



Children's Safeguarding and Family Help

Corporate Parenting Service

Life story work practice guidance

Introduction

- This policy has been written for social workers who are carrying out life story work with children as part of their permanence plan and should be read in conjunction with the Adopt London Regional Adoption Agency *Life story books guidance* which provides practice guidance on carrying out life story work and is available at: [Life Story Books Guidance \(trixonline.co.uk\)](https://trixonline.co.uk)
- It is Camden's policy that life story work is carried out for all children whose permanence plan does not involve them returning home to their parents' care. This includes children who go to live with Kinship carers under a special guardianship order.

2 Purpose of life story work

- Having a sense of belonging and identity is essential to young people's emotional development. Children living away from their birth family on a permanent basis have no opportunity to talk about their past life in the way that other children would, and because of this, they may lose track of their early experiences and feel confused about their identity.
- Because this will affect their social and emotional development and their sense of identity, CLA need a chance to build up information about their pre-care life and their birth family. Life story work is a way of providing this information to children in a structured way that can help them understand their situation and make sense of their early history.
- The process of carrying out life story work can be a therapeutic experience for the child, enabling them to talk about difficult things and helping them to come to terms with their experiences.
- Life story work needs to provide a child with the reason why they cannot live with their parents and why their parents were unable to look after them. It should provide children with clarity around events and incidents in their lives and help them to understand how and why the things that happened to them came about. It should also provide information on their history in care including people, places and events.
- An outcome of the work should be to help the child know:

Life story work

- who they are
 - where they came from
 - what has happened to them
 - why it happened.
- For many children, this will help to increase their sense of self-worth as they realise that being in care is not their “fault”. For some, knowing the truth of their early history may be reassuring as it prevents them from building up a false memory, or can assuage imagined fears.
 - Because it can help the child to develop their sense of identity and belonging, life-story work can also increase their resilience and help them to make a link with their ethnic and cultural background.
 - Life story work can be recorded as a book, video or in any other form that the child can repeatedly refer back to during their life. However, it is important to remember that the process of life story work is as important as the product.

3 Standards and objectives

- Life-story work needs to provide a chronological history of the child from their own point of view. This can be based on evidence from certificates, parent held health records, photographs, letters, toys and other items and memorabilia.
- Life-story work should cover significant events in the child’s life, including being accommodated, changes of placement and information on significant people in their lives.
- Information should be obtained from birth family and extended family members, previous carers and any other significant people. They should be approached at the planning stage about what contribution they are able to make to the work, for example providing photos or information and stories about the child.
- Life-story work will produce a book for the child that contains information about their early life and their life in care, but it is important to remember that the process of gathering and discussing the information and dealing with the feelings associated that helps the child to move on and come to terms with their history.

4 Preparing for life-story work

- Life story work should be planned within the CLA review process and agreement made as to who will conduct the work and how the process will be carried out. It should begin after the CLA review where the child's permanence plan is agreed and this should be part of the child's care plan.
- Before beginning work, the social worker should fully research the child's history using all available sources of information, including CSFH case records and interviews with significant people in the child's life, such as parents, family and previous carers.
- As part of the research, social workers need to identify the important issues for the child and what issues may arise during the course of the life-story work. The planning process should decide on who will be involved in the work and how they will contribute.
- Social workers also need to consider any issues regarding confidentiality that may arise. For example, if there is any information about the child's early history that should not be disclosed to them or any other person, and how to deal with any disclosures made by the child during the course of the work.

5 When carrying out life-story work

- Life-story work requires social workers to interact directly with the child and communicate in an effective way that enables the child to develop relationships and attachments and discuss their feelings. Birth parents should be discussed in a positive, non-judgemental way so that the child is able to understand their parent's situation.
- Life story work should be:
 - child-led
 - guided but not directed by the person carrying out the work
 - done at the child's own pace
 - based on observation of the child
 - positive in nature.
- Work could be carried out by the child's social worker, and it is recommended that to ensure continuity and consistency, the same person should be involved in the work throughout.

Life story work

- When communicating with the child, social workers should be aware of and make allowances for:
 - the child's history; it is important that social workers recognise that the child will have suffered harm in the past and may have deep-rooted concerns. This may affect their reactions when discussing issues in their early history.
 - the child's ethnicity, culture and language; life-story work needs to be sensitive to the child's background and social workers may need to research this to obtain information that will be useful to carrying out the work.
 - the child's stage of development or disability: this will help social workers to choose the most useful methods and tools of communication.
- To ensure that the child engages with the work, consideration should be given to the location and environment used and how long the child will be able to concentrate on the tasks. Sessions should be planned in advance to take account of these issues.
- If there is no information available on any aspect of the child's life, for example, if there is no information about their father, this fact should be acknowledged and an explanation given.

6 The life-story book

- The life-story book should be the product of the life-story work process and should be given to the child for them to keep and use to "explain" their history to them. The book can also be shared between the child and their new carers, particularly adoptive carers.
- The book should represent the child's own story in their words, illustrated with whatever materials were collected during the life-story work process. Any photos or written material that is put into the book should be copied and scanned onto the case record so that there is always a copy available to the child should anything happen to the book.