

USE OF LIFE BOOKS IN WORKING WITH ADOPTION CLIENTS

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Life books have traditionally been used in adoption practice in working with children. More recently, the practice has expanded to include work with adults, including birth parents, adoptive parents, and adults adopted as children. Life books provide a wonderful tool to help clients explore and map their life path and to capture their entire life experience in one container. Life books can be as simple or as complex as the client and the professional working together wish to make them.

Regarding work with children, Beth O'Malley, a former foster child, believes that a life book is "the best gift you can ever give an adopted child." A life book is a record that uses words, photos, artwork, computer graphics, and memorabilia to record an individual's life. It can make talking about adoption feel like everyday conversation. Some clients may feel uncertain about making a life book, especially if the material is painful, or the information is vague or lacking. There are a number of creative ways to work with little or no information. Life books can fill in the missing pieces with words, artwork, and photos, if available. The words create pictures when none exist. Remember that what is written will become an historical record, so never write anything that is not actually true. If information is being "filled in," then, the life book must reflect this. For example, the creator of a life book could write "Sometime people who place their children for adoption are having a difficult time in their own life. We believe that this may have been the case for your birth parents."

Adopted children often have secret thoughts about why they were adopted. Many believe that somehow they are responsible for the separation from their birth family. Life books help reduce magical thinking and fantasy. If the child, for example, comes from another country, it is important to discuss the country's conditions and/or rules for adoptions. If a child comes from an abusive or neglectful background, adults can find truthful ways to place those issues in context. Often this is the only explanation children have as to why they were placed. Life books are the ultimate teaching tool, and they may save hours of therapy later in life or be crucial to the therapy, if needed.

When working with children, they need to know about the ways they are connected to the both their birth and adoptive families. A life book can serve as that bridge. The Birth Family pages of a life book help adolescents work through issues of identity, for example. The life book provides an opportunity for a family or a child to pick it up and hold their life in their own hands, so to speak. It can give adopted persons a feeling of control over their own story.

- Start with the child's birth
- Always discuss the birth family, going beyond the birth parents
- Talk about the reason for separation from the biological family, including social conditions
- Involve the youngster as much as possible, given the developmental age

It is also helpful to have children create pictures or stories about what happened. If the books can be expanded (a binder notebook, for example), then, as the children grow, they can add information and additional pages. This creates a living life book.

Life books should be created slowly; it is the process that is important as well as the product. Where social workers are overburdened and do not have the time to start a life book for a child who is on the permanency track, Regina Kupecky, an adoption professional, recommends a "Life Box" which, is an attractive box where foster parents and social workers can "drop" report cards, foster



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family mementos, birthday cards, etc. to be assembled later by a permanent family. Children in foster care who return to their families of origin also need a way to save their histories while they are living away from their families. In therapy or counseling, pages of an emerging Life Book can be given as “homework” to be completed at home and brought back to the therapy sessions.

There are many resources to support the creation of life books, either online or through a bookstore. The best books, however, are the ones created by the client with the assistance of a caring supportive adoption professional. It is important that the life book have a personal feel rather than an assembly-line approach.

In working with adults, professionals support the creation of books that can also be used in working with children. For example, birth families might create a life book reflecting the “story” of that family which could accompany the child into a new family. Adoptive families might create a life book that can be given to the birth family to explain the adoptive family’s history and ease worries about whether the child is going, perhaps creating bridges across which children may metaphorically travel. Truly, there is no limit to the creative ways life books can be used.

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