

## **1. What is Personal Story and Life Journey work?**

In Hampshire, we want to provide a structure by which any professional can talk to a child in care and help them have a clear understanding of their own **Personal Story & Life Journey**.

Personal Story and Life journey Work aims to gather information, memories, facts and experiences from various sources, both easy and difficult ones and present them in a coherent and child-centred narrative. It aims to help young people talk and learn about their life experiences with the help of a trusted adult. It allows them to understand more about their life, and to help them become more aware of their emotions towards the people and events that have been significant in their lives.

Children in care have both a right and a need to know who they are, where they come from, what they have experienced, and why. This work helps children who have been separated from their family of origin by helping them to explore their past. It helps them to understand their own **personal story** of why they came into care and share their own history with others.

Each **life journey** will identify the good parts as well as the not so good, about their family or origin. By gathering together facts about their life, and significant people in it, children begin to make sense and process their past and go forward into the future with this knowledge. They might start to separate what they remember and what might have happened. As a result, they understand their heritage and culture, supporting them to establish a strong sense of identity.

## **2. Why do we do it? What are the benefits and its purpose?**

We recognise that for many children in care, exploring their past and learning about their family or early childhood can be challenging and difficult. However, this process is integral to helping them understand their feelings and process trauma.

Personal Story and Life journey work has many benefits, especially for children and young people who have experienced trauma or multiple placements in the care system.

Advantages include:

- **Understanding and Processing Past Experiences:** LSW helps children make sense of their past by creating a coherent narrative of their life. This process allows them to understand and process their experiences, reducing confusion and fear, which in turn, reduces heightened emotions. They may become less pre-occupied with questions and the not knowing. They begin to identify connections between the past, present and the future.
- **Building a Sense of Identity & Belonging:** By exploring their history, children can develop a stronger sense of self and identity. This is crucial for their psychological well-being and eventually helps them feel more grounded and

secure. They may present as less anxious, calmer and focused on their thinking and behaviour.

- **Emotional Expression and Healing:** LSW provides a safe space for children to express their emotions and feelings about their past. This can lead to emotional and physical healing, helping them to recognise and resolve strong emotions relating to past life events. In turn this helps them develop healthier coping mechanisms.
- **Strengthening Relationships:** Involving caregivers, social work professionals and key adults from educational settings in the process strengthens the bond between the child and their care systems. This shared experience can enhance mutual understanding, empathy and atonement. They develop an increased trust in adults around them. This strengthened attachment, particularly with carers, results in less placement breakdowns.
- **Empowerment and Resilience:** By reframing challenging/distressing narratives and understanding their past, children can feel more empowered and resilient. This helps them approach future challenges with a more positive outlook and enables them to see that change is possible. Thus, it develops a more hopeful view of what their future can look like and enables post-traumatic growth.

### 3. **How is it done and what is included?**

Personal Story and Life journey work is not just about reflecting on the past; it also involves looking at the present and future, supporting children in their ongoing **life journey**. Achieving this requires a whole-system approach to ensure that children in care have access to the same information about their history as their peers.

#### Principles of Safety:

- Child-led: the child / young person can decide how much to explore and at what pace. A relationship is important to be established first.
- Collaborative: a coherent approach amongst professionals and child
- Trauma-informed: to avoid re-traumatisation
- Honest and age-appropriate: explain difficult truths with compassion and according to the child's understanding
- Strengths Based: to highlight resilience

#### Sources of Gathering Information

It would be helpful for the information to come from various sources, including the child / young person. This will include facts, feelings, sensory sensations, thoughts and memories from everyone's perspective.

This is a list of what this might include:

- Baby books
- Birth certificate
- Photographs
- School work and certificates
- Memory boxes
- Family Tree and history – to include parents, siblings, extended family
- A timeline of their journey – both with family and previous carers
- Photographs – images of the child, their bedroom, the hospital they were born in, their school, favourite shops, toys, friends, neighbours. It is really important to include as much detail as possible, such as when, where, what, and who was there. Maps of where they have lived and schools they have attended may also be helpful.
- Memories – this can be funny things that the child has said or done, holidays and trips out, school plays. Again, being as specific as possible is helpful to the child in their life story work. Both keepsakes and audio/video recordings.
- Firsts – First steps, first words, first food they tried and enjoyed/did not enjoy, first haircut, first issue at school etc.
- Child's Personality – how the child was when they first came to live with you and how this has changed over time from your perspective. What hopes or fears have they had?
- Skills – activities or skills that the child showed a real interest or achievement in, i.e. bike riding, swimming, dancing.
- Likes & Dislikes – specifics about what these are, but also how they have changed with age.
- Significant people in their lives – photographs, letters, cards, from both family, friends and professionals.
- Social workers' and other professionals' reports.

Hampshire County Council Children Services have agreed to commission Virtual Memory Boxes for their Children in Care:

Virtual Memory Boxes are secure, digital spaces designed to support children in care with their Personal Story and Life Journey work. They help preserve meaningful memories and milestones, fostering identity, connection, and emotional wellbeing.

### **Virtual Memory Boxes (VMB) Overview**

**Purpose:** To support Personal Story and Life Journey work for Children in Care.

**Access:** Social Workers, IROs, Carers, birth parents, and siblings may contribute.

**Content Types:** Documents, certificates, videos, voice notes, and photos.

**Customisation:** Each VMB is tailored to the child's circumstances and access permissions can be managed to ensure safety, appropriateness, and emotional readiness.

- Some content may be hidden until the child reaches a certain age.
- Birth parent contributions require social worker approval before being visible.

**Integration:** VMBs are central to Personal Story work and should be revisited regularly with the child.

**Planning:** VMB engagement is part of the My Life, My Future plan.

### **Using VMBs in Practice**

#### **Regular Engagement**

VMBs should be visited regularly with the child.

Use VMBs as a tool during Life Journey sessions, review meetings, and My Life, My Future planning.

#### **Supporting Conversations**

Use memorabilia to prompt storytelling, reflection, and identity-building.

Encourage children to ask questions, share feelings, and add their own content.

#### **Adding Content**

Ensure contributions are positive, respectful, and meaningful.

Label items clearly with dates, names, and context.

Avoid uploading content that may be confusing, distressing, or inappropriate.

#### **Safeguarding and Sensitivity**

Always consider the child's emotional readiness before sharing sensitive content.

Consult with relevant professionals if unsure about the suitability of an item.

Maintain confidentiality and data protection standards at all times.

## **4. Who is the best person to complete Personal Story and Life journey work?**

This is the child's **personal story** and so involving them in what they want to include is essential. This will change depending on the age and stage of development of the child. Be prepared to repeat the same information adding details as the child seeks this, in line with their age and understanding.

It is essential that all professionals that support a looked after child including social workers, carers, teachers, health professionals (and many, many more) take responsibility for capturing the information from the child's life journey as it happens. It is important to think about keeping prompts in your diary, or making yourself reminders at specific times, to consider what is important to record and keep for that child.

Involving birth families in this where appropriate, can provide additional context and emotional support, enriching the child's understanding of their history.

Although a therapist or mental health practitioner will not complete the Personal Story and Life journey work, they might need to be involved when a child is struggling to integrate their life journey. They might need additional, therapeutic input to process the information, understand and accept their life journey and this forms part of the Therapeutic Life Story work, as we currently know it.

## 5. **What carers can do**

Foster carers and children's home support workers are often best placed to support children to create memory boxes or books which capture memories or moments in their lives and are the foundations for a child to understand their life journey. Carers can support children make sense of their journey by collecting and organising information about the child's life, including photos, letters and other important items. Some foster carer and children's home support worker recording may also be important to add to the child's memories, for example when carers have been particularly proud of a child's achievements.

Foster carers and Children's home support workers should also consider the detail of important moments in their lives for example writing a few words about their first day in a preschool or new school, not only recording the date and a photo but detailing what they did, who they sat next to and who was their key worker or teacher.

Foster carers and children's home support workers are also key in providing safe and supportive environments to facilitate conversations about children's pasts and help them to explore their feelings and emotions. If foster carers are unsure about what they can and can't say, it is important for them to have conversations with their supervising social worker and the child's social worker regarding this, so they are prepared, and children feel supported and listened to when they are ready to engage in these conversations. Children's home support workers can discuss any concerns about what they can and cannot say in their supervision or in team meetings; which can also be good opportunities to review the work completed so far and any ideas for the future.

## 6. **When is the right time to start the conversation with the child**

Personal Story and Life journey work is an ongoing conversation and not a one-off task, which can be revisited as the child/young person changes and grows. Although, the gathering of information starts from the beginning, it might be that the presentation of some information might happen later on. The integration of the past into a hopeful future is a step-by-step journey, with pauses, re-visits and accelerations. Personal Story and Life journey work should be viewed as an ongoing and helpful process throughout life.

As a rule of thumb, a child that asks questions, is ready for some answers; but always in an honest, compassionate, and age-appropriate way.

We would recommend avoiding Personal Story and Life journey work with a child that presents with extreme emotional dysregulation, are in transition and thus without a secure attachment figure or/and they do not consent to participate.

It is important to highlight, that we need to consider not only the child's chronological age, but also emotional and developmental age; as well as other presentations such as learning difficulties, Neurodiversity's and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder needs.

#### 7. **What is the difference between Personal Story and Life journey work and Therapeutic Life Story Work**

What makes Life Story Work therapeutic is the manner and way of presenting and processing the information. We would recommend a therapeutic parenting approach in the way of being with the child during this journey (e.g. use of a Playfulness Acceptance Curiosity and Empathy - PACE approach).

TLSW is about offering a safe space, within a trusted relationship to visit and re-visit the life journey. An attuned, consistent and well-regulated adult can become a co-traveller in this journey, while holding every perspective in mind. Noticing the child's emotional and bodily responses, in order to identify any need for co-regulation is vital.

Coherency and integration of any fragmented experiences or responses can be addressed with creative mediums that engage the right part of the brain. These might include art, music, sand tray, stories, card sorts and play with figures.

#### 8. **Trainings and Resources/Links** - All