

IDENTITY, HERITAGE AND LIFE STORY WORK

3.1 LIFE STORY WORK

TRANSCRIPT OF LIFE STORY WORK AUDIO

Joy Rees, Adoption Team Leader for Royal Borough of Kingston and author of 'Life Story Books for Adopted Children' chats about life story work with adopted children.

[Intro Music]

Joy Rees

Basically life story work is about helping children understand what happened, when it happened and why it happened. And practitioners use many methods to help children understand. Very often, especially with young children, it involves lots of play and really the best way of communicating with young children is through play. It is about using puppets, using toys, using sand play, painting, sticking, cutting, all those things are basically the best ways of helping all children, but especially young children understand why they didn't remain in their original birth families and ultimately why they were adopted.

So that's the basis of what life story work is all about, but for me life story work is not just about helping children understand why, it's helping them understand that whatever is happening to them is not their fault, because I think many children who have been in the care system and have gone on to be adopted, ultimately they blame themselves for any abuse or neglect. So underneath, the whole purpose of life story work is about helping children to know that it wasn't their fault and it's about helping them to raise their self-esteem.

I think the key to life story work is actually play, and in many ways I think it's still the best way of communicating with children of all ages. If you make it more playful you can actually help children understand some very difficult information. Breaking a child's history up into bite sized pieces that they can understand, not only helps the children but also the adults that are caring for the children to understand what children have gone through, because it helps them to see the child's life through the child's eyes.

The important thing is that whatever a child is told about their history must be the truth. It always needs to be a very sensitive and honest account of the history, but it needs to be age appropriate, so the language used needs to be appropriate for the age of the child, not just their chronological age but their emotional age and their cognitive development and how much they can take on.

I think you do have to explore the difficult memories, children need to know, generally children are removed from their birth parents because they suffered neglect and abuse and that's the bottom line. Their birth parents have not been able to care for them in the way children need to be cared for and deserve to be cared for. Children

need to understand that and from a very early age I think the reasons need to be broken down into very concrete terms for young children. Children need to know that they came into care because their mother forgot to get up in the morning, she would forget to feed them or she would forget to wash their clothes and there was no food in the house and the place was really untidy and very dirty and their mother or father couldn't keep them safe and they were left alone. I think that whatever the reasons, younger children can take those concrete facts better than older children, because at that stage they are at the concrete thinking stage and so that what they need to know, they need a clear explanation that it was the adults that weren't looking after them in the way they needed to be looked after.

Life Story work is incredibly important because if children don't have some understanding of what happened to them and why they were adopted, then as I said earlier, children tend to blame themselves for the abuse that they suffered and they will go through life thinking that somehow they just weren't good enough as children, that there was something bad about them. I think that if life work isn't done in an appropriate way then there is a danger that you actually feed into a child's sense of shame and blame about their history. So they need to have things in perspective.

They need to know that it was actually the adults that let them down, that weren't able to parent them in the way that they needed to be parented. Some adopters and some social workers are very afraid about doing life work because they feel that in some way it could re-traumatise the child, but actually, somewhere in their bodies, children know they have been abused and actually their early history has a huge impact, even the first year of life, or less the first few months of life if they have been neglected and abused it will have an impact on their development and if the children don't understand that and if the adults who are looking after the children don't understand that then they can't help the children understand themselves. So it actually makes sense to unravel the past for the children and if you can't unravel the past and help them understand what happened then it's difficult for them to move on really and live comfortably with themselves now in the present, but also move onto a positive future.

[Outro Music]