

LifeBooks: Every Adopted Child Needs One

I believe that lifebooks are **magic**. What other book totally changes over time yet you never touch a page? Each stage that your child enters, gives them a new perspective on their LifeBook and what it means to be adopted.

Sounds simple. It is. Easy to write? *Maybe—maybe not*. But read on and learn why this is a priceless gift for your child.

The stories and photos abound once a child enters their family. (How many boxes of pictures do you have stored away?) But that's not the child's beginning. Imagine a picture of someone that gets cut off at the knees. This is what it feels like not to have or to discuss your history. Adoptees end up with a floating or numb sensation with no past history or roots. I should know.

I spent my first five months in foster care before getting adopted. I listened carefully to the silence that was to follow for most of my childhood regarding adoption. “Who am I? How am I a part of this family?” were the questions I never found words for.

Adoptees so often have that sense of *missing pieces*. LifeBooks fill in the gap with words, art work, and photos if available. The words will create pictures when none exist.

At the age of six I decided that my birth parents died in a plane crash in Africa. I didn't tell a soul. Then I changed the story. It was always death. 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. It's the power of magical thinking.

Remember the children's rhyme “step on a crack break your mother's back”? Children believe that they are the center of the universe and so very powerful. Maybe they were moved from the foster home/birth family because they wet the bed that night...or cried too much...The damaging self talk is endless. LifeBooks help answer the questions, increase self esteem, and teach children the truth.

The truth being that it's a grown up's job to take care of the little boy or girl....to make sure that they are safe and have enough food, good baby sitters, and hugs....It's not the kid's fault.

Also, teach your own dreams. Feel the freedom to share your vision for your child and family. Remind your children of the ways they are connected to their adoptive family despite not looking alike. This may be in the form of similar voice patterns, talents, food choices or interests.

It took me 45 years to figure out that I got my dry sense of humor from my adoptive father. (OK so I was a little slow) Every North Carolina family reunion I attend, reminds me that genetics are not the only way to pass on family values. Never assume that your child knows these things.

Celebrate the strengths both in your child and their birth parents. As Corinne Rayburn Co-Director at the Center for Family Connections says, “birth family are like in laws...you didn’t pick them but have to live with them.” If you don’t have any information, then look to your child’s talents and wonder if perhaps they got their artistic talents from that unknown birth father.

This type of lifebook page really helps out with those tough adolescent years when identity issues begins to peak. The more your child knows, the more that s/he will feel “real.”

Some would argue “Our family is very open and always talks about adoption/foster care so why write it down?” Because a book that you and your child can pick up and hold gives the foster/adoptee control over his/her own story. They can look at it when the urge hits them, not when you are inspired. It becomes symbolic for adoption discussion. It’s like an adoption security blanket.

“OK I’m starting to become convinced of how important this is. Where do you begin?” Here are a few suggestions from Dr. Vera Fahlberg, adoption expert:

- ◆ start with the child’s birth
- ◆ always discuss the birth mother and birth father(even if you know nothing say you don’t know)
- ◆ talk about the reason for separation from the biological family

I also like to include the original birth certificate (if available). Children of any age are always fascinated by this official record of their life. Court papers or official records will suffice if no birth certificate is available.

So once you have laid the foundation with birth history, then add the fun part, the time when they joined your family. LifeBooks become worn and torn and more beautiful with age. Don’t get caught up in creating the “perfect” lifebook. After all, the only real mistake you can make is not to finish.

The ultimate **MAGIC** to creating a treasured lifebook is to start it, work on it as a family, and give it your child. Even if it only has five pages, it is tangible proof to your child that s/he is precious enough to deserve this life treasure.

By Beth O'Malley M.Ed., adoptee and new adoptive Mom, learn more and sign up for free lifebook tips at www.adoptionlifebooks.com

This article can be reprinted providing the author and contact information is included. Copyright 11/13/03