

Writing their own life story

For young people who are very comfortable with written expression, it might be possible to encourage them to write their own autobiographical narrative which can be worked upon over time. This can enable them to put events into order and encourages healing through self-reflection with the writing acting as a 'container', giving children's thoughts and feelings a shape and structure rather than remaining unprocessed and overwhelming.

Difficult experiences can then be remembered and thought about without re-traumatising the child. A more positive self-identity can be constructed. The written expression could be supplemented with visual imagery to deepen the self-expression.

Such a '*story of my life*' may be for no-one's eyes but the child's own. They might want to share it though through a desire to explore it further or even through pride.

It could form one aspect of ongoing 'life-story work' which is carried out in conjunction with a skilled and trusted worker and, usually, the substitute carer.

The narrative could also be turned into a semi-fictional account which allows themes and emotions to be developed in the way they are felt and experienced internally rather than being constricted by factual reality.

Case Example

14 year old Mindy has been in 11 foster placements over the last 10 years. There have been numerous and complex reasons for the foster placement moves and it has been almost impossible for Mindy to develop any kind of coherent narrative about her life course.

Mindy has finally settled in her current placement over the last six months and her social worker and foster carer have talked with her about doing some life story work together to gradually try and put some of the pieces of the 'jigsaw that is her life' together.

As things have been more settled Mindy is able to think about the bits she already knows or remembers about her life experiences and the numerous perceptions and feelings she has about them. She feels it would be really important to begin life story work by making some kind of sense of these fragments and then to try and fill in the gaps in from there.

She has a computer in her room and begins to type out fragments of memory in a series of short documents, some only a few lines long. As this progresses she begins to share some of these with her worker and carer. They suggest that she might want to print out the separate pages of each fragment of memory and place them in a folder that can be added to as more and more emerges. They also encourage her to experiment with the

visual appearance of these autobiographical writings, playing with fonts, colours and illustrations. This becomes, as Mindy says, “a very precious project”.

Over the next two years more and more gets added to this life narrative. Mindy and her worker visit places she has lived and take photos. Letters from significant people containing reflections on her history are pasted in. Mindy adds in notes she has taken from accessing her social services file.

Looking Back

At 16 Mindy is moving out of the placement into independent living. She talks about how important this autobiography is to her now, her most precious possession. It has helped her finally to make some sense out of her life and it will have pride of place in her new home.

Further reading:

Burnell, A. & Vaughan, J. (2008) Remembering Never to Forget and Forgetting Never to Remember: Re-thinking Life Story Work. In B. Luckock & M. Lefevre (eds.) *Direct Work: Social Work with Children and Young People in Care*. BAAF, London.