

Portsmouth Children and Families Service aims to deliver quality life story work in all its forms to children in its care, and to ensure they have an appropriate knowledge and understanding of their birth family identity, and their own life experiences to support their emotional, social and identity needs as they grow.

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 freely for the child, similar to the access to the past memories that are enjoyed by children not in local authority care.

It is vital to Portsmouth Children and Families Service that children who move to adoption or long term fostering that their past experiences and first family identity is valued. Also that the work that is completed with them and their family is accurate, empowering and meaningful as a tool for them to engage in their holistic birth family identity. This needs to be balanced not just the facts and discussion of the challenges their family have faced. It can take many guises, including memorabilia and keepsakes, photos, videos, notes and even music.

Principles

- The child's wellbeing and understanding is paramount to this work.
- We will be tenacious in seeking out information and be creative in gathering and recording information for the child.
- Birth family should always be encouraged to be involved and their contributions respected.

Why is it important?

"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)

Most 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. 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.

- "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.
- "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.

- 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. (new-born 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
 - 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.

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 by the Care Plan and always be on the agenda of the first Looked after Child review and explored in greater depth at the second. Subsequent reviews should include this. As part of the resilience building process, effective life story work can assist the child or young person to know 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.

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 base 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.
- Ensure all records are written in an accessible format and are personalised. When people choose to access their records at a later stage, it is imperative they get a feel of being 'cared for' and 'invested in' even when things were tough!



One Minute Guide Life Story Guidance



- To support the child to have a good understanding of their life story throughout our involvement.