

Introduction

The land of adoption is fertile ground for the secret; it blooms and blossoms and flourishes; everywhere you dig, there's a fresh gnarled root.

(Kay, 2010, p.153)

A later life letter is one written by a social worker to a child who is being adopted, at the time of or soon after the placement, to help the child understand their history and make sense of their past, enhance their self-esteem and strengthen their resilience. As the name implies, the letter is intended to be read later in the child's life. It is a difficult task to write a letter to be read at an unspecified time in the future, harder still to write it for the unknown young person that an adopted child will become.

Social workers approach adoption work with varying degrees of experience, understanding and skill, and often pressure of time does not enable them to think through the issues the young person will need to make sense of as they grow older. Nor is there always time for more experienced social workers to offer those new to the field advice and mentoring.

This Good Practice Guide aims to enhance the approach and skills of social workers and managers in writing a later life letter, but it does not set out to prescribe an exact or rigid format. Instead, it suggests areas that need to be addressed in the letter, depending on the child's history, and how difficult issues could be approached, with quotes from actual letters to demonstrate these. The appendices contain examples of later life letters which show different approaches.

The guide also considers some of the implications of data protection and confidentiality, language, style and phraseology, and explores the difficulties presented by the letter writer's task of remembering the professional context in which they work, whilst indicating the personal nature of their relationship with the child, the birth parents and the adoptive parents. Guidance is also provided on how the letter should be used, and the role of the adoptive parents in this.

Throughout, the focus is on the child or young person. The guide also emphasises the crucial roles both of the social worker who writes the letter, in conveying what can often be difficult information, and of the adoptive parent who shares the letter with their child.