

# Introduction

## What is this book for?

*When adolescents are supported and encouraged by caring adults, they thrive in unimaginable ways, becoming resourceful and contributing members of families and communities. Bursting with energy, curiosity and spirit that are not easily extinguished, young people have the potential to change negative societal patterns of behaviour and break cycles of violence and discrimination that pass from one generation to the next. With their creativity, energy and enthusiasm, young people can change the world in astonishing ways, making it a better place not only for themselves but for everyone.*

(UNICEF, 2002, p. 3)

This book invites practitioners from all professions and carers who work with vulnerable adolescents to engage with them through digital life story work. Digital life story work involves using digital technologies to create opportunities for supportive conversations with young people which can help them to make sense of their past, their experiences and their aspirations.

This book builds on a four-year research project undertaken at the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. The research project was Simon Hammond's PhD and was inspired by his time in practice as a residential worker.

During this time, Simon noticed that while some of the adolescents he worked with wanted to talk about their experiences, they were unwilling to engage using traditional life story work resources, frequently citing them as being "for kids". However, they would often use pictures and video clips on their mobile phones and talk to him about places and people from their past and present.

Informed by this, the original research project aimed to use the appeal of digital technology to develop adolescent-specific life story work resources. To do this, the project worked with young people, their carers and care providers to see if

adolescent-specific resources would be used by the young people and how they would be received. Numerous interviews and focus groups with young people and carers were undertaken, and are drawn upon by this book to provide real-world quotes and case study examples.

The book is primarily for practitioners working with looked after young people, residential workers, foster carers and others, including adoptive parents. However, it is also relevant for therapists, counsellors and others who work with vulnerable young people. Building upon ideas about life story work, as an approach established in Ryan and Walker (first edition 1985 and updated many times, most recently in 2007), this book offers a range of illustrative, practical and jargon-free exercises which use technology to enable effective communication with adolescents.

## Using this book

The book may be read from cover to cover, or dipped into according to your knowledge, confidence and needs.

- **Chapter 1, 'Why do digital life story work?'**, introduces the ideas behind digital life story work, outlining the importance of helping looked after young people reflect, with the aim of enhancing their self-understanding and sense of a coherent identity.
- **Chapter 2, 'Thinking about a project'**, introduces a number of creative individual "off the peg" ideas for digital life story projects. The level of technological skill needed across the nine projects ranges from beginner levels to those which intermediate computer users may find challenging at first.
- **Chapter 3, 'Working with young people'**, introduces ways to work with young people via technology.
- **Chapter 4, 'Preplanning, pitching and planning'**, looks at important aspects of planning a project and pitching it to the young person, to help ensure it will run smoothly.
- **Chapter 5, 'Creating content'**, looks at creating content, particularly filmed content, and points you may need to consider, including when filming in public.
- **Chapter 6, 'Editing and production'**, gives practical information on how to edit filmed content.
- **Chapter 7, 'Completing the project'**, gives some ideas for how to celebrate completing a project, including holding film premières.
- **Chapter 8, 'Towards tomorrow: storying the self'**, reinforces the ongoing need to discuss and listen to adolescents reflecting on their lives, highlighting how forthcoming innovations and research in the life story work field may present new ways to do this.

Finally, a series of appendices gives additional technological, practice and practical guidance, including details of equipment needed for digital life story work, a “jargon-buster”, tips for filming and editing content, and resources which provide information on and can help to tackle cyberbullying.