However traumatic a child’s past has been, helping them to understand it can prepare them for the future. Nicola Hill talks to foster carers who have taken some imaginative approaches to life story work with great success.

Life story work is widely agreed to be important for children and young people. For example, the final report of the Care Inquiry, an in-depth investigation co-led by The Fostering Network, into how best to provide stable and permanent homes for children in England, stated: ‘There should be more work done with children and young people to help them understand their identity and personal history, for example, making life story work available to all children and young people.’

The words of one 17-year-old quoted in the Care Inquiry report reveals how – too often – fostered children and young people miss out on knowing about their own history and background. She said: ‘It’s important to know your first words, your birth weight, what time you were born…many a time I’ve thought “what time was I born?”. When you don’t know it’s hard.’

Life story work trainer Joy Rees says: ‘Some aspects of life work should begin as soon as the child becomes looked after. It is an integral part of the social work task and not an “add on” or something that is only done when a child moves on to a permanent placement.’

She adds: ‘Life work needs a comprehensive, integrated approach, with birth parents, social workers, contact supervisors, foster carers and adoptive parents all contributing. The children deserve this.’

There are two aspects to life story work. The first is the day-to-day capturing of memories: the first day at school, baking a cake or learning to ride a bike. The second is therapeutic life story work: charting a child’s journey through life, from birth to now.

The day-to-day aspect of life story work is something that foster carers should be doing as part of their general care of children: collecting memorabilia, such as school certificates, tickets to shows and significant objects, such as a first teddy bear or special items of clothing, as well as taking photos and keeping records of important events.

‘I think as a foster carer you can seize opportunities to talk to children and help them understand where they come from. It is such an important part of their identity and self-esteem’

The Fostering Network Scotland’s operations manager, Sarah McEnhill, says: ‘The life story books or memory boxes will be something that will go with children throughout their lives. It is important to capture achievements (large or small), and special occasions as well as some of the day-to-day memories, as these all form part of the child’s history. Even seemingly silly things are worth keeping as they may trigger memories later on.’

The second aspect, therapeutic life story work, is normally carried out by a social worker or therapist but can also be done by a foster carer, if this is deemed most appropriate for the young person. It is important to work as part of the team around the child, gathering and sharing information. This will include tracing family history, drawing up genograms (diagrams that show family and other relationships), reading files and
Like us on facebook
facebook.com/thefosteringnetwork
Follow us on twitter
@fosteringnet

visiting significant places in order to explain the child’s identity and the reasons why they became looked after.

There can be hurdles, however, such as patchy recording of information, difficulty establishing historical facts from birth family members and children not wanting to engage with their past.

Sarah McEnhill advises: ‘This type of life story work needs to be handled very sensitively as it may uncover troubling memories and trigger some “magical thinking” about their past – some children may have confused memories about their past and uncovering the reality can be emotionally challenging. Young people will need time and help to come to terms with their trauma and loss. It needs to be at the child’s pace and when the time is right.’

Scrapbooks, films and digital publications

Foster carer Gina keeps everything – tickets, programmes, certificates – and she tries to capture ordinary as well as extraordinary times on video and camera.

Just over a year ago, a very traumatised six-year-old boy came to live with her. She has made a life story book about his first year with her family. It is in the form of a scrapbook with headings such as ‘One of your favourite things to do’, or ‘Our holiday’. Across a double-page spread letters, photos, tickets, programmes and short descriptions of events have been pasted in. Stuck to some of the pages there are gold DVDs in plastic wallets.

Gina has also made a digital version of the scrapbook with the help of a friend who runs a photographic studio. It is called A year in the life of… and is set to music. The opening sequences are descriptions her fostered child has written about members of the foster family and a video of him playing in the garden. It then flicks through the ‘scrapbook’ showing the photos and descriptions on each page.

On the pages with DVDs, the gold disc flies off the digital page and opens up into video footage of the fostered child and the family. One shows them teaching him how to ride a bike, another follows them on holiday from the airport through to splashing in a pool surrounded by palm trees; others show the whole family dressing up or helping to wash the car. It ends with the words, ‘Because every child matters…so do their memories.’

Gina says: ‘My plan is to do one of these a year, now that he is staying with us permanently. He really likes watching it and laughs, remembering things we have done. Hopefully, he will enjoy watching the videos as he grows up. It’s also great for us to see his progress; he is much calmer now.’

The professionally edited DVD cost £250, which Gina’s fostering service agreed to fund, but the scrapbook could easily be done on a home computer.

Gina used to foster mothers and their babies and taught the young mums how to do life story work with their little ones, taking videos with their phones and keeping baby clothes.

She says it also works for older children. ‘I had a 13-year-old girl turn up with a black carrier bag full of bits; you would think it was rubbish, but the objects meant the world to her. I took photos of everything in the bag in case she lost them. She loved being able to look at the photos at any time.’

Uncovering history

Foster carer Alison believes strongly that therapeutic life story work should be done for all looked after children and that foster carers should be trained and supported to carry it out. She conducted an extremely effective piece of work which resulted in the rehabilitation of a young boy to his mother, who he hadn’t seen for five years.

Top tips for foster carers

• Take photos and videos of everyday events as well as significant ones.
• Keep a memory box and put everything in it – ordinary things as well as special things.
• Take photos of the objects in a memory box in case they are lost or destroyed.
• Ask the child what they would like to include – what is special for them.
• Take photos of buildings, such as schools, houses and sports clubs.
• Give yourself time to work on a life story book or DVD.
• Have different formats such as photo albums, scrapbooks, digital story books and letters.
• Create the life story book with the child.
• Think about why you are capturing the information.
• Include letters and pictures from the fostering family that the child can read later in life.
• Find out what’s available to support you – many fostering services have life story work resources and training courses.
• Be creative!
The eleven-year-old came to stay with Alison as an emergency short-term placement, after his previous placement broke down. The plan was to move him into a residential unit. He was very withdrawn and wouldn’t even eat in the same room as Alison, let alone talk to her. The boy’s mother had been battling in court to re-establish contact and social workers asked if Alison would speak to her to gather some of the boy’s history before he moved into residential care.

“She was lovely, a young mum, who had rescued her son from a house fire but then had been left homeless,” explains Alison. “She had no option but to voluntarily place her son with his paternal grandparents, which she thought would be a short-term solution.” The grandparents though were keen that the boy should stay with them.

Alison gathered information and memorabilia from his mother, including photographs, his baby bangle, a calendar he made at nursery school and the dressing gown he was wearing when he was rescued from the fire.

“I decided his mum would be the best person to tell him about his life story,” says Alison, so she facilitated conversations between the two of them. “Mum really stepped up and agreed to tell him what he needed to know.”

They started with a timeline, marking down what the boy remembered and what his mum could tell him, including his height, weight and the colour of his eyes when he was born. She was able to fill in lots of gaps and correct stories he had been told, for example, that she had reported his dad to the police. The full story was that she had called the police because she was the victim of domestic violence and wanted to protect herself and her son. A support worker at Alison’s fostering service checked the mother’s story by searching relevant files.

“I had to support his mum quite a lot and encourage her to be strong and honest. It turned out from checking the files that she was incredibly honest, even though she wasn’t proud of some of her actions,” says Alison.

Alison’s fostered child became quite withdrawn for a couple of weeks while he digested the information. During this time a support worker took him out to give him space to talk. He told her that he liked talking about his history and wanted to know about pets he could remember.

The relationship between mother and son developed so well that social workers started to consider rehabilitation. Alison says: “It was like watching a little boy coming out of his shell, being re-born.”

The mother was also very reflective about her own life; she had been in the care system too. She admitted mistakes she had made, such as poor choices of partners, and stopped blaming social services for everything. This was used as evidence in court as part of the assessment to let her son move home. It is now 16 months since the rehabilitation and it is going well. The boy’s mother still keeps in touch with Alison and last week rang her to share the news that he had won an award at school.

Alison believes that without the boy knowing his life history, this return home would have failed. She says: “This was so rewarding, I think as a foster carer, you are best placed to carry out this work as you can seize opportunities to talk to children and help them understand where they come from. It is such an important part of their identity and self-esteem.”

As well as helping to improve relationships with the birth family and possible rehabilitation, Alison believes this work should be continued at different stages of a child’s life, as they may understand more as they get older. However, she warns it takes an emotional toll on foster carers and they need to be supported and offered training. “You need someone to talk to about your feelings,” she says.

In a paper on treating traumatised children, authors Alan Burnell and Jay Vaughan* suggest gathering as much information as possible and working through the child’s history with parents and carers using creative strategies such as drawing a road or a river as a metaphor for the child’s life, sticking in photos to mark significant events and letting the child draw or write on it to illustrate their feelings.

They say: “However bad or traumatising a child’s early experience and history might have been, if they have processed these feelings and experiences, and have been helped to form secure attachments, then they can reflect upon their past and their present, and think about their future, with a greater sense of hope and optimism.”

Journalist Nicola Hill is a foster carer of two children and is taking part in the Head, Heart, Hands social pedagogy programme. She sits on the Department for Education’s expert panel on improving permanence for looked after children, the All Party Parliamentary Group on looked after children, and fostering and adoption panels for the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. She has written two books about fostering and adoption, The Pink Guide to Adoption and Proud Parents.

* Family Futures’ Neuro-sequential Approach to the Assessment and Treatment of Traumatised Children: Neuro-physiological Psychotherapy by Alan Burnell and Jay Vaughan

More information

The Joy of Life Work thejoyoflifework.com

Information about life story work and training offered by former social worker, Joy Rees

Life Story Works www.lifestoryworks.org This is aimed at adopters but has useful templates for life story books, how to tell difficult stories and help children to express their feelings.

Many fostering services produce guides to life story work, as well as running training courses. Contact your fostering service to find out what help they can offer.