

STEP BY STEP



TO EFFECTIVE PARENTING

**Recreating History for My
Adopted Child**

By

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About Step by Step

Parenting is both an exciting and challenging journey. Having a child to love, nurture, and encourage is a blessing. However the journey is filled with challenges which are sometimes puzzling and at other times frustrating. This booklet and others in the series are designed to help you sort through the steps in helping a child grow and develop to reach her fullest potential.

Each booklet contains core information on parenting attitudes, skills and abilities. There are activities to work through to help in applying each strategy. While the booklets contain information which can lead to more effective parenting, it may not answer all the questions a parent might have in the area presented. It is therefore recommended that each and every parent join the thousands of other parents in the journey for lifelong learning. Parenting is a step by step learning process.

We invite you to read all our titles and join us in one of our many different training sessions. We look forward to walking together with you step by step to effective parenting!

Sincerely,

Ruby M. Johnston

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Founder, LAMb International

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CREATING BRIDGES FROM AN UNKNOWN PAST TO A PROMISING FUTURE

"I don't have any memories of the important people in my past. I wonder if the important people in my past have any memories of *me*."⁷

Each child's reaction to the separation from his family of origin presents its own set of unique, individual responses. But these painful feelings weave a common thread throughout the lives of older adopted children. For children whose memories of former relationships smolder vaguely in their minds, frequent themes revisit during the healing process:¹

- Feelings of abandonment accompanied by feelings of humiliation and worthlessness
- Anger at the person who deserted them either by surrender, death, or divorce
- Feelings of being responsible for the desertion, in total disregard of reality
- Shame or guilt about the terrible "deed" they believe caused the separation
- A need to punish oneself for such a deed

For children to move from a painful past to a promising future, they must have an understanding of past and present events and why things happened as they did. This understanding is vital for the child's sense of identity, his sense of continuity, and most all, his sense of worth." There are a number of effective tools for helping children to integrate their past into their present

The next few pages of this guide describe six effective tools for recreating a child's history.

- Life Books
- The Life Story Box
- The Life Map
- The Family Tree

- Story Telling
- Journaling



LIFEBOOKS

What Do They Look Like? Developing the Age Appropriate Lifebook

NOTE: The following material was adapted from *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child* by Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler.

Lifebooks for Infants and Toddlers (ages 0-2)

Gathering information for the lifebook for an infant or toddler is far more important than one might assume. Children at these ages have no memory of their birth parents, foster parents, or other significant people who cared for them. They often have no pictures of themselves or any significant person to help fill in the gaps. Completing an infant's lifebook while in foster care, whether the child's outcome is reunification with the birth family or adoption, is a crucial activity.

<i>What to include</i>	<i>Where To Find It</i>
Birth Information: birth certificate, height, weight, time and date of birth, hospital (picture if possible from brochure or taken by family) names of doctors, special medical information or circumstances of birth, Genogram, pictures of birth family, and cultural history	Bureau of Vital Statistics, case record and social/medical hospital, WIC clinic, hospital records, birth parents, extended family

<i>What to include</i>	<i>Where To Find It</i>
Placement Information: reasons for removal or placement, include journal entry, chronological list for each move, good-bye letters from caregivers, names of other children child was close to, pictures of their caretakers, their birth and foster homes, bedroom, pets, etc.	Court records, intake worker, birth family, caseworker, previous caretakers
Medical Information: list of medical providers, immunization record, list of childhood diseases, injuries, allergies	Case record, health department, caretakers, pediatrician, WIC clinic
Developmental Information: significant milestones of development	Previous caretakers, care record, medical history
Adoption Information: date of finalization, adoption party pictures, any special mementos	Adoptive family and adoption caseworker

Lifebooks for School Age Children

Children removed from their homes during the early school age years may have memories of those important people in their lives, but those memories are usually vague and fleeting. Those memories may also be attached to the trauma of abuse, neglect and the experience of removal. The lifebook should be that tool that fills in the memory gaps for these children and also replaces the fantasies that have developed. The school age child's lifebook should include the birth, developmental, and medical information listed above. It should also include the following:

<i>In addition to the information already cited, include:</i>	<i>Where To Find It</i>
<p>Placement Information: reasons for removal or placement, include journal entry, chronological list for each move, good-bye letters from caregivers, names of other children child was close to, pictures of caretakers, their birth and foster homes, bedroom, pets, church activities, neighborhood friends, ball teams, scout troops, letters, correspondence from birth family or other friends, names and addresses of separated siblings, mementos of special events</p>	<p>Court records, intake worker, birth family, caseworker, previous caretakers, school teachers, counselors, adult leaders, ministers,</p>
<p>Educational Information: list all daycare and schools attended with dates, names and addresses and photos, if possible, pictures of classmates, teachers and other important adults, copies of report cards, samples of homework, special projects, pictures and mementos of special events, awards, achievements and certificates</p>	<p>School personnel, teachers, yearbooks, school and community newspapers, coaches, school records</p>
<p>Adoption Information: tools used to prepare child for adoption (coloring books), date of finalization, adoption day pictures, etc.</p>	<p>Adoptive family, foster care and adoption caseworker</p>

Lifebooks for Teens

Teens, who have spent any amount of time in foster care and enter adoption or independent living, have probably lost track of the important details of their lives. They probably do not have many mementos of their past - little or no birth information or pictures. They do not have a record of where they lived and the people with whom they lived, the schools they attended, and the achievements they obtained. Putting a lifebook together for a young teen requires investigative work and perseverance. However, it may be the youngster's only link from a confusing and disjointed past to a more stable future. The lifebook for the teen should include as much information from birth, medical, and developmental records that can be traced. It should also include the following:

<i>In addition to the information already cited, include:</i>	<i>Where To Find It</i>
Placement Information: chronological listing of places where teen lived, with whom, reasons for moving, pictures of people and places that were important in the development of the teen	Previous caregivers, caseworkers, case record,
Educational Information: list schools attended with dates, names and addresses and photos, if possible, pictures of classmates, teachers and other important adults, copies of report cards, samples of homework, special projects, pictures and mementos of special events, awards, achievements and certificates	School personnel, teachers, yearbooks, school and community newspapers, coaches, school records, band/music directors, drama teachers,

<i>In addition to the information already cited, include:</i>	<i>Where To Find It</i>
<p>Independent Living Information: information and mementos gleaned from teens groups and classes, pictures of other teens in independent living, group leaders, pictures of graduating from group and moving in day into the new apartment</p>	<p>Caseworkers, foster care and independent living caseworkers</p>
<p>Adoption Information: tools used to prepare teen for adoption (date of finalization, adoption day pictures, any special mementos</p>	<p>Adoptive family and foster care and adoption caseworker</p>



THE LIFE STORY BOX

In addition to recording a child’s history in a lifebook, is the life story box. This should be a box or chest that will be the repository of all the child’s mementos – everything from the first tooth, to sports or musical trophies, to grade cards and teachers’ special notes. The older the child gets, the more important these mementos such as samples of homework, special projects, pictures and mementos of special events, awards, achievements and certificates become.



THE LIFE MAP

The Life Map is a technique that is helpful in reconstructing the child's placement history. The Life Map can communicate a number of important life events for a child that are often lost when he experiences a number of moves. These life events include:

- where the child has lived
- how long he lived there
- the people, pets, places that were important to him
- why he had to move
- how he felt about the moves

The child should be an active participant in the drawing of his map. He should be encouraged to draw it in any manner he chooses. The key purpose of the Life Map is to generate open discussion about the child's history, to give the parents the opportunity to talk about and clarify any of the child's misconceptions, to provide support for painful feelings and to provide reassurance about his new parents.²

Use of this tool is primarily for children who have experienced the foster care system prior to adoptive placement or in the case of international adoption, children who have memories of life in an orphanage or foster home. It is helpful for children as young as four years through adolescence.



THE FAMILY TREE

The Family Tree, a modification of the more commonly known family tree, has a unique purpose.

The Family Tree can help children organize all the people who have been an important part of their lives. The biological family can be identified as the roots of the tree. These “roots” (the biological family) cannot be seen, but they anchor the tree, just as the biological family provided the child with a genetic heritage, and will always be part of her. The child’s foster or kinship families can be represented on the trunk of the tree, as they have helped the child grow. The adoptive family may be represented on the upper trunk, branches, leaves, fruit, and flowers. Through this activity, the child learns she does not have to choose between families and she can come to for understand how each family played an important role in her growth and development.³



LET’S TELL A STORY/LET’S WRITE A STORY

Another creative technique in guiding children to communicate their thoughts and feelings about their life experience is what Dr. Fahlberg calls joint storytelling.

*The child is asked to choose a favorite animal and name him. Then the adult starts telling a story about the animal that reflects the child's history. After several sentences, the adult asks the child to continue the story. In this way, the child has the opportunity to share emotional reactions to life events as well as his perceptions and desires for the future.*⁴

Why is storytelling helpful? According to Kathryn Brohl, in her book, *Working with Traumatized Children*, storytelling is “an effective way to address traumatic memories, [monitor] responses and to teach problem solving. Storytelling also bypasses resistance by speaking to, as well as offering solutions to, overcoming a trauma without directly discussing the trauma.”⁵

*An example of using “Let’s Tell a Story”.*⁶

Benjamin, age four, had been living in interim care for close to a year because of being severely physically abused by his mother's boyfriend. He had developed a close, loving relationship with his foster parents. Benjie had weekly visits with his teen-aged birth mother who was no longer with the same boyfriend. The plan was for him to be returned to Mother's care shortly. His caseworker, Mrs. Shields, wanted to know more about how Benjamin viewed the past abuse and whether or not he perceived his mom as now able to provide adequate physical safety. She decided to use joint story telling to facilitate her communications with Benjie. She knew that with the younger child it is frequently necessary for the adult to ask some leading questions during the story telling.

Mrs. S: Once upon a time there was a bunny named Ben. When he was just a baby, Bunny Ben lived with his mommy and his grandma. How do you think things went for Bunny Ben when he was a baby?

Ben: Bunny Ben was happy with his mommy and grandmother.

Mrs. S: Then what do you think happened?

Ben: Then they moved.

Mrs. S: One day Bunny Ben's mommy and grandmother had an argument and Ben and his mommy moved. They moved in with some friends of Bunny Ben's mother. How do you think things went for Bunny Ben then?

Ben: Sad.

Mrs. S. Was Ben sad a lot? Was he missing someone?

Ben: He was *very* sad for his grandma. There was a mean man.

Mrs. S. When Bunny Ben was very sad, he cried a lot. Mommy's friends did not like to hear crying. One of them would get so frustrated that he would spank Bunny Ben so hard that it really hurt him. It is not okay for adults to hurt children. One day some neighbors heard Bunny Ben crying very hard. They called some adults who help bunny families who are having problems. One of the adults came to visit Bunny Ben's family. Bunny Ben had lots of bruises on his bottom. The man who had spanked him was very angry at everyone. Bunny Ben needed to be in a safe place where he wouldn't be hurt. How do you think Bunny Ben felt when he moved to a new place?

By continuing the story, Mrs. S encouraged Benjie to talk about his feelings in interim care and about his thoughts and feelings about the upcoming move back to Mother's care. She learned that he missed his mom and wanted to spend more time with her. However, Mrs. S. also learned that he was less worried about physical harm in the future than sad about anticipating the separation from his foster family. Like most children his age, the story solution he chose was for Mommy Bunny to move in with Bunny Ben and his foster family.

Mrs. S. then modified the ending to the story, acknowledging that Bunny Ben would like one ending, but that none of the adults thought it would work out for them. Instead, they decided that he should go live with Mommy Bunny but frequently visit with his foster family so he wouldn't miss them so much.

This same type of story can be used to help a child verbalize his feelings regarding his adoption experience.

Older school age children often enjoy writing their own story. What follows is a story written by a ten year old African – American boy, Mike, after his adoption into the Caucasian family of his first grade school teacher.

Tom-Tom the Round Pumpkin⁷

Once upon a time, Tom-Tom the jack-o-lantern was born on a mountain. But he was abandoned by his real mother. That made him feel sad when she couldn't take care of him anymore. He decided that he was too young to be alone so he went to find a new family. He looks and looks. He was sad and lonely while he looked for a new family. It made him act bad. Everyone thought he was a bad behaving pumpkin.

Then one day when he had turned 8 years old he found a new family of pumpkins. They didn't exactly look like him because they were oval shaped pumpkins and he was a round pumpkin. But they were still pumpkins anyway even though they looked a little funny on the outside.

Now he is ten years old and is a happy, good, silly, little pumpkin. He doesn't even notice their shape anymore. Life is good for Tom-Tom. Mike A.



WRITE A LETTER OR JOURNAL

Teens often go underground with their feelings – at least in their willingness to talk with adults. Sometimes the only way for an adolescent to communicate is through letter writing or journalizing.

Letterwriting

Below is a sample letter a teen wrote to her birth mother at the suggestion of her adoptive mom. The letter would never reach the birth parent in this particular case, but Tasha was willing to share this letter with her adoptive parents. It gave them tremendous insight into her feelings and perceptions about her earlier life experience.

Tasha's Letter

Dear Barbara,

In just a few short days, I will be sixteen years old.

Sixteen. Does that seem possible to you? It has been many, many years since I saw you. The last memory I have is at that agency. Mom and dad have pictures of that last visit. I was around four. I hope now that you are happy. Are you? I'm not, not totally anyway. That is what I wish for every year when I blow out my birthday candles. When you signed on that dotted line and gave me away, you blew out the candles. Why did you do that? Was it your wish for happiness?

In these 12 years I have lived with a wonderful mom and dad. They have tended to and kissed my scrapes and scratches, helped me with homework, listened to my excited chatter (mostly about boys), taught me to drive the family car (I will be getting my license next week). I love them for what they mean to me. I know what I have done these years. I know

what my parents have done. But, mother, what have you done?

Everyone tells me that sixteen is too young to find you. They tell me that I am just not ready yet. I disagree. I have many questions that only you can answer. Why should such a large part of my life be missing? You blew out the candles? I had no choice. Why must I suffer?

Your daughter, Tasha

Journaling

Another helpful tool for teens is journaling. Keeping a running diary of their thoughts and feelings helps adolescents to formalize thoughts and feelings that are difficult to talk about. The following are two journal entries from Carol, who chronicled her struggles with adoption issues. She was adopted as an infant. Her diaries are written as though she was writing a letter to her birth mother.

Carol's Diary Entries

From Carol's diary – December 30, 1997 – age 15

today is my birthday.. at 2:26 am you gave birth to me. does it mean anything to you that so many years ago you gave birth to a child? well, here i am - thinking about you. are you thinking about me? it is only fair that you should be thinking of me, but how am i to know.

From Carol's diary – December 30, 1998 – age 16

it has been a difficult birthday to enjoy. thoughts of you dominated me all day. i feel like i walk around with a big label taped to my blouse. the label screams "ADOPTED", hushed voices whisper "given up," "thrown away" "adopted, adopted, adopted". i walk around, like today in the stores and it feels like everyone can see right through me and knows all about me.



FINAL STEP

Recreating a child's history is probably one of the most important tasks assigned to adoptive parents. In taking the time to intentional work on lifebooks, lifemaps or story-telling with the child, his parent is communicating to him that all things connected to him are important – his past, his present and his future.

If you are an adoptive parent, we strongly encourage you to invest in helping your child to re-create his/her history. Choose one or more of the age-appropriate techniques from this booklet. It is a step to creating healthy relationships that is well worth the time and effort.

NOTES

¹ Hilary, Betse and Rebecca Richardson, "Developing a Life Story Book Program for Foster Children," *Child Welfare Journal*, vol. 60, no 8, September/October 1981.

² Rycus, J. & Hughes, R. (1998) *Field Guide to Child Welfare*, Washington: D.C. CWLA Press and Columbus, Ohio: Institute for Human Services

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Brohl, K. (1996) *Working with Traumatized Children*. Washington, D.C.: CWLA Press

⁶ The story is taken entirely from a Child's Journey through Placement and is used with permission of the author.

⁷ Anthony, Beth. "A Place for Mike." *Guidepost Magazine*, July, 1999. Used with permission.

OTHER STEP BY STEP TITLES WITH NUMBERS

1. Understanding Child Development – Birth to Two – “The Infant”
2. Understanding Child Development – Three to Five – “The Preschooler”
3. Understanding Child Development – Six to Eleven – “The School Aged Child”
4. Understanding Child Development – Twelve to Fifteen – “The Young Teen”
5. Understanding Child Development – Sixteen to Eighteen – “The Older Teen”
6. Communication – Responding to Children
7. Communication – Feelings
8. Communication – Asking Children Strength- Focused Questions
9. Communication – Being Direct with Children
10. Communication - The Languages of Love for Your Child
11. Communication – What you Say and How you Say It
12. What Every Parent Should Know About Child Abuse
13. Sharing Secrets and Keeping Surprises – James’s Story
14. Teaching Your Child to Say, “NO” – Jessica’s Story
15. Understanding Childhood Illnesses
16. Caring for a Sick Child
17. Disease and How it Spreads
18. First Aid – What Parents Need to Know
19. Home Safety
20. Childproofing Your Home
21. Teaching Safety
22. Food Safety
23. Foodborn Illness
24. Nutrition
25. Feeding Problems
26. Bringing a Foster Child Into Your Home
27. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Family
28. Understanding the Effects of Fostering on the Marriage
29. Guide to Dealing with Stress As a Parent
30. Guide to Building a Healthy Marriage Relationship
31. Bringing our Adopted Child into Our Home
32. Helping Children Understand Adoption
33. Joining With my Adopted Child’s Culture
34. Understanding the Birth Parent of My Child
35. The Blended Family
36. When Family Members Treat My Foster or Adoptive Child Different

37. Understanding Attachment
38. Recreating History for My Adopted Child
39. Helping the Child who has been Sexually Abused
40. Teaching about Sexuality
 - a. How to Talk to Your Child
 - b. How to Talk to Your Parents
41. Understanding Sexual Behaviors
42. Teaching Your Child about Abstinence
43. Talking to your Teen about Identity
44. Contracting with Your Teen About Behavior
45. Developing Responsibility
46. Teaching Your Child to Build Relationships
47. Teaching about Marriage and Family
48. Telling Your Child Someone has Died
49. Understanding the Grieving Cycle
50. Understanding and Approaching Behavior
51. Dealing with Lying
52. Toilet Training and Bedwetting
53. Dealing with Defiance
54. Dealing with Hitting and Biting
55. Dealing with Stealing
56. Dealing with Anger
57. Dealing with Fighting
58. The Child Who Plays With Fire
59. Helping My Child Deal with Fear
60. Helping My Child Kick a Bad Habit
61. Help with Tattling
62. Dealing with the Two Year Old's Temper Tantrum
63. Help with Thumb Sucking
64. Help with Bedtime Problems
65. Dealing with Substance Abuse
66. Understanding Suicide
67. Developing Good Study Habits for School
68. Dealing with Failure
69. Demonstrating Manners
70. Helping Siblings Get Along
71. Nurturing Optimism

MORE TITLES TO BE DEVELOPED IN THE FUTURE