



LifeBook Work

Knowing one's history is important to all human beings. Many children in care lack memories of their past and are unable to make sense of who they are or how they ended up in care. LifeBooks can help children understand their past, present, and future.

Our identity is drawn from knowledge of our past, stories passed down from relatives, photographs, and belongings. For children who are in or have been in the care system, these sources of identity are frequently absent. They may have little recollection of the past, no photographs or belongings to reinforce memories, and minimal contact with relatives who can fill in the blanks for them. Traditionally, the family holds all knowledge about the child, but children who are not living with their family must have help maintaining this knowledge.

PURPOSE OF A LIFEBOOK

- A lack of identity can be extremely disconcerting and raises anxiety and insecurity issues, which may continue into adulthood if not resolved.
- An inability to remember people and events from the past can cause children to believe that they are at fault, are unlovable, or lack any ability to shape their future. This results in worry, depression, low self-esteem and confidence.
- LifeBook work enables children to realize that they are not to blame; they deserve to be cared for and loved, and gives children more control over how they can feel and the actions they can take in the future.

There is a difference between LifeBooks and other types of memory books, picture albums or baby books. The LifeBook is a therapeutic tool that can:

- provide a chronology of the child's life
- enhance identity formation
- help resolve grief and difficult emotions
- increase attachment – preparing a LifeBook together is an easy way to get to know or reacquaint yourself with the child; you will build a relationship in the process



- prepare a child for a move – a LifeBook can help a child return to their family by keeping track of the important people, places and events in their life; the LifeBook can help prepare a child for adoption by building a bridge between the birth family and adoptive family.
- raise self-esteem – the child better understands how much they have accomplished, the people who surround them and care about them, and the strengths they have developed which will allow them to move forward.
- preserve connections – to people who have been important in their lives and LifeBooks may help the children integrate past experiences with the present circumstances in a healthy, constructive manner
- help children answer the question “Why was I separated from my family?”

The LifeBook is not just an end product, but a tool that helps the child deal with the conflicts and crises of their life.

The LifeBook can also be helpful during transition to family care. The social worker should help the child share their LifeBook with the family, and the family can help the child continue to add to their LifeBook over the years.

CREATING THE LIFEBOOK

Making a LifeBook with a child requires some special skill and sensitivity and should be done by trained helpers who have knowledge of child communication, cognitive/social development and basic child counseling skills. Thus, social workers/psychologist are the preferred facilitators.

Materials needed:

- Folders with brads or 3 ring binders (or a box or folder to hold papers), papers, markers, materials to decorate the papers
- Information about the child, their family, previous placements, schools, etc. (Gather the information from case history, medical files, school records, family members, professional involved with the child or family, etc.)
- Information that is helpful for the child: developmental milestones, ways the child showed affection, what the child did when he was happy, excited or sad, things the child was afraid of, favorite friends, activities, toys, birthday and other celebrations, descriptions of important people, nicknames, pets, visits to relatives, names of teachers and schools attended, photographs of people and places, etc.

It is important to let the child tell their own story. Encourage the child to do as much as possible of the LifeBook Work.

LifeBooks may be created in an individual or group setting. The children should work on their books over time, adding as they have new experiences.

HANDLING THE EMOTIONS OF LIFEBOOK WORK

- For each child there will be good and bad times that will need to be included in the LifeBook. While some of these events may be painful, it is important to reflect the reality of the child's experience, while emphasizing positive points. Children need to have a realistic and believable account of their history.
- Some truths are hard to explain and accept. But if an event is an important part of the child's history, include what you can in a developmentally appropriate way.
 - A teenager may be able to understand "sexual abuse" and a birth parent who was "addicted to cocaine and alcohol," but a younger child may make better sense of phrases like "bad touching" and "couldn't stay away from bad drugs."
- Assume that the child is in need of a clear explanation to their concerns. Do not take it for granted that someone has explained to the child why they are in care or what will happen to them in the future.
- Understand that the child has been hurt in the past, and is likely to be fearful of the future. Even if the child isn't showing signs of anxiety, assume they have been affected.
- Omissions say to a child that things are so bad they can't be shared. Then the child may fill in the blanks with much scarier imaginings and a sense of guilt or shame. Truth leads to healing, and troubling past events, over time, can fade into "just the way it is."

It is important to help the child understand their feelings, concerns, fears and hopes about their living situation. Working on a LifeBook can give the child a good sense of their past, but they also need reassurance that it is normal to feel angry and afraid. Assure the child that most people would respond as they did, given the same situation.

LifeBook work allows the child to learn to recognize and communicate their feelings. Use your listening skills to let them know you truly understand and care. If a child seems to be having unusual emotional difficulty, consider working with them one on one, or in a counseling setting.



LifeBook Work

A loose-leaf notebook or pages placed in a folder with brads will both be suitable for a LifeBook. If you use a hardbound journal, be sure and leave a few blank pages between each Chapter and at the end for children to add things as time passes. If making a book is not practical, it's possible to use a special box or folder to hold the child's pages.

If the child is over age five, please engage them in making each page of their book, including their wishes, thoughts and memories. Don't be overly concerned with the accuracy of the child's data – but do try to be truthful while maintaining sensitivity.

Older children can be given the task of interviewing adults on the staff who remember them when they were younger in order to get data for their books. Also, use the Intake file for facts of the child's background.

The following five chapters are standard in any LifeBook:

- (i) THIS IS ME!**
- (ii) THE BIRTH STORY AND BIOLOGICAL FAMILY (THE CREATION STORY)**
[Include common emotions for children re: these losses]
- (iii) MY JOURNEY TO GET TO WHERE I LIVE NOW (PLACES AND PEOPLE)**
[Include common emotions for children re: these losses]
- (iv) IMPORTANT THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO ME**
[Include accomplishments, milestones and people who were supportive to the child]
- (v) WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?**
[Include the child's hopes and dreams, along with key adults' hopes for the child]

CHAPTER ONE: THIS IS ME!

The first few pages of any child’s LifeBook are “bragging pages” that include:

- Title page with current photo and Name, Birthday, Place of birth, and For Fun I like to:
- Pages for: My Favorite Things; I Am Special; My Personality; My Feelings are Important; When I Grow Up I Want To Be.....

Engage the child to write or tell you things for each page, adding their own drawings and ideas.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BIRTH STORY AND BIOLOGICAL FAMILY

- In every case we have some facts about the child’s birth, even if they were abandoned as a newborn, and when children are brought to CCIs by biologic relatives we can gather quite a bit of information. It is important to gather and record all the information at the time of intake and to get photos if at all possible. Even noting what the child was wearing, who brought them to the CCI, etc, may stand in for actual information about birth relatives when none is available.
- Also, the child may well have memories of their family and life before entry into the CCI, so help them write those into the LifeBook.

USE THIS GUIDE FOR TELLING/WRITING A “CREATION STORY”

For the first page of this chapter:

I’m going to tell you a story and LATER I want you to draw this story...

Every single child, in fact every person in this whole wide world starts out the same way:
There is a man and woman and there is magic, and love, and SO MANY GOOD WISHES.....

...and YOU? YOU were so teeny tiny you were smaller than a pinky fingernail. Smaller than a dot drawn by a pencil!

BUT LITTLE AS YOU WERE, YOU HAD THE MIGHTY STRENGTH OF A FORCEFUL, FLOWING RIVER AND YOU WERE HEADED FOR LIFE!

Imagine yourself as that tiny dot, cradled in a little boat, in a flowing river. You are going to ride that boat through lots of kinds of water – some smooth, some choppy and maybe even over some waterfalls. Maybe hit a boulder or two. Maybe get thrown from your boat and into the cold water. But YOU are always riding into and through life.



If you were separated from your parents and family, if you lived in a CCI, if one day you are adopted, if you have lived with different families..... then you have MORE THAN ONE RIVER coming together and flowing.

But EVERY SINGLE PERSON has a destiny, a guiding force with them in the little boat and in the flowing water.

If the children are old enough, put information here that acknowledges that some parts of their “destiny” or what has happened to them, is bad, sad and not what they would have chosen.

Help the children draw a picture with the above elements (themselves as a tiny being; rivers, boats, images of parents and family, etc). After kids finish their drawing you might set up an area and invite them to choose a small symbol to represent themselves as tiny-before-they-were-born beings (small beans, rice, or tiny jewels) and glue it in their boat. Another fun thing to add is a little glitter to represent magic or destiny.

THEN PROCEED WITH SOMETHING LIKE THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES:

Example: You were born in a tiny village in India where the trees are so tall and the river is wide. Your mother brought you to the clinic where she knew you would be taken to the best CCI in India! We do not know her name, but we know she wanted you to grow up strong and to have everything good in your life.

Example: Once there was a girl born in the city of Delhi. Her mother and father named her Sarita and they wanted all her dreams to come true. Sadly, your mother and father could not live to help you grow up because they were so sick. After they died, your uncle tried to take care of you, but he had to work many hours a day and little girls need someone to look after them EVERY MINUTE! Your uncle looked and looked and found the best CCI in India for you.

On the day your Uncle brought you to live at the CCI he said “Please take the best care of my Sarita and help her grow up to be a wonderful woman for India.” He said “—(use actual information if it exists-----)”

To summarize: Please include place of birth, mention of first mother and/or father, and the facts that are known. As in the examples, these facts should be worded in a positive way. It is a good idea to have the adult “characters” in the story have power to make loving decisions and that they convey a blessing for the child to do well in life.

CHAPTER THREE: COMING TO LIVE AT THE CCI

There should be photos from the Intake day or shortly thereafter that go into the LifeBook. On this page the script might read like this:

When you came to be part of our CCI and family, we were so happy! You were welcomed by _____ and everyone thought you were such a _____ [pretty babysmart boy.....strong girl.....] you first lived in _____ and your houseparent was _____.

This chapter could include a page titled: Why I'm not Living with My Family

The language on this page depends on the child's age and the circumstances, but there are ways to talk about abuse, neglect, addiction and death and help children understand that the adults are responsible for the things that happened, not the child themselves. Remember, one of the purposes of the LifeBook is to help the child tell a truthful narrative that explains why they are not currently living with their family. It is your job to help them do so.

CHAPTER FOUR: IMPORTANT THINGS THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO ME

The longer the child has been in alternative care, the more information will be in this chapter. When they are reintegrated, their family will add items over the years. This includes photos, school mementos and art work the child made.

Please note some of the following:

Developmental milestones (walking, first words, etc)

Humorous stories

School events and reports

Birthday celebrations

Holiday celebrations

Photos of adult caretakers and other important people



CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE FUTURE?

This chapter focuses on future plans for the child. This chapter might include wording such as:

Every child comes into the world because they have a job to do! Your job is to love those around you, to grow strong and healthy, and to let your special light shine in the world.

“Every person is welcomed by LIFE. Every person can make positive contributions to our world by choosing to be a positive force.”

CLOSING PAGE

Children grow up in many different ways --- some live with their mother and father, some children have only one parent, and some children live with another relative or friend. Sometimes children do not have any adults to help them. Some children live and grow up with lots of other kids in a CCI. Some children are adopted into families where they finish growing up.

Wherever a child lives, ALWAYS REMEMBER, every single person in this world is invited by LIFE to love, to enjoy those around them, to be of service and to make a good life for themselves.

Here are things that are wished for you! (Write wishes for the child’s future on a few pages.)

***LifeBook Guide written by Janie Cravens, LCSW**