



Is that lifebook still on your to-do list? Are you stuck? Or don't know where to begin? Keep reading. This guide is designed to first inspire then offer simple but effective hints. The goal is to jump-start you onto the road toward Lifebook creation.

What is a Lifebook?

A lifebook is an actual book. Many parents create it from scratch, which I believe offers the most benefits. A lifebook is the child's story, seen through his or her eyes. It has three essential components:

- starts with the child's birth
- details the child's birthparents (even if you, the adoptive parent, know no facts)
- explains in child-friendly terms the reasons the child was adopted

These are the crucial pages; they tell your child that he was born just like everyone else, that he has birthparents... and then that he was adopted.

Naturally, there are also fun "current family" pages – the day you first met, travel pages, silly things that happened in the beginning, etc. Typically, there are many, many pictures starting when your family formed; and lots of information, too. These are very different than the pre-placement pages.

Lifebook Benefits: What's so special about a book?

A life history book will tell the child's story, from the moment when s/he first entered this world. It pulls together all the pieces of your child's story AND helps them make sense of what has happened in their life. A lifebook helps them feel normal and better answer the question, "Who am I?"

If you think of the lifebook as "just a book," then you are making a big mistake, and chances are your child's lifebook will never get done. Instead, consider it as the *lifebook process*, which is so therapeutic. Work on it is healing work, time when you can help your child make sense of himself. The questions, discussions, etc., all take place in between the pages. This intimate talk brings you and your child closer together. Kids get to say things which maybe they might not normally talk about or disclose.

Creation of the lifebook helps take the ‘sting’ out of adoption talk. It helps parents feel more and more comfortable with the entire process. Adoption talk gets easier and easier. The story doesn’t have to be fancy or elaborate. In fact, short is best. But each word is so important, and choosing the words is maybe the hardest part.

Why is this? Because each word essentially secures your child’s memory.

What a Lifebook Isn’t:

Be very careful that you don’t end up writing *your* adoption story. A lifebook is not about your feelings or the adoption process. Instead, it starts with the child’s birth. Not when you got the referral picture or that special telephone call.

Writing the lifebook isn’t easy. Why? Parents get in touch with their child’s loss and abandonment. Some parents re-experience their own losses and sadness: Sadness, perhaps, that their baby was not grown within them....Sadness that their child may not have had enough food in the orphanage.... Sadness that maybe their child got hurt in their birth home.

So, although the story isn’t yours, feeling the writing of it certainly IS. Intense, unexpected feelings may come up as you write the text. Try to embrace the experience. Feel the feelings and get to the next level. Consider it a therapeutic experience, which it is and a cleansing of sorts. Heart and soul. And ultimately a sacrifice for your children.

You mean I’m not done with the paperwork?

Chances are your son or daughter isn’t pulling on your sleeve saying: “Mommy, where’s my lifebook?” There aren’t letters in the mail saying, “You have 30 more days to get this finished.” Husbands or loved ones don’t keep reminding you or pushing to prioritize this matter.

You are the Lone Lifebook Ranger (unless you are part of a group or receiving Beth’s monthly lifebook newsletter). Alone but filled with vision and conviction that this lifebook is really important.

Stay focused. See your child completed by having the lifebook and owning his/her past. With joy, imagine your child walking down the aisle getting married. Or envision them in school – paying more attention to math than wondering about their birthparents.

Picture her/him sitting in your lap looking at their book. The trust grows with each reading. It’s all about them.

Get in the Lifebook Mood: Read out loud.

Start with something that's easy to get into: read books to your child. My personal favorites for pre-school include *A Mother for Choco*, *I Don't Have Your Eyes*, *When You Were Born in China*, and *How I Was Adopted: Samantha's Story*, just to name a few.

By the way, have you told your children that they're adopted? If not, the prospect of a lifebook may be especially daunting for you. Just saying "adopted" is not enough. Kids need to hear the "tummy mommy talk" to really understand. So take a deep breath and start talking about their birthparents...before you begin the lifebook work.

Get Organized: Set a date.

"Someday I'm going to give her the best lifebook..." Well, someday is here. Soon you'll be helping them get ready for college and saying, "Where did the time go?"

Set a date. Tell your best friend, husband, sibling, or child, depending on age. Write it down on the calendar. Commit. Follow through.

Make It Easy: Find a partner or Lifebook buddy.

Two heads are better than one when it comes to lifebooks. Decisions regarding photos and wording are easier and faster with another adult.

Hint: Don't worry about being perfect, worry about getting it done.

When Should I get Started? Toddlers vs. School Age?

You really can't go wrong (unless you don't make one). If you have a baby or toddler, start by writing the text. Aim for something that a school-age child can read. Then go back and select the pictures that best fit.

If you have waited for years and are feeling guilty – don't. One of the advantages of working with a school-age child is to take advantage of their interest. Let them help you stay on track.

Best of All Worlds: Your child can help.

The best way to make the lifebook is with your child. Of course, it depends on age. But even if your child is only three, s/he can help select the title-page picture, draw pictures, pick an album, and stick on stickers.

Ready...Set...Write.

Are you ready? Have you cleared your schedule? Hooked up with your child, a helpful adult, or both? Now it's time to begin.

When stuck, repeat to yourself, "A lifebook will help my child in ways I can't possibly imagine. I want my child to have every opportunity life can offer."

A Personal Passion: Beth's own walk toward Lifebooks

Beth O'Malley, M.Ed., author of *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child*, has a very personal connection to Lifebooks.

Growing up, Beth had an empty feeling inside – she couldn't seem to put her finger on it or shake it. Then, when she was in her 30s, it hit her. She was adopted. Of course, this was something she knew, but had no information about. Until that point, Beth had never made the connection between her adoption and that empty feeling inside. "That empty space could have been filled with just a few basics: my birth name, where I was born. All of which could have helped normalize my experience. A lifebook would have changed my life for the better."

A few years later, she had her story. The search was inspired in part by her experiences as an adoption specialist. Now she's helping others with their own stories. Her goal is for all adopted children to have individual lifebooks, whether they are adopted from Chicago or China.

But the story continued when Beth and her husband decided to adopt. They returned from Kazakhstan in October 2003 with 11-month-old Polina. Beth says, "I have a renewed appreciation for the lifebook process now that I've adopted."

Page by Page: Improve quality of life.

Beth has made countless lifebooks with children as an adoption professional. She understands that the lifebook process is simple but not easy. In her book, she walks you through the process step by step and page by page. You don't have to be creative or artistic; just have a vision and be determined that your child will have a lifebook. Lifebooks represent a proactive, therapeutic approach to parenting that can improve the quality of life for any adopted child.

Beth O'Malley, M.Ed. is a lifebook expert, adoptee, adoptive mom and professional in the field of adoption. With a Masters in Counseling, she relies on her instincts and experiences as an adult adoptee and as much as her professional skills when writing and working on lifebooks.

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