

PREPARING THE CHILD FOR ADOPTION

Date or subtitle if you desire



Kansas Department for Children and Families
Strong Families Make a Strong Kansas

3-5-7 MODEL

DARLA HENRY, 2004

- Three Goals
- Five Questions
- Seven Critical Elements



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THREE GOALS

- Clarification (life events)
- Integration (of previous families)
- Actualization (of belonging to a new family)



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FIVE QUESTIONS

- Who am I? **identity**
- What happened to me? **losses**
- Where am I going? **attachment**
- How will I get there? **relationships**
- When will I know I belong? **claiming**



SEVEN CRITICAL ELEMENTS

- Engage the child in the process.
- Listen to the child's words.
- Tell the truth.
- Validate the child and the child's story.
- Create a safe space for the child.
- Help the child understand it is never too late to go back in time.
- Help the child understand pain is part of the process.



WHAT IF...

- Child loves birth family more
- Child will have negative self-image
- Child is too young to understand
- Child may model birth parent's behavior



PRINCIPLES FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN

- Initiate the conversation
- Never lie
- Use a third party
- Don't judge
- Don't join child's anger



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TOOLS OF ADOPTION COMMUNICATION

Lifebooks

- Recreates a child's history
- Provides photos, stories; records feelings

Life Story Box

- Box for treasures, mementos
- Awards, grade cards, items from family

Life Map

- Timeline of where child has lived
- Child should design map, if possible



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TOOLS OF ADOPTION COMMUNICATION

Family Tree

- Birth family in roots
- Adoptive family in branches

Family Collage

- Photos and drawings
- Can be placed in outline of child's body

Bibliotherapy/Films

- Stories that deal with loss
- Developmentally-appropriate



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TOOLS OF ADOPTION COMMUNICATION

Phone Call

- Using toy phone
- Young child can ask questions, tell how he/she feels

Doll and Puppet Play

- Elicits feelings from young child
- Can correct misperceptions

Tell/Write a Story

- Case manager begins story, child completes
- May use animal substitutes for actual people



TOOLS OF ADOPTION COMMUNICATION

Write a Letter or Journal

- Useful with older children and teens
- Child chooses whether to share with worker

Heart Boxes

- Addresses loyalty issues
- Helps child understand he/she can love and be loyal to many people at the same time



WHAT DO I SAY?

Age 3—Your first mommy couldn't take care of you. She wasn't ready to be a mommy.



Age 7—Your birth mommy had trouble taking care of herself. She wasn't able to take care of you. Neighbors were worried about you and called the social worker.



WHAT DO I SAY?

Age 10—Your birth mom made a bad decision and started taking drugs. She couldn't think well when she was using drugs and made even more bad decisions. Sometimes she left you alone. That wasn't safe for you.



WHAT DO I SAY?

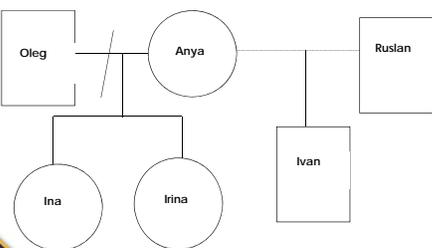


Age 12—Your birth mom felt sick when she couldn't get drugs. She could not hold a job. She needed money, so she became a victim of human trafficking. She left you alone when she met customers or bought drugs. Neighbors called the social worker, and a judge agreed you needed a safe home to grow up in.



IDENTIFYING CONNECTIONS

- Genograms



ASSESSING PERMANENCY OPTIONS

Child's current/future needs

- Talents/interests
- Challenges
- Trauma

Attachments

- Who is "family"?
- Foster family adopt?
- Pets, toys, places



ASSESSING PERMANENCY OPTIONS

Siblings

- Free for adoption now?
- Already adopted?

Child's wishes

- Perceptions and fears
- Child able to plan, identify connections



ASSESSING PERMANENCY OPTIONS

Who can best meet child's needs?

- Identify interested families
- Assess attachment and skills of each
- Determine who is best able to meet needs



UNPACKING THE "NO!"

Why do children refuse adoption?



CHILDREN REFUSE ADOPTION BECAUSE...

- Loyalty/emotional ties/visits to birth families
- Past disappointments
- Lack of information about adoption
- Resistance to name change
- Anger regarding lack of control
- Belief they are "unadoptable"
- Reunion fantasies



TRANSFER OF LEARNING

Think of a particular child you will prepare for adoption.

What strategy can you use to help this child transition to his/her permanent family?



Preparing the Child for Adoption

Agenda

I. Introductions and Setting the Stage

15 minutes

II. The 3-5-7 Model

25 minutes

III. Talking with Children about Adoption

70 minutes

IV. Connections for Children

30 minutes

V. Unpacking the No

20 minutes

VI. Conclusion/Transfer of Learning

20 minutes

Preparing the Child for Adoption

Competencies

201-04-013

Can assess children's developmental and treatment needs and select the most appropriate, least restrictive placement to meet a child's developmental and treatment needs

201-06-003

Knows the benefits of honest communication with children about his/her histories, future plans and personal concerns

201-06-009

Know age-appropriate art, play and communication strategies to answer child's questions about his/her history and future, and to help him/her express and deal with his/her feelings and fears

201-06-017

Can work directly with children to help them talk about and cope with anxieties and emotional conflicts related to a placement change

201-07-004

Understands the emotional reactions, including ambivalence, often experienced by children and his/her adoptive families before and after adoption finalization

201-08-011

Understands the value to children of being given permission by his/her birth families to be adopted

The 3-5-7 Model

Darla Henry, 2004

➤ Three Goals

- ✓ Clarification (life events)
- ✓ Integration (of previous families)
- ✓ Actualization (of belonging to a new family)

➤ Five Questions

- ✓ Who am I? (identity)
- ✓ What happened to me? (loss)
- ✓ Where am I going? (fantasies)
- ✓ How will I get there? (relationships/attachment)
- ✓ When will I know I belong? (claiming)

➤ Seven Critical Elements

- ✓ Engage the child in the process
- ✓ Listen to the child's words
- ✓ Tell the truth
- ✓ Validate the child and the child's story
- ✓ Create a safe space for the child
- ✓ Help the child understand it is never too late to go back in time
- ✓ Help the child understand pain is part of the process

Principles of Telling

- **Initiate conversation about adoption.**
- **Do not lie.**
- **If information is negative, use a third party to help.**
- **Don't impose value judgments.**
- **Allow the child to be angry without joining in.**
- **The child should be in control of his/her story outside the family.**
- **Remember the child knows more than you think.**
- **Tell information in a developmentally-appropriate way.**
- **Share all information by the time the child is 12 (developmentally).**
- **Use positive adoption language.**

Positive Adoption Language

Words and phrases to watch for positive and negative connotations.

Positive	Negative
Birthparent (father, mother) Biological (parent, child, ancestry) Woman (lady) who gave birth	Real parent Natural parent
Adopted person Adoptee Adult Adoptee	Adopted child (when speaking of an adult)
Adoption Triad Adoption Triangle Adoption plan was made for... The baby joined the family The older child moved in with his/her family An adoption was arranged for... He/she was placed	Adoption Triad (when it applies to the negative connotation associated with triangulation) Adopted out Put up for adoption Given away Given up
Birth child	Their own child Their real children
To opt for, to take on, to choose, to continue Parenting	Keeping
Born outside of marriage Born to a single person (divorced, single, never married, unwed mother)	Illegitimate child Bastard Unwanted child
Termination of parental rights; unable to continue parenting (older child) Court termination	Gave up

Positive	Negative
Made an adoption plan Legally-released Voluntary release	Gave away
My child	Adopted (when it is used constantly, it can become a label)
The waiting child Child with special needs Child available for adoption	Hard-to-place child
Search Reunion Making contact	

- Language is important in describing adoption.
- Adoptees are sensitive to feeling different
- We want to try to avoid negative terms and use less judgmental language.
- How is language manifested in your own family? What does Grandma say? Peers? Outsiders?

Tools of Communication between Parents and Children

NOTE: The following material was adapted from *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child* by Betsy Keefer Smalley and Jayne Schooler. It is available at amazon.com.

*Children can not communicate about their feelings as adults can.
Youngsters talk through dolls, puppets, drawings, and play.*
Susan Pelleg, LISW, MSSA

LIFEBOOKS

What Do They Look Like? Developing the Age Appropriate Lifebook

Lifebooks for Infants 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's outcome is reunification with the birth family or adoption, is a crucial activity.

Infants and Toddlers Lifebook (0-2)

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, Genogram, pictures of birth family, and cultural history	Government birth records, case record and social/medical hospital, clinic, hospital records, birth parents, extended family
Placement Information: reasons for removal or placement, include journal entry, chronological list for each move, good-bye letters from caregivers, names of other children child was close to, 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, clinic

Developmental Information: significant milestones of development	Previous caretakers, care record, medical history
Adoption Information: date of finalization, adoption party pictures, any special mementos	Adoptive family and adoption caseworker

Lifebooks for School Age Children

Children removed from their homes 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 that 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 child was close to, pictures of caretakers, their birth and foster homes, bedroom, pets, church activities, neighborhood friends, ball teams, scout troops, letters, correspondence from birth family or other friends, names and addresses of separated siblings, mementos of special events	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, achievements and certificates	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, etc.	Adoptive family, foster care and adoption caseworker

Lifebooks 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 disjointed past to a more stable 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, 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 into the new apartment	Caseworkers, foster care and independent living caseworkers
Adoption Information: tools used to prepare teen for adoption (date of finalization, adoption day pictures, any special mementos	Adoptive family and foster care and adoption caseworker

THE LIFE STORY BOX

In addition to recording a child's history in a lifebook, is the life story box. This should be a box or chest that will be the repository of all the child's mementos – everything from the first tooth, to sports or musical trophies, to grade cards and teachers' special notes. The older the child gets, the more important these mementos such as samples of homework, special projects, pictures and mementos of special events, awards, achievements and certificates become.

THE LIFE MAP

(Use of this tool is primarily for children who have experienced the foster care system prior to adoptive placement or in the case of international adoption, children who have memories of life in an orphanage or foster home. It is helpful for children as young as four years through adolescence.)

The Life Map is a technique that is helpful in reconstructing the child's placement history. The Life Map can communicate a number of important life events for a child, events often lost when he experiences a number of moves. These life events include:

- where the child has lived
- how long he lived there
- the people, pets, places that were important to him
- why he had to move
- how he felt about the moves

The child should be an active participant in the drawing of his map. He should be encouraged to draw it in any manner he chooses. The key purpose of the Life Map is to generate open discussion about the child's history, to give the parents the opportunity to talk about and clarify any of the child's misconceptions, to provide support for painful feelings and to provide reassurance about his new parents.¹

THE FAMILY TREE

The Family Tree, a modification of the more commonly known family tree has a unique purpose.

The Family Tree can help children organize all the people who have been an important part of their lives. The biological family can be identified as the roots of the tree. These "roots" (the biological family) cannot be seen, but they anchor the tree, just as the biological family provided the child with a genetic heritage, and will always be part of her. The child's foster or kinship families can be represented on the trunk of the tree, as they have helped the child grow. The adoptive family may be represented on the upper trunk,

branches, leaves, fruit, and flowers. Through this activity, the child learns she does not have to choose between families and she can come to understand how each family played an important role in her growth and development.²

BIBLIOTHERAPY/VIDEOS

Bibliotherapy means “helping with books. Parents can broaden their child’s understanding of the circumstances of their adoption through the use of children’s stories, other literature and videos. As children read the stories of others, they can view how other youngsters in similar circumstances confronted difficulties and overcame them. They can also see how children who had the same life experiences faced loss, disappointment, separation, and fear.

It is important when selecting books for children parents should consider the following criteria:³

- a. Developmental age as well as the child’s reading level.** Preschoolers enjoy stories with colorful pictures and simple conversation. Older elementary youngsters enjoy stories with mystery, plot and intrigue. Teens usually pick books that are relevant to their concerns, such as identity, dating, decision-making, and parent-teen struggles.
- b. Choose reading material or videos that address a child’s apprehensions.** Those apprehensions could include leaving a foster family, loss of birth parents or siblings, livings in a transcultural family. Dr Vera Fahlberg points out that most of “G-rated” movies for children deal with loss.⁴ Movies/videos such as Bambi, or Little Orphan Annie, just to cite two, can open up discussion between parents and children and feelings of separation and loss.
- c. Parents should learn how to explore feelings and attitudes by asking appropriate and timely questions.** Those personal questions can be couched by asking how the child thinks the hero or heroine felt and how he/she would feel if he/she were in the same position.

Tools of Interactive Communication- From Child to Parent – Ages 4 to 10

- **Let’s Make a Phone Call**
- **Let’s Tell A Story/Let’s Write A Story**
- **Can You Tell Me What They Think? (Using dolls and puppets)**
- **Pick a Feeling Card**
- **Who Do You Go to For What?**

LET’S MAKE A PHONE CALL

The use of pretend and play are especially helpful in for children who are developmentally between the ages of four to seven. One helpful game is playing telephone. Very young children often do not respond to direct questioning, says

Dr. Vera Fahlberg, nationally acclaimed adoption therapist. Dr. Fahlberg suggests that using the toy telephone game when combined with pictures of adults from whom the child is separated can be helpful in gaining information that direct questioning would not obtain. It also helps parents to correct wrong information or wrong thinking.⁵

An example of using “Let’s Make a Phone Call” is as follows:

Casey, age six had been in foster care for two years before being adopted by her foster parents. Her birth father had died and her birth mother who already had severe mental health issues became totally ineffective and unsafe to parent a young child. Using the telephone, Casey pretended to call her birth mother. Prior to making the call, her adoptive mother asked her to think about questions that she wanted to ask her mother. When Casey “placed” the call, she asked her mother if she was still mad at her and why she couldn’t come back to care for her. Casey’s adoptive mom took on the role of her birthmother said to her, “Casey, I was never angry at you. I was very upset that your daddy died. When he died, I became very sad. There were many days I didn’t get out of bed. You weren’t safe during those times. I couldn’t take care of myself well and I knew that I couldn’t be the mommy that you needed. You now have a mommy and daddy who can take good care of you and keep you safe.

LET’S TELL A STORY/LET’S WRITE A STORY

Another creative technique is guiding children to communicate their thoughts and feelings about their life experience are what Dr. Fahlberg calls joint storytelling.

The child is asked to choose a favorite animal and name him. Then the adult starts telling a story about the animal that reflects the child’s history. After several sentences, the adult asks the child to continue the story. In this way, the child has the opportunity to share emotional reactions to life events as well as his perceptions and desires for the future.⁶

Why is storytelling helpful. According to Kathryn Brohl, in her book, *Working with Traumatized Children*, storytelling is “an effective way to address traumatic memories, [monitor] responses and to teach problem solving. Storytelling also bypasses resistance by speaking to, as well as offering solutions to, overcoming a trauma without directly discussing the trauma.”⁷

An example of using “Let’s Tell a Story” is as follows:⁸

Benjamin, age four, had been living in interim care for close to a year because of being severely physically abused by his mother's boyfriend. He had developed a close, loving relationship with his foster parents. Benjie had weekly

visits with his teen-aged birth mother who was no longer with the same boyfriend. The plan was for him to be returned to Mother's care shortly. His caseworker, Mrs. Shields, wanted to know more about how Benjamin viewed the past abuse and whether or not he perceived his mom as now able to provide adequate physical safety. She decided to use joint story telling to facilitate her communications with Benjie. She knew that with the younger child it is frequently necessary for the adult to ask some leading questions during the story telling.

Mrs. S: Once upon a time there was a bunny named Ben. When he was just a baby, Bunny Ben lived with his mommy and his grandma. How do you think things went for Bunny Ben when he was a baby?

Ben: Bunny Ben was happy with his mommy and grandmother.

Mrs. S: Then what do you think happened?

Ben: Then they moved.

Mrs. S: One day Bunny Ben's mommy and grandmother had an argument and Ben and his mommy moved. They moved in with some friends of Bunny Ben's mother. How do you think things went for Bunny Ben then?

Ben: Sad.

Mrs. S: Was Ben sad a lot? Was he missing someone?

Ben: He was *very* sad for his grandma. There was a mean man.

Mrs. S: When Bunny Ben was very sad, he cried a lot. Mommy's friends did not like to hear crying. One of them would get so frustrated that he would spank Bunny Ben so hard that it really hurt him. It is not okay for adults to hurt children. One day some neighbors heard Bunny Ben crying very hard. They called some adults who help bunny families who are having problems. One of the adults came to visit Bunny Ben's family. Bunny Ben had lots of bruises on his bottom. The man who had spanked him was very angry at everyone. Bunny Ben needed to be in a safe place where he wouldn't be hurt. How do you think Bunny Ben felt when he moved to a new place?

By continuing the story, Mrs. S encouraged Benjie to talk about his feelings in interim care and about his thoughts and feelings about the upcoming move back to Mother's care. She learned that he missed his mom and wanted to spend more time with her. However, Mrs. S. also learned that he was less worried about physical harm in the future than sad about anticipating the separation from his foster family. Like most children his age, the story solution he chose was for Mommy Bunny to move in with Bunny Ben and his foster family.

Mrs. S. then modified the ending to the story, acknowledging that Bunny Ben would like one ending, but that none of the adults thought it would work out for them. Instead, they decided that he should go live with Mommy Bunny but frequently visit with his foster family so he wouldn't miss them so much.

This same type of story can be used to help a child verbalize his feelings regarding his adoption experience.

CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT THEY THINK? - DOLL AND PUPPET PLAY

This "play" technique is quite helpful to communicate about adoption with the pre-school or young school-age child, ages 3-7. The purposes of this activity are:

1. to teach or clearly illustrate the facts of the child's history;
2. to elicit feelings and perceptions from the very young child;
3. to correct misperceptions (often related to magical thinking of children in this age range) or fantasies; and
4. to express feelings, wishes, or dreams of the "characters" involved in the child's past or present.

The parent can use small Fischer-Price figures, other small dolls, or puppets to represent important figures in the child's past and present. The parent explains to the child that they are going to "play out" a story. Identify the characters, using the real names of the child, birth parent, adoptive parent, siblings, and others, or using fictitious names but actual circumstances of the child's adoption. Allow the child to control and speak for the "child" doll to elicit his perceptions and feelings.

Parents should never "correct" feelings, but they can "correct" the actual events in the story by saying, "Let's play the story this way--I think this is the way the story might have happened." This play technique allows learning through a visual, experiential activity that can be repeated many times over (the child will thoroughly enjoy the attention and the activity as well as the ability to add more details and figures as he matures). Children who have difficulty understanding language will especially benefit from seeing a re-enactment of his life. This play therapy technique may provide a safe opportunity, for both the parent and child, to express fears, anger, sadness, good wishes for the future held naturally by all members of the adoption triad. Expression of these feelings occurs through a character, thereby creating an emotional comfort zone for all involved.

The number of figures/puppets used should be adjusted based on the child's age and developmental capacity to keep track of different "characters" in the story. A reasonable rule of thumb is to allow only as many characters as the child's age, plus one. That is, a four-year-old can accommodate a story with five characters.

Parents should not feel compelled to illustrate every detail in excruciating accuracy during the first play session. Initially, it is important only to understand the child's perception, "where the child is" in beginning to make sense of his adoption story. As the parent and child continue to "play the story" during subsequent sessions, the parent should address the following issues, one aspect at a time:

- Understanding what placements have occurred in his life
- Answering questions about siblings, birth parents, other attachment figures
- Understanding reasons for his separation from the birth family

- Exploring feelings about his separation from the birth family
- Understanding other separations that have occurred in his history (orphanages, kinship families, foster families, previous adoptive placements)
- Exploring feelings about his separation from these placements
- Understanding the reasons behind the adoption plan, made by agencies and courts or by the birth parents
- Understanding why the adoptive parents wanted him
- Understanding his future with the adoptive family
- Exploring his wishes/dreams for the future in relation to siblings, birth parents, other kinship or foster families with whom the child has connections
- Helping the child understand that his birth parents wish him to be happy and successful in his new family; they want him to make them proud of him
- Helping the child to understand that he can love and be loyal to many persons and families at the same time

WRITE A LETTER OR JOURNAL

Teens often go underground with their feelings – at least in their willingness to talk with adults. Sometimes the only way for an adolescent to communicate is through letter writing or journalizing. Below is a sample letter a teen wrote to her birth mother at the suggestion of her adoptive mom. The letter would never reach the birth parent, in this particular case, but Tasha was willing to share this letter with her adoptive parents. It gave them tremendous insight into her feelings and perceptions about her earlier life experience.

The Letter

Dear Barbara,

In just a few short days, I will be sixteen years old. Sixteen. Does that seem possible to you? It has been many, many years since I saw you. The last memory I have is at that agency. Mom and dad have pictures of that last visit. I was around four. I hope now that you are happy. Are you? I'm not, not totally anyway. That is what I wish for every year when I blow out my birthday candles. When you signed on that dotted line and gave me away, you blew out the candles. Why did you do that? Was it your wish for happiness?

In these 12 years I have lived with a wonderful mom and dad. They have tended to and kissed my scrapes and scratches, helped me with homework, listened to my excited chatter (mostly about boys), taught me to drive the family car (I will be getting my license next week). I love them for what they mean to me. I know what I have done these years. I know what my parents have done. But, mother, what have you done?

Everyone tells me that sixteen is too young to find you. They tell me that I am just not ready yet. I disagree. I have many questions that only you can answer. Why should such a large part of my life be missing? You blew out the candles? I had no choice. Why must I suffer?

Your daughter, Tasha

Journal Entry

Another helpful tool for teens is journaling. Keeping a running diary of their thoughts and feelings helps adolescents to formalize thoughts and feelings that are difficult to talk about. The following are two journal entries from Carol, who chronicled her struggles with adoption issues. She was adopted as an infant. Her diaries are written as though she was writing a letter to her birth mother.

Carol's diary entry

From Carol's diary – December 30, 1997 – age 15

today is my birthday.. at 2:26 am you gave birth to me. does it mean anything to you that so many years ago you gave birth to a child? well, here i am - thinking about you. are you thinking about me? it is only fair that you should be thinking of me, but how am i to know.

From Carol's diary – December 30, 1998 – age 16

it has been a difficult birthday to enjoy. thoughts of you dominated me all day. i feel like i walk around with a big label taped to my blouse. the label screams "ADOPTED", hushed voices whisper "given up," "thrown away" "adopted, adopted, adopted". i walk around, like today in the stores and it feels like everyone can see right through me and knows all about me.

NOTES

¹ Rycus, J. & Hughes, R. (1998) *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, Washington: D.C. CWLA Press and Columbus, Ohio: Institute for Human Services

² Ibid.

³ Schooler, J. (1993) *The Whole Life Adoption Book*. Colorado Springs: Pinon Press

⁴ Fahlberg, V. phone interview, July 13, 1999.

⁵ Fahlberg, V. (1991)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Brohl, K. (1996) *Working with Traumatized Children*. Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press

⁸ The story is taken entirely from a Child's Journey through Placement and is used with permission of the author.

Keefer, Betsy and Schooler, Jayne. (2000). *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past*. Bergin and Garvey. Westport, Connecticut.

LIFEBOOKS

PREPARING A CHILD FOR THE FUTURE



Guide to Your Child's History

Seven Reasons Why Children Need Their Life History

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

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

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 set of 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.
- 5. Records child's feelings about their 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 or 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.



SECTION

2

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 return's home or to adoption is a crucial activity.

Infants and Toddlers Lifebook (0-2)

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 child was close to, 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 that 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
<p>Placement Information: reasons for removal or placement, include journal entry, chronological list for each move, good-bye letters from caregivers, names of other children child was close to, pictures of caretakers, their birth and foster homes, bedroom, pets, church and recreational activities, neighborhood friends, letters from from birth family or other friends, names and addresses of separated siblings,</p>	<p>◆ Court records, intake worker, birth family, caseworker, previous caretakers, school teachers, counselors, adult leaders, ministers,</p>
<p>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,</p>	<p>◆ School personnel, teachers, yearbooks, school and community newspapers, coaches, school records</p>
<p>Adoption Information: tools used to prepare child for adoption (coloring books), date of finalization, adoption day pictures,</p>	<p>◆ Adoptive family, foster care and adoption caseworker</p>

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 disjointed 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, 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 into the 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

What Do I Say?

Age 3

Your first mommy couldn't take care of you. She wasn't ready to be a mommy.

Age 7

Your birth mommy had trouble taking care of herself. She wasn't able to take care of you. Neighbors were worried about you and called the social worker.

Age 10

Your birth mom made a bad decision and started taking drugs. She couldn't think well when she was using drugs and made even more bad decisions. Sometimes she left you alone. That wasn't safe for you.

Age 12

Your birth mom felt sick when she couldn't get drugs. She could not hold a job. She needed money, so she became a victim of sex trafficking. She left you alone when she met customers or bought drugs. Neighbors called the social worker, and a judge agreed you needed a safe home to grow up in.

Unpacking the NO!

Many children have barriers that prevent them from considering adoption. Strategies to address these barriers are listed below.

Barrier/Challenge	Strategies for Social Worker
Loyalty to birth family	<p>Children must understand that feelings for and loyalty to birth families will be unchanged after adoption. Refer to “heart box” activity, a tool for communication about loyalty to the birth family.</p> <p>Older children may need time before he/she is ready to call adoptive parents “Mom and Dad”. Adoptive parents to older children will need training and preparation to anticipate this resistance.</p>
Fear of risking disappointment	<p>Children who have had multiple placements may regard themselves as unlovable. They may assume they have been responsible for past placement failures. Children need assistance in understanding where earlier placements have been and why those placements ended.</p> <p>Often, placements have ended because the adults had difficulties or issues unrelated to the child.</p> <p>If, however, a placement ended because the parents could not cope with the child’s behavior, the child should be helped to understand the parents were not assessed, matched or prepared properly. This caused the placement to end. Care will be taken to involve the child in permanency decisions so that future placements are more appropriate.</p>
Lack of understanding about adoption	<p>Children need to be educated about the value of a lifelong connection. Most adults require some help and support from extended family members. Children and youth can be given examples of how important family relationships will be to them if they marry and have children.</p> <p>Social workers should speak candidly about adoption to youth in terms they can understand.</p> <p>Allow resistant children or youth to speak with other youth who have already been adopted.</p>

Barrier/Challenge	Strategies for Social Worker
Severing relationships with birth family	<p>Some children continue to visit with birth grandparents, siblings, or parents after being adopted by another family.</p> <p>Open adoption relationships are particularly helpful for an older child. The child, birth parent and adoptive parent must be helped to understand the birth parent is unable to parent, but child and birth parent continue to love one another. Adoptive parents in an open adoption will need training to ensure healthy emotional boundaries between members of the birth family and the adoptive family, and all involved should be clear that the parents are the adoptive parents. Birth parents in an open adoption will relate to the child as a favorite aunt or uncle.</p>
Name changes	<p>If a youth is resistant to having his/her last name changed, it may be possible to retain the birth family name as a “middle name” or even retain the birth family name as his/her legal last name following adoption. At times, opposition to a name change may fade away as the child’s attachment to his/her adoptive family grows.</p>
Control issues	<p>An older child or youth should be engaged in his/her adoption planning through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying his/her existing connections (resistance to adoption is reduced when the older child knows the prospective parent.) • Involve the child in child-specific recruitment activities. Ask the child, “What would you like your family to be like?” • Engage the child in decisions about possible matches. • Engage the child in planning pre-placement visitation.
Belief that no one will want them	<p>The social worker can share examples of children and youth of the same age who have been adopted.</p>

Reunion fantasies	<p>The social worker can ask the birth family (birth parents, grandparents or aunts and uncles) to deliver a “transition message” to the child. The transition message gives closure to the fantasy of returning to the birth family. It has three parts:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. You are loved and will not be forgotten.2. The birth parents cannot provide a safe home for you now or in the future.3. We want to be happy and do well with your own family. We want you to be adopted so you can have the parenting we can't give you.
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