Seven Reasons Why Children Need Their Life History

Dr. Denise Goodman, ACSW, LISW, PH.D

A lifebook is a book that records a child's family and placement history. It is a tool that gathers information about a child's growth and development, feelings, ideas and hopes and dreams for the future. It is a vital resource in helping a child to understand the past and prepare for the future.

The Seven Reasons Why

1. **Recreates child's life history.** This is important, as many of our children have had very confusing lives. They have been in and out of care and shuffled between family members. Each child's reaction to the separation from the birth family presents its own unique individual response. These painful feelings weave a common thread throughout the lives of older adopted children. For children whose memories of former relationships smolder vaguely in their minds, frequent themes revisit during the healing process. They need to have an accurate record of their past, because it will help them look forward to the future without fear.
2. **Gives a child information about his/her birth family.** Many foster and adopted children do not have a lot of information about their birth families. What did their parents look like? What talents did they have? What about their extended family? In fact, some kids have no information at all. Each of us has a "genetic road map," which is our parents. This "roadmap" helps us when we begin to develop our identity. We decide what traits we like and we keep them. The traits we do not like, we reject. Youngsters, who have no information, make it up and usually it is negative. For kids who only have negative information about their parents, that is the only source they have to keep for their identity. Children need both positive and negative details about their birth family.
3. **Gives reasons for placement.** Frequently, children have the wrong idea about why they have been removed from their homes. Many times, they believe that it was their fault. This leads to feelings of guilt, and sometimes children will try to punish themselves. Therefore, children must have accurate and honest information about why they are in care.
4. **Provides photos and a pictorial history.** Even when information is given in written form, kids generally want to know what their families look like. In addition, photographs also record family events, such as holidays, birthdays and special times. Children need pictures of themselves to trace the changes that have taken place.

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5. **Records child's feelings about his/her life.** Too often, children are not given an opportunity to talk about their feelings regarding their life and being in out-of-home care. The lifebook, in some ways, is a diary or log children can use to keep their personal thoughts or feelings.
6. **Gives the child information about his/her own development.** How many people have baby books? If you are not the first born, you probably don't have one. How would you like a recording of all your important milestones? Your first tooth, your first step, your first word, along with a record of all the other special things you've done. This is another important role that the lifebook plays.
7. **Is a useful tool when working with children.** Being a way to organize information, the lifebook is a helpful tool for foster parents, adoptive parents, caseworkers and therapists who must assist children who are struggling to cope with being away from their parents, siblings and homes.

I don't have any memories of the important people in my past. I wonder if the important people in my past have any memories of me.

An adopted teen

History for Infant and Toddlers

Gathering information for the lifebook for an infant or toddler is far more important than one might assume. Children at these ages have no memory of their birth parents, foster parents or other significant people who cared for them. They often have no pictures of themselves or any significant person to help fill in the gaps. Completing an infant's lifebook while in foster care, whether the child returns home or to adoption, is a crucial activity.

Infants and Toddlers Lifebook (0-2 years)

What to include	Where to Find It
Birth Information: birth certificate, height, weight, time and date of birth, hospital (picture if possible from brochure or taken by family), names of doctors, special medical information or circumstances of birth, pictures of birth family and cultural history	• Bureau of Vital Statistics, case record and social/medical hospital, WIC clinic, hospital records, birth parents, extended family
Placement Information: reasons for placement, include journal entry, chronological list for each move, good-bye letters from caregivers, names of other children close to the child, pictures of their caretakers, their birth and foster homes, bedroom, pets, etc.	• Court records, intake worker, birth family, caseworker, previous caretakers
Medical Information: list of medical providers, immunization record, list of childhood diseases, injuries, allergies	• Case record, health department, caretakers, pediatrician, WIC clinic
Developmental Information: significant milestones of development	• Previous caretakers, care record, medical history
Adoption Information: Finalization, adoption party pictures, special mementos	• Adoptive family and adoption caseworker

History for School-age Children

Children removed from their home during the early school-age years may have memories of those important people in their lives, but those memories are usually vague and fleeting. Those memories may also be attached to the trauma of abuse, neglect and the experience of removal. The lifebook should be the tool that fills in the memory gaps for these children and also replaces the fantasies that have developed. The school-age child's lifebook should include the birth, developmental and medical information listed above. It should also include the following:

In addition to the information already cited, include:	Where To Find It
Placement Information: reasons for removal or placement, include journal entry, chronological list for each move, good-bye letters from caregivers, names of other children close to the child, pictures of caretakers, their birth and foster homes, bedroom, pets, church and recreational activities, neighborhood friends, letters from birth family or other friends, names and addresses of separated siblings	• Court records, intake worker, birth family, caseworker, previous caretakers, school teachers, counselors, adult leaders, ministers,
Educational Information: list all daycare and schools attended with dates, names and addresses and photos, if possible, pictures of classmates, teachers and other important adults, copies of report cards, samples of homework, special projects, pictures and mementos of special events, awards	• School personnel, teachers, yearbooks, school and community newspapers, coaches, school records
Adoption Information: tools used to prepare child for adoption (coloring books), date of finalization, adoption day pictures	• Adoptive family, foster care and adoption caseworker

History for Teens

Teens, who have spent any amount of time in foster care and enter adoption or independent living, have probably lost track of the important details of their lives. They probably do not have many mementos of their past—little or no birth information or pictures. They do not have a record of where they lived and the people with whom they lived, the schools they attended, and the achievements they obtained. Putting a lifebook together for a young teen requires investigative work and perseverance. However, it may be the youngster's only link from a confusing and disjoined past to an uncertain future. The lifebook for the teen should include as much information from birth, medical and developmental records that can be traced. It should also include the following:

In addition to the information already cited, include:	Where To Find It
Placement Information: chronological listing of places where teen lived and with whom, reasons for moving, pictures of people and places that were important in the development of the teen	• Previous caregivers, caseworkers, case record
Educational Information: list schools attended with dates, names and addresses and photos; if possible, pictures of classmates, teachers and other important adults; copies of report cards; samples of homework; special projects; pictures and mementos of special events, awards, achievements and certificates	• School personnel, teachers, yearbooks, school and community newspapers, coaches, school records, band/music directors, drama teachers
Independent Living Information: information and mementos gleaned from teens groups and classes, pictures of other teens in independent living, group leaders, pictures of graduating from group and moving-in day to his/her new apartment	• Caseworkers, foster care and independent living caseworkers
Adoption Information: tools used to prepare teen for adoption finalization and adoption day pictures; any special mementos	• Adoptive family and foster care and adoption caseworker

Sources of Information for Whereabouts of Birth Parents and Extended Family

www.knowx.com – people locator (charge for service)

www.ancestry.com/ssdi/advanced.htm – Social Security Death Index. This tracks location of death of birthparents or birth-grandparents. After that is discovered, the worker should check obituaries for funeral homes and then check funeral homes for addresses of next of kin.

www.cyndislist.com – A genealogical search with links to numerous similar sites.

www.att.net/find/genealogy – genealogical search site

www.genealogy.miningeo.com/index/htm - genealogical search site

www.ancestry.com - genealogical search site

www.familytreemaker.com/iffintro.html - internet family finder

http://genealogy.tbox.com - Helm's Genealogy Toolbox provides a variety of tools to aid genealogists in the pursuit of their family history.

www.aol.com/netfind/whitepages.html - Find phone numbers and addresses of individuals in any U.S. city.

http://www.netscape.com/netcenter/whitepages.html - Find phone numbers and addresses of individuals in any U.S. city.

www.aol.com/netfind/yellowpages.html - Look up phone numbers, addresses, maps and directions for businesses in any U.S. city.