

Tools and Techniques for Helping Children Integrate Their Life Stories

1. Introduction and Objectives

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Tools and Techniques for Helping Children Integrate Their Life Stories.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Recognize the importance of knowing children's unique and complete story and the negative impacts of missing or misinformation and secrets.
- Help children and youth construct a coherent life narrative that makes sense of their experiences and supports a positive identity.

2. The Importance of the Child's and Youth's Story

2.1 The Importance of the Child's and Youth's Story

Throughout their development, children and youth who have experienced major losses and other relational traumas will likely struggle coming to terms with the meaning of these events.

2.2 In This Lesson

Some questions they may ask are: "Why did this happen?" "Did I do something to cause or deserve this?" "Did my birth mom or dad love me?"

This lesson will focus on life story work with youth, which is a component of many treatment models for working with foster and adopted children and youth. We will focus on the use of lifebooks and digital storytelling. Lifebooks are a primary means for helping youth reconstruct the pieces of their history and fill in the gaps in their understanding.

2.3 Personal History Reflection

Let's begin with a simple exercise. Please answer each of the following questions:

1. Do you have a picture of yourself when you were a baby?
2. How many siblings do you have?
3. Where did you go to school in the first grade, and who was your teacher?
4. Are one or more of your birth parents still living?

2.4 Personal History Response

For most children and youth, their histories are collected and preserved by their birth parents. Consider what it is like for them to grow up without this basic information, even if separated at older ages. Some of you may have had this experience firsthand.

Their lives are often disconnected fragments of memories and fantasies, with gaping holes and distorted information.

Many children and youth have not had a consistent adult in their lives to be a "meaning maker." These are adults who have a shared history and help the child integrate their experiences, relational connections, and important life events.

2.5 Your Role

Your role in helping children and youth understand their life journey is essential to their ability to make sense of what happened in their lives, process their feelings, achieve a more reality-based perception of events, and integrate all known experiences into a coherent life narrative.

It can be difficult to piece together the story, because of missing information, misinformation, or painful information. And yet this process of putting the pieces together is an integral part of your therapeutic work as we help children heal.

2.6 The Importance of the Story

What is the importance of the child's or youth's story? Understanding their story gives you valuable information that will help inform your understanding of the child or youth and the therapeutic decisions you make.

Click on each circle to hear more information.

- The story gives you clues to the meaning of their behaviors.
- It provides you with insights into their view of the world, and their ability to form relationships. Additionally, what you glean from their story gives clues into the kind of therapeutic services and interventions that will be the most helpful for them.
- It provides information about triggers that the child or youth may associate with past traumas and losses.
- Their story helps the child or youth have more coherent understanding for themselves and helps parents or guardians understand behavior in the context of their experience.

2.7 Adopted Children

Listen to the experiences of adopted children from the video, "Adopted Children Part 1." As you watch, make a list of important issues related to their stories which you would want to address in more depth in your therapeutic work.

[Video Transcript]

AMANDA: I was feeling really scared because I didn't know where I was and I didn't know what was happening or whatever, because these people just came to my house and just took me. It was like at night when they took me to this house. And I felt really scared because these were strangers I was living with and I had no idea what was going on.

DAVID: My mama had fallen. She started doing drugs and alcohol. And she'd pull us out of school and go to our biological dad's house and just do drugs and stuff and not even care about what we were saying and stuff, because she'd do it right in front of us.

TIFFANY: Living in the group home, I felt like I wasn't respected and I was always mad and angry. My former family put me in the group home. And I thought they didn't love me anymore, it's my fault that I'm in the group home, and that I'm not worth anything.

ADAM: Switched homes like more than eight homes, just about. And then I was getting in a lot of trouble because, well, I was confused and stuff like that.

LUKE: Well, it's kind of hard because nobody really likes to move from another person's house that you're just starting to get to know, and then you move out. Then you got to get to know somebody all over again.

DAVID: Like nobody wanted me, like people give up. Like if I do one little thing wrong, they'll just send me away to somebody else.

TIMOTHY: I was like, "Is this the last home I'm going to?" And I go to like three more homes.

AMANDA: Every teenager in foster care always thinks, "Oh, we're never going to get adopted. We're going to stay in foster care until we're 18 because nobody wants teenaged. They want little babies, to let them grow up in their home." So we always thought, "What's the use of even trying to get adopted?"

BRITTANY: Because once you get bounced around too many times, you finally give up and say, "It's not going to happen."

[End of Video]

2.8 Important Issues to Explore Reflection

In working with foster and adopted youth, we explore their memories and the meanings and feelings attached to their stories.

How did their experiences impact their sense of safety, self-worth, and security?

2.9 Important Issues to Explore Response

You may have thought of these things:

- Not knowing what was happening or why
- Being taken away by strangers or placed with strangers
- Feeling uncared for, disrespected, or devalued
- Being moved around or not knowing if this would be the last placement
- Feeling unwanted and unloved
- Having to get to know people over and over every time you move
- Worrying that you'll never get adopted or giving up on having a family

3. Life Story Exploration

3.1 Life Story Exploration

The reasons why children and youth are separated from their families carries with it a heavy weight of loss, shame, guilt and fears. We are now going to consider therapeutic tools and strategies to support your work with youth to help them manage their story and heal.

Life story work helps children and youth to recall, process, and understand past events in their lives.

3.2 Two Theories

Therapeutic life story work is based on two primary bodies of knowledge - narrative theory and trauma theory. These have been brought together in many aspects of psychotherapy - particularly in trauma-focused treatments.

Click on each image to learn more about each theory.

3.3 Narrative Theory

Narratives, or stories, are the primary way that we make sense of our lives, construct meaning, and organize and remember our experiences. The meaning that people attach to stories can affect their emotions, beliefs, behaviors, and their identity.

Click on each point in the timeline to learn more about narratives at different ages, then click the "Back" button to return to the theories page.

Prior to age 3: Our stories are constructed through our own lens and through the lenses of family members and others in our lives. Prior to age 3, children's autobiographical memory relies almost totally on adults.

Early childhood: In the years between age 3 and adolescence, most children's and youth's life stories are co-constructed with parents or caretakers, as they tell children stories about times in their earlier life, and store pictures, artifacts, and other markers for memories.

Adolescents: Adolescents are able to construct their own narrative memory. When life narratives are dominated by unresolved difficulties, it can limit opportunities and adjustment in the present and future.

Your work with children and youth: Part of the work with children and youth who have had difficult life experiences is to enable them to construct and re-construct narratives of their own lives that affirm, inform, and interpret what has happened to them.

3.4 Trauma Theory

Trauma experience integration seeks to help children and youth explore, process, and integrate past experiences into a coherent understanding of their past and themselves. Trauma-related thoughts, feelings, and body sensations are often disconnected from conscious awareness but impact behaviors, relationships, and sense of self.

Many models of trauma-focused treatment focus on reconstructing memories of traumatic events and processing these trauma narratives.

Click the Back button to return to Theories page.

3.5 Life Story Work Model

Life story work recognizes that the life-long construction of a personal narrative involves the attunement of experiences and messages between internal cognitive, emotional, and physiological processes and their environment.

Once they are constructed, lifebooks can be used for therapy related to resolution of trauma and loss, and to revisit or reinterpret life events.

Attuned Representational Model of Self (Cook-Cottone, 2006)

3.6 Important Elements in Processing Experiences

Now let's get into some important elements for helping children and youth to elicit their story and facilitate processing and integration of experiences.

Click on each box to hear about these skills.

1. Trust: The most essential part of this process is taking the time to develop trust, getting to know the child or youth and finding the most comfortable way for them to express themselves. For example, art therapy may be more effective for some. Shooting hoops may be effective for others. The child or youth needs to know that they can speak freely - that whatever they tell you is okay and that you will not judge them or respond negatively.

2. **Safe Space:** It is very important to be attuned and listen for the child's or youth's perceptions and feelings about their experiences. If you know what they are telling you may not be accurate, continue to listen rather than contradicting their story, as there is likely a good reason for their version. What they perceive is their reality. There will be time later to reframe their perceptions in a safe and gentle way.
3. **Feelings Work:** Those who have endured ongoing traumas are often disconnected from their feelings and avoid feeling vulnerable. You may need to work with children and youth to help them to be able to identify and express their own feelings. Keep in mind that some children and youth may be completely detached from their feelings. There are many therapeutic tools for working with children and youth on identifying feelings, including bingo and feelings posters.
4. **Trigger Awareness:** This work can ebb and flow and lead to complicated memories, feelings, and triggers. Painful information about how the child came into foster care, major attachments, losses, and traumatic events are all part of the story that needs to be told.
5. **Reframe Cognitive Distortions:** As you learn more about their story, it is important for you to offer other information or possibilities that help to shift the narrative into a more realistic and comprehensive story.
6. **Normalizing Experiences:** You can spark conversation and expression of feelings using general statements and questions like, *"Some kids who live in foster care feel lonely and miss their mother."* Or *"Sometimes children who are removed from their families because their parents cannot keep them safe feel like they did something to cause this to happen. Do you sometimes feel like that?"*
7. **Psychoeducation:** Help the child or youth understand how vulnerable feelings stemming from their past experiences, and other triggers are provoking them to act in ways that are not attuned to the current event and are self-defeating. Increasingly help them to develop self awareness and self-reflective capacities.
8. **Address Missing Information:** Fantasizing is normal for children and youth who have missing information about their past. Ask them to think about the possibilities of what happened and the feelings attached to these possibilities. Make sure that fantasies and hopes are clearly differentiated and labeled from what is known.
9. **Pace the Work:** Finally, know when to stop if the child or youth is becoming overwhelmed. Pay close attention to what might be triggers so that you can be sensitive to them. Come back to the conversation later when they are ready to do so.

3.7 Life Stories Grow Up and Develop Over Time

Just as the understanding of adoption deepens as children and youth develop cognitively, so too should their understanding of important experiences in their lives.

As children and youth mature, they will continue to reflect on important experiences and want more details about their past.

It is important that their life narrative is revisited and reinterpreted as they develop emotionally and cognitively as new questions emerge and they come to view situations in a more nuanced manner.

This is important both for therapists and parents.

Listen to a foster mother describe this reality with her children:

[Video Transcript]

MOTHER: I adopted, the first time, the twins, and they've always known that they've been adopted. They didn't have big, big questions until we started the process with Simone and McKai and they got to see the process and how things came to be and how their birth mom signed her rights to us. And we just went from there and that triggered questions for them. They wanted to know, "Well, how did we come to you? What happened with us? What was our whole thing?"

And I thought, "Wow. Okay, where do we go from here? How do I put this and not make it extreme or not make it too much for right now?"

And I just basically let them know that they were taken at birth and that Mom had some problems and wasn't a good choice for a parent. She hadn't learned parenting skills yet. They want to get into real details, "Just what did she do or didn't do?" And I said--and they were like, they were saying, "Okay, we know that sometimes kids are born with drugs in their systems or they have this." And I said, "Well, you were. You were born with drugs in your system and that is attributed to your ADHD," because they know that they go to the doctor for their ADHD and they're on meds. And they were like, "Oh!" So that brought it full circle for them so they totally understood where that was coming from.

But again, they were preteen before we got into those types of things, and you just have to handle it with the most delicate care and just talk to them. Listen to their questions because sometimes they don't want you to give them the full, complete answer. They don't want you to go into real, real details, but they want some small details. And if that's what you can give them, that's great. And as they get older, you could add on because their questions will become more intricate. They will ask you smaller details and that's when you can get into all that.

[End of Video]

4. Tools for Life Story Exploration

4.1 Tools for Life Story Exploration

Embarking upon this journey with children and youth is essential work of the treatment plan but must be approached carefully and at a pace they can tolerate given the difficult nature of their stories. We will explore several tools that you can use in your practice to help open the dialogue and guide the exploration.

4.2 Therapeutic Lifebook Work

Many foster and adoptive parents are encouraged to do lifebooks for their children, but often these are done in a prescribed format, from the adult's point of view, and without therapeutic processing of children's perceptions and feelings.

Therapeutic lifebook work is more than constructing a scrapbook of pictures and facts. It is a path to memory, to reinterpretation, and to understanding. It gives children and youth the pieces of the puzzle on which to build a coherent life narrative and a positive sense of identity.

Click on each box to hear more about the characteristics of a lifebook.

1. A lifebook is a tangible, chronological representation of major aspects of the child's or youth's story: past, present, and hopes for the future
2. It evolves over time to incorporate more detailed information and explanations
3. It is developed from the child's or youth's point of view
4. It incorporates all experiences the child has had

4.3 Building a Lifebook

Because lifebook work typically includes processing painful experiences, the lifebook should be created slowly and in stages.

The child or youth should actively participate in creating their lifebook.

This work may help adoptive parents understand significant people in the child's life and provide context for their current functioning.

Youth referred for therapy may already have a lifebook.

You will need to build from what is available already, and may use family members, mentors, interns, or previous service providers to help gather the information.

4.4 Content Overview

So, what should be included in the lifebook?

There should be pages that contain information and photos about when and where the child was born, birth family members, and history about where and with whom the child lived, including foster parents and other supportive adults.

Research can also identify other meaningful information, such as maps showing where the child or youth was born and places they lived, pictures of the region, pictures of community events, and other creative items that are meaningful to them.

If no photos are available, having the family take a picture of the house or school, or having the child draw pictures can be useful. You can also use the Internet to get images of locations.

4.5 Lifebook Content

Click on each item to learn what information (if available) Lifebooks should contain.

1. Birth certificate (if available), hospital record of the birth with footprints, or adoption papers
2. Why the child came to be separated from birth family
3. Pictures of the child at different ages, birth family members, and foster and kinship families with whom they have lived
4. Hobbies or interests, strengths and talents
5. Observations or letters by caregivers, teachers, coaches, friends, and other important people in the child's life
6. School reports and significant school memories
7. Earliest memory and memories surrounding key events
8. Information about people and pets who are important to the child
9. Child's adoption story
10. Drawings or other forms of expression the child or youth wants to add to tell their story

4.6 Caution

There are two notes of caution here when it comes to creating a lifebook with a child.

Click on each section to hear more.

Caution 1: Be sure to ask the child or youth about their feelings regarding events in their life before you add any statements about feelings. Otherwise, the book will not feel like their own. For instance, if, on the day of moving to their adoptive family, the child or youth felt fear and anxiety, then it is important for that to be in the book. Stating otherwise, for example, that they felt happy and relieved at having a "forever family" will be invalidating and inaccurate. If you don't know how the child or youth felt, and they cannot tell you, just state the facts. Do not make assumptions.

Caution 2: You will need to decide whether the lifebook should remain in the office while the child or youth is in therapy or taken home and brought back to therapy sessions. Some therapists prefer to keep it in the office so it can be used spontaneously, but with the clear message that it belongs to them and will be taken home when treatment ends. You may also suggest that parents provide duplicates of all documents and pictures rather than originals, just in case the book is lost or damaged.

4.7 Benefits of Lifebook Work

Lifebook work may be part of a child's individual therapy or family sessions. Above all, lifebook work is a path to memory and healing. It provides opportunities to bring difficult feelings and thoughts to the surface and expand the youth's understanding of events. It can also help parents have a deeper understanding of their child's experiences and can support communicative openness between parents and children.

Take a couple of minutes to watch the following video clip about Rebecca, a foster mom, talk about the benefit of lifebook work with her daughter, Lexi.

[Video Transcript]

REBECCA: My name is Rebecca and I'm a foster and adoptive parent through LSSI. Lexi has been here, I think about 6 months; so long enough that we knew each other fairly well and she'd settled in fairly well. Her case worker suggested working with Lifebooks. Lexi has been in the foster system her whole life. And so she came to me at age 6.5, not remembering anything except for the last home she was in.

So she had these huge gaps in her life that nobody had answers to. So her case worker at LSSI was able to go and get letters and pictures from her first 2 foster homes, that she didn't know anything about. And for her to read a letter that said, "When she was a baby, she would crawl and sleep with her head in the corner of the crib", that was something that was so meaningful to her because she didn't know that about herself. And before all of this, she would often talk about how nobody loved her and she didn't belong anywhere.

And through the Lifebook process, it began to shift. And she would read these letters and for her, I think it filled in that space and made her feel like there were people who had cared about her and people who had loved her, her whole life, that she didn't even remember. And so that she was loved, and she did belong to places, and she did belong in families. And so I didn't hear any more, "I don't belong here, and I don't feel loved, and nobody wants me."

And it wasn't something she could really articulate. But it came out in the way that she was behaving. She looked so much more confident by the end of the process. And she felt comfortable asking questions about where she'd been, and about her birth family, which we had hardly talked about before we started the Lifebook process. But it kind of opened the door for all of those conversations to happen and for her to feel safe and comfortable and know this is a place she could talk about her life before she got here without worrying that she wasn't supposed to or she'd get in trouble or she would hurt my feelings.

But instead it was something that was OK to figure out and to process and to ask questions about.

[End of Video]

4.8 Timeline

A tool that can be integrated into life story work is a Timeline. Click the icons to hear about timelines.

1. The timeline provides you, as a therapist, a deeper understanding of the number, frequency, and duration of moves and placements a child or youth has experienced and the impacts they have on their mental health. This can also guide your course of treatment.

2. By creating a timeline, the child or youth can see a broader picture of their life and create order out of fragmented memories and gaps in information. This contributes to a sense of continuity in their life.
3. The timeline can also incorporate the adoptive and birth parent timelines in conjunction with the child's.
4. One approach is an exercise called "The River of Life." The child, often with the help of family and professionals, draws a mural on butcher paper depicting the child's life as a river. The banks of the river may have homes representing various placements. The river may have rapids or falls representing difficult experiences or important milestones.

5. Digital Stories

5.1 Digital Stories

Another creative tool for life story work is digital stories. Digital stories are especially useful with teens who are accustomed to chronicling their lives through social media.

5.2 Digital Stories

The digital story can be developed using computer-based images, music, text, video clips and recorded narrative, all incorporated and chosen to represent the story the youth is sharing.

This is a technique that allows for tremendous creative expression on the part of youth and can be a very effective tool in the creation and retelling of their stories.

As you know, however, their stories are powerful, deeply personal, and can evoke a host of emotions.

Therefore, it is so important that you, and the youths' caregivers, remain vigilant that the process itself does not cause or perpetuate trauma for the youth.

Additional information on digital storytelling is in the Resources tab.

5.3 Example of a Digital Story

Let's watch an example of a digital story from Brondalyn.

[Video Transcript]

BRONDALYN: I was born in the bathroom in my great-grandmother's house in Altus, Oklahoma. It is said that I am the youngest of seven. I was in foster care from six years old to eighteen years old. My birth mother told me she couldn't handle me. I later found out that my mother kept my placement a secret. Being in foster care was difficult. During my early years in custody, I was very outgoing with more personality than Aretha Franklin could ever imagine. As I grew up in custody, my personality was my greatest strength and hindrance.

Being in therapy to foster care provided me with multiple opportunities to grow: being freshman class president and a varsity cheerleader. I have to admit, it took me years to deal with my anger and feelings of abandonment. The permanent connections I made in custody were key in helping me overcome my feelings. I'm truly a product of my supportive community. There was a particular staff named Louise Wilcox, better known as Grand-mommy. She taught me that education is the key, and it has stuck with me since.

When I was 16, I worked at the Golden Goose Flea Market as the duck. I would dress up in the costume to bring in new customers. I was the kid at the flea market, and the vendors pushed me to be great. They didn't care what my circumstances were. My foster parents, whom I consider my mom and dad, has had the greatest impact on my life. Having them in my life has truly been vital to my success. My parents loved me even when I wouldn't let them. They are the reason I am here today, they have supported me in all my endeavors and have shown me what a family truly is.

My parents taught me that love has no color. I have four blond hair and blue-eyed younger siblings, who I love unconditionally. Today I am 22 and currently in college working on my bachelors in political science. I am president of College Democrats of the State of Oklahoma and also activities coordinator for our student government. I am a former foster youth, and I am proud of it.

[End of Video]

Video obtained from: <http://youth.gov/feature-article/digital-stories-voices-foster-care-youth>

6. Bibliotherapy and Cinema Therapy

6.1 Bibliotherapy and Cinematherapy

Let's turn now to two other mediums for helping a child or youth to develop their story: literature and film which can be used to elicit discussion and reflection.

6.2 Bibliotherapy

Are you familiar with the phrase, "Never underestimate the power of a good book?" In this case, literature is used to help a child connect with feelings and begin to create a story for themselves. Click on the arrow to turn the page.

1. We have all had the experience of getting involved with a good story, and when we identify with a character or a situation that makes the story more meaningful.
2. Reading a story that has a familiar theme can open the door to a conversation and make difficult subjects easier by talking about the characters and their situation rather than talking directly about the child's or youth's experience.
3. There are many excellent books for children and youth with themes that touch on the traumas they have endured, and many with adoption themes. See *Foster Care and Adoption-Friendly Children's Books* in the Resources section.

6.3 Cinematherapy

Let's turn now to Cinematherapy. Movies engage both our visual and auditory senses, and we experience movies at an emotional level especially when we identify with the characters and the story.

Movies and TV shows can be very helpful in opening conversations with children and youth about their own experiences, again through discussion of a story or character and relating it to their own experiences.

There are many movies that can be used to talk about loss and grief and a host of other issues. Click the icon below or check the Resources tab for the handout entitled, Adoption at the Movies that recommends an adoption-related movie for each week of the year.

6.4 Cinematherapy Video

Let's look at the movie, *Martian Child*, a story about a young boy placed from foster care into a preadoptive home.

[Video Transcript]

[FIRST CLIP FROM THE MOVIE MARTIAN CHILD]

MR. Gordon: That was a nice strikeout, huh? That's called a strikeout. It's pretty cool, huh? You want a peanut? You know what's really cool about baseball; you know what I love about baseball? Baseball is the only sport where you can fail 70 percent of the time and still be great. It's about trying hard and never, ever, ever giving up. Just think about it, if you can hit three out of every ten times you're at bat, you're really good. If you do a little bit better than that, just a little bit better than that, maybe 3.2--3.3 times, you're great and you can be a star and you're going to make it to the big show. And if you do that in the big show, you're a superstar.

[SECOND CLIP FROM THE MOVIE MARTIAN CHILD]

Mr. Gordon: These pictures are mine, and they're really important to me, and I need to understand why you took them. Will you tell me? Please, I need you to tell me.

CHILD-1: Because you love her so much.

Mr. Gordon: Hmm. That's really true, but that doesn't change the way I feel about you, pal. Not even a little. But what we will never do is we will never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, give up. Winston Churchill said that, I think.

[THIRD CLIP FROM THE MOVIE MARTIAN CHILD]

FEMALE-1: So all this moving from school to school, how's that been for you?

CHILD-1: There's been some rough times, but the important thing is to--you have to face your problems, and you should never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever give up, never, ever, ever, ever. Winston Churchill said that, I think.

MALE-2: Winston Churchill, he was a very smart man, huh?

MALE-3: Um, did Mr. Gordon coach you on what to say here today?

CHILD-1: He only coached me on one thing.

MALE-2: What's that?

CHILD-1: If you hit three out of ten, you're a star. If you get even a little better than that, a little better than that, you're a superstar. Can I get a cup of coffee? I like coffee.

[End of Video]

7. Conclusion

7.1 Wrapping Up

Different from other populations with whom you work, having the skills to help youth build a coherent life narrative is central to your work with foster, adoptive, and guardianship families.

Life story work provides you insight into experiences from the youth's point of view. It is also foundational to getting to the core of their challenges and provides a bridge to healing for a cohesive sense of self.

7.2 Learning Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

7.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

7.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

7.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have now completed Tools and Techniques for Helping Children Integrate Their Life Stories.

In the next lesson, we will focus on family work.