

## LifeBooks: Every Foster Child Needs One

By Beth O'Malley M.Ed

Foster children so often have that sense of missing pieces. I should know. I spent my first 5 months in foster care, before being adopted.

Information is gold to any child separated from their biological family. Every tiny piece is precious, whether it's a photo or quote from a child's first foster parent. LifeBooks help put all the pieces together in a way that helps a child make sense and ultimately feel good about his or her history.

*"...My second foster family reported that I used to make these funny lip smacking sounds as a baby...and that the entire family would watch and laugh. This is one of my favorite pieces of information, discovered in my foster care notes..." (Beth O'Malley)*

This story never appeared in any LifeBook. Instead, my foster parents took the time to share it with my social worker. She found the time to write it in her case notes. The adoption agency then managed to hold onto my case record for 35 years. And the post adoption social worker thought I might find the anecdote amusing.

Talk about teamwork. I'm grateful that every person followed through, giving me this "baby picture" in words that I carry in my heart today.

I'm convinced that my entire life would have been different if I had been given a LifeBook. The absence of information on my birth family meant I had nothing with which to connect with my history. A blank screen. A feeling of floating, or that numb sensation that so many foster children later describe.

*"...LifeBooks remain important to my children...They show that their biological connections are still important...They will never be forgotten..." (Michelle Braxton, single foster/adoptive mother of seven)*

Imagine what would be important to you 10 or 20 years later in life. Including school papers, awards, copies of report cards, the birth certificate, locks of baby hair, baby teeth, and mementos increases a LifeBook's value. These volumes will fill in gaps, with words, art work, and photos, if available. Your words can create pictures if none are available.

Speaking of pictures, can you imagine going through life without ever knowing what your mother or father looked like? Foster parents often have the unique opportunity to get photos of birth parents. Foster mother Sandy Parker shared the following story:

*“...I took three-year-old David for a visit with his birth mother while she was incarcerated. They didn’t allow cameras inside the facility. Shortly thereafter she was released, overdosed, and died. So I learned a lesson. At the next visit with a*

One foster parent recently lamented that with five foster children, one being medically involved, coupled with caring for an aging parent and her 150-pound dog, she didn’t always have the time to complete her children’s LifeBooks. *It is a tall order.*

A team approach to LifeBooks may be the wave of the future. If foster parents can capture a few pages of the child’s life, perhaps grabbing a picture of the birth family (regardless of the goal), then the LifeBook has begun. Social workers, CASA volunteers, and/or therapists can add in additional information. Don’t forget the birth certificate, which children in foster situations love at any age.

Here are a few suggestions from Dr. Vera Fahlberg, national 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

LifeBooks help reduce magical thinking and fantasy. This frees up a foster child to pay better attention in school or be more available to focus on developing painting skills or playing soccer.

LifeBooks help answer questions, increase self-esteem, and teach children the truth. They are the ultimate teaching tool. LifeBook facts become “memory pegs,” says Mimi Robins, originator of LifeBooks in Massachusetts. If children are given the basics, the essentials, then hours of therapy later in life can be saved.

Children need to feel proud of their strengths and those of their birth parents. A LifeBook page on birth parents really helps in those tough adolescent years when identity issues begin to peak.

Foster care periods are often the only time when birth parents are usually available to answer questions and discuss talents and hobbies.

The ultimate *magic* to creating a treasured LifeBook is to start it, work on it with a child, and give it to him or her, or to the social worker, when the child moves on. Even if it only has five pages, it is tangible proof to that child that s/he is precious enough to deserve this treasure.

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