding it so difficult that he stopped going when he was a teenager. Andy's Dad and Nan didn't know how to help him with school and they didn't look after him or his brother very well. When Andy was 16 he found a job with some builders who taught him about building. He really liked to work outside and he enjoyed working with different people and in different places. One of the people he worked with was Lucy's cousin and that is how he and Lucy met, at a party when he was 20 and Lucy was 16.*

*Andy's doesn't have a favourite colour and he says that his favourite dinner is sausage and mash, especially when his nan makes it for him.*

This level of information then needs some quite factual information gathered, and will need photographs of each birth parent, and if other birth family members are relevant to the story, a photograph of them. For the purposes of this record, there only needs to be one photograph of each, but there may be others gathered for the child's photo album / memory box etc.

A genogram will also be helpful, remembering to do one for both sides of the child's family.

### **The Circumstances at the time of the child's birth**

Once the account has covered this description of the birth parents, it needs to move onto explaining the circumstances at the time of the birth and the reason for the child moving from the care of the birth parents. This will of course be different depending upon the pre-birth planning or the development of the concerns.

As a general rule, the account should be written in the third person, referring to the child by their given name as opposed to using "you". Little children tend to use their name to talk about themselves, and for slightly older children, using their name when presenting the story allows some distance that "you" does not.

An example then of this section could be;

After Andy and Lucy met at Lucy's cousin's party, they decided that they wanted to live together. Lucy had not been getting on with her mum for quite a long time and so she went to live with Andy in his flat. Andy shared his flat with some other people and it was a very busy place, with lots of their friends coming and going all through the day and the night. Andy and Lucy were really excited when they knew Lucy was going to have a baby, and when Alex was born, they really enjoyed showing him off to the other people in the flat and all their friends. Alex was their first baby and they had to learn very quickly how to look after him. Lucy was very young to be a mum, and Andy had not had very much experience of children and so the midwife at the hospital and the health visitor gave them some extra help to make sure that Alex was safe and well looked after in the first few weeks after he was born.

Lucy and Andy looked after Alex very well for the first few weeks after he was born while they were getting extra help, but then things started to go wrong. They were very tired, and they both missed being able to go out with all the people who used to visit the flat. They started to think that it would be ok to leave Alex for a little while on his own, even though he was very tiny, so that they could see their friends. When people would visit the flat, they would often bring cans of lager with them to drink and Andy and Lucy would join in, and drink lager and smoke cigarettes and sometimes they would also take drugs. They thought that this would make them feel nice, and sometimes it did, but it also made them forget about Alex and what he needed from them. Sometimes, when they drank lager they would have arguments, and then they would get angrier and angrier with each other. Sometimes when they argued, Andy would get so angry, that he would lose his temper and hurt Lucy. The people who would visit would also get angry sometimes and they would have arguments too. This was a very frightening place for Alex to live when there were so many angry grownups who kept losing their temper with each other.

When the health visitor used to visit Lucy, Andy would be at work, and there would be no visitors and so she thought that Alex was living in a safe and happy family. The health visitor did not see how angry Andy could be, she did not see him hurt Lucy and she did not see Lucy drinking lager or taking drugs. Lucy was very unhappy and so was Andy and this meant that they could not look after Alex properly. Lucy started drinking lager and taking drugs even when she did not have friends visiting, and Andy started doing the same. They thought that taking drugs and drinking lager would make them happier but of course it didn't, in fact it made it even worse. Sometimes the drugs and the lager would make them feel really ill and really sleepy and then they would feel even more unhappy.

One afternoon, when Alex was five months old, Lucy and Andy had taken him out into Brighton town centre in his buggy. Lucy and Andy had been drinking lager and they were both drunk. They had not remembered to make sure that Alex had warm clothes on before they put him in the buggy and then, when they were outside a shop, they started to argue. People in the shop were worried about Alex because he looked very cold in his buggy and Andy and Lucy were drunk and angry and they were not paying any attention to him. Andy lost his temper and he hit Lucy. The people in the shop were worried about Alex and now they were worried about Lucy as well so they telephoned the Police to come to help.

When the Police officers arrived, they were really worried about Alex too because Lucy and Andy were still very cross with each other, and they were both drunk and could not look after Alex properly. When they tried to talk about how worried they were about Alex, Lucy hit the Police Officer. When the Police Officer tried to stop Lucy hitting her again, Andy

*tried to hit her too and more Police Officers came to help. This was very frightening for Alex who was cold, and scared by all the noise and who was hungry because Lucy and Andy had forgotten to feed him.*

*The Police Officers decided that Alex needed to be looked after properly and they asked a Social Worker to find someone who could look after Alex while they decided what to do with Lucy and Andy. Lucy agreed that Alex could be looked after by a foster carer, and Alex went to stay with his first foster carers, Helen and John and their daughter Sophie while the Police Officers and the Social Workers could work out whether it was safe for Alex to go home to Lucy. Lucy and Andy had to go with the Police to the Police Station and later, when they were not drunk, they were allowed to go home to the flat.*

*Helen and John and Sophie were all at home when the Social Worker, Alice, took Alex to stay with them. Helen had looked after lots of children whose parents could not look after them properly and so she made sure that even though this was very frightening and strange for Alex, he was warm and safe, and that he had enough to eat. Alex was very upset to be away from Lucy and Andy and he did not understand why everything had changed. Helen told the Social Worker that Alex seemed happiest when Sophie was playing with him.*

*Alex did not have any of his clothes or toys when he was at Helen's house so the Social Worker, Alice, went to Lucy and Andy's flat the next day to collect some clothes and his favourite cuddly elephant as Lucy was worried that Alex would miss this. When Alice arrived, Lucy answered the door and she had been drinking lager. She seemed very sleepy and very sad and she asked Alice to help herself to what she needed while she lay on the sofa. Alice went to Alex's bedroom to collect his clothes and his cuddly elephant and she saw that Lucy and Andy had not been looking after Alex properly for a long time. His room was very dirty and smelly and dogs and cats had gone to the toilet under his cot. There was not any carpet on the floor and his cot only had one sheet on it and his mattress was wet from where his nappy had been leaking when Lucy and Andy had not remembered to change it.. Alex must have been very cold and uncomfortable for a long time sleeping in that room.*

*Alice also found out that there was no food in the kitchen cupboards or in the fridge, and every where she looked she saw broken furniture and doors. Lucy said that Andy would break things when he was angry. Lucy told Alice that when she had no food she would give Alex a bottle full of sugary tea to drink.. Alice knew that this is not good for children.*

*Alice knew that this was not a safe place for a baby to live and she knew that even though Lucy and Andy loved Alex, they did not know how to look after him, and because the lager and the drugs stopped them thinking properly, it would be very hard for them to learn how to do this. It was only fair though to help them to try to learn, and so Alice agreed with Lucy that Alex would live with foster carers while they tried to learn how to keep Alex safe.*

*Helen and John and Sophie were only able to look after Alex for three days because they had planned to go on holiday and Alex needed to be in Brighton so that he could see Lucy and Andy every day. Alice had to find Alex some new foster carers who could look after him while Lucy and Andy tried to learn how to look after Alex safely. Alice arranged for Alex to stay with Sue and Dave who had looked after lots of babies and little children.*

*Sue and Dave collected Alex from Helen and John and Sophie in their car and they took him back to their home in Brighton. Even though they knew how to look after children it*

must have been really scary for Alex. In three days Alex had been taken by the Police to Helen and John when Lucy and Andy were arguing and fighting, and then already, he was being moved to a new family – so many changes for such a little boy.

At the foster home with Sue and Dave, Alex started to get used to being looked after properly. Sue and Dave did not drink lager or use drugs like Lucy and Andy and so they did not forget to feed Alex, and they made sure that his bedroom was clean and warm and that his bed was always cosy. They did not argue or fight, and although they had lots of friends and family visitors, those visitors did not fight and argue. This was very strange for Alex but as he got used to being safe and cared for, he started to grow really quickly. He was being fed properly and he liked to eat xxxxxxxxxx and xxxxxxxxxxxxxx. Sue and Dave would play with Alex and each day, they would do the same things at the same time so Alex soon learned what to expect and this made him feel safe. A typical day for Alex and Sue and Dave would be xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.

### **Helping the child to understand his or her needs and how these were not met (or “Building Strong Walls”)**

The following model of understanding for children is recommended by Joy Rees in her sample life story book in “Life Story Books For Adopted Children” (2009 Jessica Kingsley). It is a model also used in adoption training and support work with adopters developed by Adoption UK, a leading Adoption Support and Adoption Training agency run by and for adopters.

In helping children to understand why their birth family was not a safe place for them, it is useful to establish normative experience and expectations so that they can understand why what was “normal” or usual in their birth family was not healthy or protective for them.

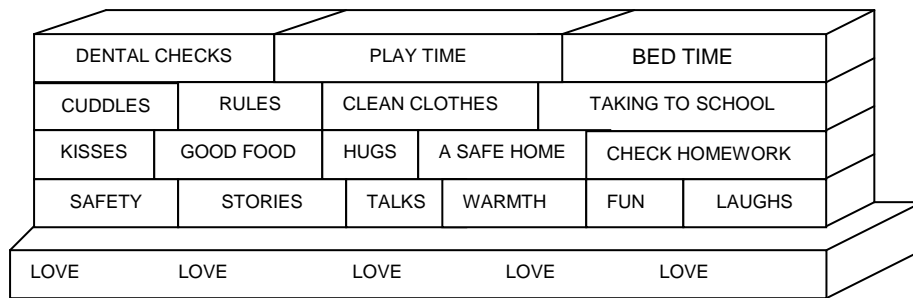
Joy Rees offers the following explanation for children:

“bringing up children is a bit like building a wall. To make tall, strong walls you need a very good foundation and then, using just the right type and just the right amount of cement, you carefully lay all the different bricks on top. The cement is like the love that hold everything else together and makes the wall strong. You can see from this wall of bricks that children need love, but they also need lots of different kinds of caring to help them grow properly, and they need to be cared for by grown – ups who can make sure that children are happy, healthy and safe”.

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

You may wish to play with the language but the model offers a useful and simple way of describing what children need and for thinking with the child of what they didn’t get and why.

The image used by Joy Rees and by Adoption UK in their training for adopters and social workers is as follows;



From this understanding, the account of the child’s particular circumstances continues to explain the reasons for not remaining with their birth parents:

*Lucy and Andy loved Alex, but they were not able to look after him properly or keep him safe or do the things that parents need to do to help children to grow up into strong, healthy grownups.*

*While Alex was getting used to living with Sue and Dave and being looked after in the way that children need to be looked after, Alice and some other social workers tried to help Lucy and Andy. If they could stop drinking lager and taking drugs, and if they could stop arguing and fighting, and if Andy could stop losing his temper and hurting Lucy, then maybe they could look after Alex again. They did try at the beginning, but soon they started to pretend that they were not in the flat when social workers visited, and then they started not to go to their appointments with the people who were trying to help them to stop drinking lager and using drugs, and then they stopped visiting Alex. They were very sad that it was too hard for them to change and they knew that this would mean that they would not be able to look after Alex again.*

*The Social Workers had lots of meetings and talks about Alex and Lucy and Andy. No one thought that Alex should go back to live with Lucy and Andy but if he could not live safely with them, where could he live – Alex needed a family to grow up in. Alice thought that Alex should be adopted, he should have a family to grow up in that he would always belong to.*

*The Social Workers went to the Court to see the judge to ask what she thought should happen. Judges are very clever and wise and they listen to everyone and then make their decision. This Judge (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx) listened to Alice, the Social Worker, and she listened Andy and to Lucy and she listened to the people who had helped Andy and Lucy when they were trying to stop drinking lager, and stop using drugs, and stop arguing and fighting and then she decided that Alex should not live with Lucy and Andy because they just did not know how to look after him.*

*The Judge agreed with Alice that Alex needed a family to grow up in, a family who would know what he needed and who would keep him safe until he was grown up.*

It may be at this point that you would also include some information about the contact plan if it was felt that Alex needed to see his parents or if it was felt that this would be too difficult for him.



It may also be that you want to include some information about the effects of a substance and its impact upon parenting capacity (obviously not in that language!). It will be helpful for a child to know that the heroin a parent was using meant that they could not do certain things (you could refer to the “wall” to make these quite concrete examples) when they were using.

