

Kids and Lifebooks: Tips for Social Workers

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Every child who is adopted from foster care deserves a clear, detailed record of his or her life prior to adoption. While a foster child is waiting for a forever family, a lifebook can help her to make sense of the past and prepare to go forward. Once a child is placed with a permanent family, lifebooks are a connection to the past that can inform and improve the future. Done with care, lifebooks are an invaluable tool for helping children through difficult life transitions and enabling them to take ownership of their unique histories.

Simply stated, a lifebook is a book that presents a child's life story. Like other books, lifebooks can contain pictures, artwork, text, and other meaningful memorabilia that convey information about a child's personal history. What child doesn't like being the star of his own story for an audience of his choosing?

It is very simple in principle...until you begin to factor in abuse and neglect, multiple placements, loss and grief, complicated legalities, and disruptions. How can you translate abuse, drugs, and rejection in terms and images appropriate for a five-year-old? You may have to learn some new skills, but a well-constructed lifebook can hold a tale of even the most profound loss and pain.

Key Components

When I was a new adoption worker, the experienced writers in my office created a lifebook template/checklist of sorts. All of our lifebooks included:

- information about the child's birth
- a copy of the child's birth certificate
- birth family information
- why the child entered foster care
- a history of different placements
- a worker's blessing page

To bolster children's self esteem, our template included a very upbeat birth page. One common line was, "When you were born, the doctors oohed and aaahed..."

While I believed in all the lifebook components, I never liked this line. For me, it just did not ring true. So many of our children were tiny drug-addicted babies, fighting for their lives. Lifebooks are supposed to be about the truth.

Lifebook Truths

Because lifebooks are historical documents, it is never okay to lie. Sometimes, though, you may not know much about a particular event—say, the moment the child was born. In such circumstances, you may need to say, “I’ll bet that....” For example:

I’ll bet that your birth mother was happy to have given birth to such a beautiful baby girl, but she may have felt sad and confused too because of her problems with bad drugs.

Official documents such as birth certificates and hospital birth records are a great source of factual information, and kids love to see the important pieces of paper that validate their very existence. Foster kids sometimes need to be reminded that they, like everyone else, started life by getting born.

Another way to promote lifebook truth is to involve the child. After all, this is his or her story. Grab crayons and markers, and find a quiet space. Younger children may enjoy dictating while you write; pretend they are guests on a talk show and interview them. Other kids may want to write down their own words, and have you transform them into neat, printed pages.

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.”

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.”

Family History

Think about your family for a minute. Which relatives do you take after? Whose athleticism matches yours? Whose laugh echoes yours at the same jokes? Whose nose is (for better or worse) stuck on your face?

Much of our identity comes from being part of the generations that came before us. Children who live with their birth family can see the traits they share with relatives. They also hear and relive family stories at the dinner table, at family gatherings, and through shared memories.

Children who are adopted from foster care may have vivid memories of their birth family, but relatively few positive stories or happy shared moments. Once the birth family is out of their lives, they lose major connections. Can you imagine going through life without meeting anyone who looks like you? Imagine what it feels like to go through a significant life event—having a baby or being screened for cancer—without knowing your family medical history?

Lifebooks can help answer questions that keep kids, teens, and adults up at night wondering. Adoption social workers often have access to detailed social histories, old medical records, and other social workers who once worked with the birth parents. If visits with birth parents are still going on, you have a golden opportunity to gather important facts and images.

In my view, any chance to get information or pictures should be considered a last chance. Additional family photos and details about the birth family will be a treasure to the child—and to those who parent the child for the rest of their lives.

And let's not forget siblings; they have a special magic all their own. A simple page with siblings' names, ages, pictures, and locations can work wonders.

Asking Why

One of the hardest and most critical parts of lifebooks answers the question: Why don't I live with my birth family?

It is unwise to tell a child that their birth parent was sick (unless it is an honest part of the story). Don't sick people usually get better? And if Mom gets better, shouldn't the child go back home? What if Mom doesn't get better—is she dead, or dying? Why give the child this worry?

I tell children that their birth father, birth mother (or other caretaker) had grown-up problems and wasn't able to take care of him- or herself. In fact, the caretaker took such poor care of him/herself that he/she couldn't possibly take care of a child—any child—at that time in his/her life.

By placing responsibility squarely with the adult, we can help children work through nonsensical thinking evidenced in rhymes like: “Step on a crack and break your mother's back.” Many children with abuse histories believe they were bad or somehow responsible for being taken from their birth families. As social workers, we must make sure that kids don't carry this burden of false guilt through life.

I often directly ask children, “Why do you think you aren't living with your birth family?” In 10 minutes, I get more information from this question than most therapists do in 10 sessions. Depending on the circumstances, I will then discuss each child's specific situation.

Placements

Pages on placements are often the most straightforward. Start with here and now; do a page on the child's current school, favorite foods, good friends, sports, and favorite activities. Get any photos you can. Do the same for past placements in foster homes, group homes, or emergency shelters.

If the child is just about to enter an adoptive placement, a favorite page may be one commemorating when the adoptive parents and child first met. Interview the parents and child separately, and then share their quotes. Now you are accumulating text for the lifebook.

Seek out school report cards, awards, and positive quotes from teachers and foster parents. Awards and praise can help children feel good about who they are—a feeling that can give them the ego strength to deal with difficult transitions.

The Worker's Blessing Page

As a social worker, you probably have worked with this child for months, if not years. Just before the child is placed for adoption, take time to write one page for the end of the lifebook. Talk about the child's strengths and what you think is special about him or her. Include a funny story or thought.

It is important to give a child permission to move on and be happy. This is a powerful message for the years to come.

Getting It Done

A team approach to lifebooks may be most rewarding. If foster parents can capture a few moments of the child's life—maybe grab a picture of the birth family and share a picture of the foster family too—then the lifebook has begun. Social workers and therapists can add to the record.

When the child is adopted, carefully transfer the book to the adoptive family. Coach adoptive parents to keep the lifebook somewhere special and secure. If the child wants the book in her room, make a copy of the original for her to keep. The child gets to decide when the lifebook comes out and parents should never share the book without the child's permission. It may be that the book will become a part of adoption anniversary celebrations, provide help with a school family tree assignment, open the door to conversations about adoption and identity as the child gets older, and help the child to deal with the painful loss of his birth family. Then too, it may be something that the child can only appreciate once he starts his own family. The lifebook should be available whenever the child is ready.

Soon after I began working on lifebooks for children, I heard back from families whose children had my first plain, typewritten efforts. To my delight, they reported that the lifebooks became more valuable over time. Lifebooks give foster and adopted children crucial, life-affirming information: basic factual data about themselves, as well as an understanding of where they came from and why they have a new family. It also gave them permission to remember and grieve their losses and better bond with their new families. What a gift! END