



Life story work for children and young people in out-of-home care

My Life Story Book is a record of a child or young person's life in words, pictures, photos and documents. Life story work is the work done with the child to develop their Book.

It is a chronological account of the child or young person's history and begins when the child enters out-of-home care and kept up during their time in care.

Life story work makes sure that children and young people have an accurate record of their family background and history. A key part is information about their cultural and religious heritage. This includes details about their birth parents' culture, ethnicity, religion, language and life in their country of origin.

Life story work can help children and young people to make sense of their past, and gain a balanced understanding of their present. The life story materials help them, when they are ready, to understand why they came into care and to express their feelings about this.

It is a valuable process so that children and young people can feel connected to significant people and places in their past, their family of origin, culture and heritage.

Life story work allows them to understand the reasons for their entry into out-of-home care and any later moves to new placements.

Life story work also helps them to piece together fragments of their lives about which they may have limited information.

Benefits

The child or young person can develop a stronger sense of identity and self-esteem through learning about and accepting their past.

Life story work helps to build a bond and develop trust between the child or young person in care, their carer and caseworker.

Life story work can 'bridge the gap' between carers and parents when the child or young person returns home, especially when parents feel they have missed out while their child was in care.

Structure

DoCS has developed the My Life Story Book as the suggested format for recording life story information. My Life Story Books are given to all children and young people who enter out-of-home care under a Children's Court order that places them in the parental responsibility of the Minister for Community Services.

The way a child or young person's history is recorded may vary because of their age and preferences. Other formats for recording their life story could be a scrapbook, photo album, treasure box, video or a computer-designed report.

My life story book

My Life Story Book contains:

- coloured worksheets
- plastic sheets for copies of school reports, awards, certificates etc. These can also be used to keep memorabilia such as baby tags, ticket stubs, etc
- divider sheets, to separate the different parts of the child or young person's life in the My Life Story Book, e.g. family, health and education
- stationery pack of coloured pencils, scissors, glue, etc.

Material put into a child's Life Story Book depends on a number of factors, including the child or young person's wishes and if information is available.

The child or young person may choose to include:

- photos with captions
- copy of their birth certificate
- drawings
- letters from their parents, siblings or carers
- postcards and pictures of where they were born
- photos of past or current pets
- family tree
- holidays and special outings
- anything else they want to include.

Role of carers

The carer is generally the person who works with the child or young person to record their life story. Carers spend the most time with them and have the opportunity to collect day-to-day information such as photos and other memorabilia.



Carers need to have a clear understanding of ways to maintain the My Life Story Book. This can include:

- taking photographs to put in the book at special events and on special occasions, such as birthdays and first day at school
- encouraging the child or young person to keep personal mementos to put in their book such as letters, cards, drawings and paintings
- recording the life story at the child or young person's pace. This may be a gradual process as they become more comfortable compiling detailed information about their families and time in care
- spending time with the child or young person at regular intervals to update the My Life Story Book
- discussing with the child or young person that the My Life Story Book is confidential and that no-one should access it without their permission
- keeping the book in a safe place. The carer should discuss with the child or young person where to keep their My Life Story Book so it is safe
- ensuring that the My Life Story Book goes with the child or young person when they leave care.

Aboriginal life story

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people placed in care have similar needs to non-Aboriginal children. However, there are differences that are specific to Aboriginal children and young people. It is especially important to provide for their cultural needs as this helps them grow up strong, knowing who they are, where they come from and how they fit into their community.

It is important to include information about an Aboriginal child's family, community and culture in their life story. This information can be found by talking with:

- the child or young person
- their parents or extended family
- Aboriginal workers
- their caseworker
- Aboriginal leaders
- Aboriginal organisations and community groups
- using internet, libraries, books and videos
- attending art exhibitions, performing arts events, concerts and cultural camps.

Life story for kids from other backgrounds

Children and young people from other backgrounds can explore their cultural and religious heritage and record details in their life story work. This includes:

- where the child's family comes from
- what the country/city is like

- the religious beliefs and practices of the family
- what language(s) they speak
- holidays, special events, national foods and dress associated with their culture and or religion
- how the child takes part in the culture and religion of their birth families
- what the child liked or didn't like.

Sources of information may include the child or young person, their family, caseworker and cultural organisations.

Planning

People who can help with life story work include the child or young person, a caseworker, the carer, a counsellor and sometimes family members. These people can have different roles depending on the task or may work with the child or young person on certain parts of their life story.

Make it clear who will be responsible for the roles of:

- structuring the life story work
- preparing the child or young person for life story work
- collecting information
- asking the child or young person who they would like to have work with them
- maintaining the life story work once the My Life Story Book is compiled.

Preparing kids for life story work

Generally, caseworkers will prepare the child or young person for life story work together with the carer.

An important aspect of life story work is to acknowledge the child or young person's feelings about things that have happened to him or her.

They can experience a range of feelings during the life story work. Some memories may make them feel uncomfortable or sad while others may be happy.

It is important that the child or young person is encouraged to talk about these feelings with a person they feel comfortable with. Additional support such as counselling can help deal with any difficult or sensitive issues that arise during life story work.

It is also important to tell the child or young person that their My Life Story Book belongs to them and that they decide who else can look at it. If someone wants to look at their My Life Story Book they must have the child or young person's permission.

More information

To download a copy of the My Life Story Book go to the NSW Department of Community Services website www.community.nsw.gov.au.