

Open file

An interactive CD-rom is helping children removed from their birth parents understand their past. By Kate Hilpern

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Three years ago, Minnie Hobbs and her husband adopted an eight-year-old girl. "We were promised that life story work had been done with her to help her make sense of the abuse and neglect of her early life and the multiple placements she'd been in since," Hobbs says. "Photos, birthday cards and explanations had, we were told, been gathered and - via a therapeutic process - been made into a book about her life that she could keep."

Life story work has become the accepted way for care professionals to work with children who have been removed from their birth families. It can result in a book, a video or simply a record of the sessions that take place. Tony Ryan, co-author of *Life Story Work*, a book on the subject, says that children can otherwise find it difficult to form new relationships and develop emotionally. "Life may appear a series of incomprehensible events linked with traumatic feelings," he says. "What's more, without explanation, many children blame themselves for being removed in the first place."

The problem is that life story work can be at best insufficient and at worst non-existent. In Hobbs's case, her daughter's book arrived eight months into her adoption. "Even then, it glossed over traumatic events and contained discrepancies," says Hobbs, from Guildford in Surrey. "This was an extremely disturbed little girl and the last thing any of us needed was for her to have a lost past."

It is the responsibility of a child's social worker to ensure that life story work is undertaken. According to Fran Moffat, a trainer and consultant for the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (Baaf), most do recognise its importance. "But under a regime with increasing emphasis on targets and paperwork, many simply don't have the time required to commit to it," she says. As a result, many social workers have started delegating the task to social work assistants. "The problem is that assistants often feel ill-equipped," says Moffat. "I have found that many consider life story work as a photo album. While photo albums are important, life story work is far more detailed and the focus should be on the process - helping the child understand what has happened to them and why - not on the book itself." Adding to this is the fact that children themselves often go to great lengths to avoid life story work, in the knowledge that they will have to revisit distressing areas of the past.

One groundbreaking attempt to increase good practice in life story work is an interactive CD-rom already in use by councils including Barnsley and Powys. Entitled *My Life Story*, the computer-based resource has been developed by Bridget Betts and Afshan Ahmad, who have been involved in life story work for many years.

Betts says: "Because even young children tend to find computers fun and accessible, the CD-rom seems to enable care professionals to persuade them to undertake the work. And because children can do some of the work on their own, the process makes them feel in control and is a less time consuming process for the care professional. For example, the child could be working on a very unthreatening section such as 'likes and dislikes' while the social worker is working on collating the hard facts."

Using a colourful menu system based on a treasure island, *My Life Story* opens into seven interactive sections including "past and present" and "people and places", with a range of

activities, user input, printable worksheets and help. Everything is characterised by music, sound effects, animation and does not require a high level of literacy.

Joy Hadden, a London-based social worker who has been using the CD-rom with a seven-year-old boy, says: "It works because he doesn't find it threatening. The family tree part, for example, is an important aid to knowing who you are and where you come from, but is something he was trying to avoid compiling because of painful memories. In My Life Story, it's a real tree with some noisy creatures living in it and space to enter all your important relatives and siblings. At first, he kept playing with it and now he's starting to do some work around actually filling it in with me." Striking also in both its simplicity and its success is the growing use of the "life map": a large piece of paper placed on the floor, with events marked along a road. Baaf, which runs life story work training sessions for social workers, favours this device, as well as plays, toys, board games and puppets, to help children become clearer by sorting out their confusion - for example, between fact and the fantasies they may have created in their minds.

According to Alan Burnell, a social worker and co-director of Family Futures, a therapeutic centre in north London, children involved in life story work often reach a point where they become distressed and the care professional, even with extensive training, is unable to meet their needs. "For these children - of which there are many in the care system - there are huge unresolved issues regarding their past which can't be contained within the time that the social worker has assigned to do the life story work," says Burnell. "What this flags up is just how important it is for children who have early trauma to access not just life story work, but some kind of intensive therapy."

This is where Family Futures comes in. Its treatment programme consists of several elements including art, drama, play therapy, disclosure work and re-parenting skills. Burnell believes that working in collaboration with adoptive or long-term foster carers is crucial. "So many are left as much in the dark about the child's past as the child themselves," she says. "But just as children have every right to know what's happened to them, parents have the right to know about their child. That's why we, together with the carers, go through in almost forensic detail all the horrible things that may have happened to the child from day one - re-researching information if necessary.

"The therapy with the child follows their life journey and deals with issues as they come up - ambivalence towards their birth parents, for instance. Carers remain involved at this stage because it's important for them to understand the child's history not just intellectually but emotionally."

In its five years, Family Futures has seen more than 150 children with an average age of eight. Treatment usually lasts two years and costs on average £20,000. Although this is expensive, Burnell insists that early intervention using post-placement support is the cheapest option. Alternatives include private or voluntary placements at £1,000 a week, or the longer-term cost to the state of mental health services or placements in young offender institutions. Minnie Hobbs would have welcomed such a service, had it been offered in the early days. She says: "If a child doesn't have an understanding of their past, how can they be expected to build a solid future?"

• Family Futures is on 020-7354 4161. Details of My Life Story on 01856-761334 or at: www.information-plus.co.uk <<http://www.information-plus.co.uk>>