

ACORN EDUCATION AND CARE

Life Story Work

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Introduction

“It is difficult to grow up as a psychologically healthy adult if one is denied access to one’s own history” – Falhberg

Life story work is a piece of directive work that aims to help a child or young person in care understand and accept what has happened to them. Young people and children within our care can have little understanding of why they do not live with their family and their early life events, alongside often having had multiple foster and school placements. Life story work looks at the what, when and why questions about a child or young person’s life experiences allowing them to express their feelings about these events whilst unravelling confusion and discarding some negative emotional baggage (Conner et al, 1985). It can be a difficult and complex process for children and young people to develop a coherent narrative during life story work and it is important that children and young people are not rushed through this process but allowed to work at their own pace.

How Life Story Works

A life story worker will gather information from files, social services, family and previous foster carers/

placements. Once all the information is gathered it needs to be considered in order to assess the following:

- If information is missing e.g. first names of carers or photos etc.
- Is all the information safe to share, has GDPR been considered e.g. current addresses of family or information that is in their file but that does not directly pertain to their life history such as detailed information surrounding police arrests etc.
- What the child or young person may want to know and what additional questions they may have surrounding the information.
- Has the young person engaged in life story work before, if so what have they covered?

Once all the information has been gathered and assessed, planning of sessions can commence. Children and young people’s external communication of trauma is as individual as the children and young people themselves, therefore the approach of the life story worker needs to be as unique as the children and young people (Rose, 2012).

Children and young people engage in life story work in a variety of ways however a general outline of areas covered is listed below.

Topic - The First Session/s

Content -

- Getting to know each other
- Discussing what life story work is and gaining consent
- Making session rules together
- Letting them explore the tool kit

Topic - All About Me Now

Content -

- Looking at how the child or young person views themselves
- What are their likes/dislikes
- Who are their friends / what staff members do they have a good relationship with
- How they would describe their personality
- What is significant for the child or young person now and can they communicate the good along with the bad

Topic - Feelings and Emotions

Content -

- Giving the child or young person the opportunity to think about, identify and experiment with their experience of emotions
- Allowing the worker to gain an understanding of the child or young person's emotional literacy and how they express themselves
- Providing a basis to build upon or reflect back to during later work
- The child or young person can identify safe ways to express big or overwhelming feelings
- You can play brain stem calming/regulation games to add to the child or young person's coping strategies. These are games that focus on breathing and connection such as cotton ball hockey etc.

Topic - Different Types of Families

Content -

- Gain an understanding of how different families are constructed and normalising different types of families

Topic - Birth Family

Content -

- Family Tree
- Their birth story
- Developmental milestones
- What life was like when they were living with their birth family
- Explore their family heritage

Topic - How Did I Get Here?

Content -

The exploration of:

- What is good enough parenting and why children and young people need it all of the time
- The role of Social Workers
- The role of the Judge and court

Topic - Where Have I Lived?

Content -

- An exploration of the child or young person's different placements. Who have they lived with, what schools did they attend whilst in foster care, what are their memories and why did they leave

Topic - Summarising

Content -

- Consolidating all the information that the child and young person has explored

Topic - The Future

Content -

- Looking at future wishes and aspirations
- If they are moving placements, look at where they are going, what will be the same and what will be different
- Who would they like to keep in contact with and how.
- Looking at ways to say goodbye

Some children and young people work through their life story work in order, others feel safer being able to choose which topic they will look at and when. Putting their life events in order at the end of their piece of work when they have built up more trust and resilience. Generally sessions take place weekly ranging from 45 minutes to 1 hour, however should this prove too overwhelming less frequent sessions can be planned. A child or young person may explore their life history using a variety of mediums depending on the topic.

A Life Story Tool Kit Can Include:

- Arts and crafts materials
- Clay
- Musical instruments
- Puppets
- Symbols / small world figures
- Sand tray
- Messy play supplies
- Houses and people figures
- Games – for breaks
- Fancy dress items for taking on different roles e.g. judge, police, social worker
- Scrapbooks and scrapbook supplies
- Large rolls of paper for timelines
- Digital media
- A special box to keep any creations in

Life Story Work in Conjunction with Play and Creative Arts Therapy

Preceding life story work with therapy can help to prepare the child or young person for this directive piece of work. Therapy allows the child or young person to build upon their resilience, improve their self-concept and bringing unconsciousness to consciousness ready for the therapist to help unravel their experiences and understand their feelings. Another advantage of having the same therapist carry out the initial therapy and life story work is that the therapist can move gently through directive and non-directive work during the course of the life story work to enable the child or young person to disengage from directive work for a short time when stuck in their process or if becoming overwhelmed, rather than disengaging from the whole process. The young person is free to utilise ways of processing that they have already developed in therapy such as the use of messy play, creative writing, the use of symbols in the sand tray etc. This helps the child or young person to look at harder, more emotive aspects of their life history.

Conclusion

Life story work can be a difficult and complex process that aims to ultimately enable a child or young person to understand and accept their life events and process any feelings and or confusion they have surrounding their history. Acorn Education and Care provide therapeutic life story work for children and young people both as a standalone piece of directive work and in conjunction with therapy. Children and young people with Developmental Trauma often have a complex history of placements as well as difficult stories to process, life story work helps them to form a coherent narrative of their lives.

Useful Links / Books

- Life Story Therapy with Traumatized Children by Richard Rose
- The Child's Own Story, Life Story Work with Traumatized Children by Richard Rose and Terry Philpot
- Life Story Books for Adopted and Fostered Children by Joy Rees
- Life Story Work with Children Who are Fostered or Adopted: Creative Ideas and Activities by Katie Wrench and Lesley Naylor
- Innovative Therapeutic Life Story Work: Developing Trauma-Informed Practice for Working with Children, Adolescents and Young Adults by Richard Rose. Foreword by Deborah D. Gray
- http://www.lifestoryworks.org/Life_Story_Works/HOME.html

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If you found this help sheet useful please feel free to share it with anyone who you feel may benefit.

To see the full series, please take a look here:
www.acorneducationandcare.co.uk