

Guide for adoptive parents on how to use the later life letter

The later life letter is a letter for the adopted young person, written by a social worker. Its main focus is to help the young person make sense of their past, build their self-esteem, and enhance resilience. This brief guide is for you as an adoptive parent, to help you use the later life letter in the most helpful way for you and your child.

The later life letter will not be your only source of information about your child, as you will have received a life story book, and a copy of the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) written about the child when adoption is the plan. You may also have reports from experts. But hopefully the later life letter will have been written with a specific focus on your child, in language that is easy to read and makes them feel valued. The impact on your child of seeing such personal information in written form should not be underestimated.

Good practice indicates that, if possible, you, as an adoptive parent, will have been asked what should be included in the later life letter. You may have been asked about your hopes, fears and feelings at the time of the introductory meetings and placement, and this may have helped you feel more confident about sharing difficult information as your child grows older. You may have been asked for what name to use for the birth parent/s. Hopefully, the reason why you wanted to adopt your child will have been included in the letter, preferably in your own words.

If you met your child's birth parent/s, then it may have helped you to build up a more rounded picture, which will make it easier for you later to talk with your child about them.

Some birth parents write their own later life letter and you may have this attached to the letter of the social worker. You may also have a letter from a foster carer, or other adult who was close to your child.

BACKGROUND TO THE LETTER

Hopefully, your child's life story book will have given your child some understanding of their background and you will have looked at it together. It is not always easy to talk about difficult experiences, and hopefully you will have received training on ways of being open in your family.

One of the most important things is to set the emotional tone in your home right from the start, when your child comes to live with you. Brodzinsky (2005) has shown in his research how openness in adoption refers, first and foremost, to a state of mind and heart of the adopter and the extended family. The family needs to model openness about the expression of emotions generally, and in particular the expression of emotions connected with the adoption experience. The child's attitudes, curiosity and openness initially will reflect the attitudes and openness of the adopters. Brodzinsky's research indicates how this openness (what he calls "communicative openness") may be a much more important factor in a child's adoption adjustment than the specific type of family structure in which the child lives.

Adopted children will benefit from being in a family where adoption is discussed from a young age and in an open and understandable way. Keeping secrets about the past can damage their identity formation. It can also damage their trust in you...If adoptive parents don't, or very seldom, talk about the adoption, children might not know for sure whether they are allowed to ask or fantasise about their birth parents; they may think it isn't fair to their adoptive parents. They may also start feeling scared that they may be abandoned or rejected again. During puberty, and later on in life, this insecurity can lead to even greater confusion. By covering up the truth, you may be creating a vacuum where all the fantasies, thoughts and feelings collide together more and more furiously.

(Wolfs, 2008, p.42)

Adopted children can't ever belong solely to their new families, no matter how unpleasant their early childhood experiences were, or how shadowy their reflections are. Outside their family there exists for them another family that carries their identity, their inherited characteristics and their shared reservoir of memories. If adoptive parents avoid speaking of their child's birth family, if they don't encourage questions and demonstrate respect for the importance of the birth family in their child's life, then the child may be forced to carry their fragile memories silently on their own.

(Mackenzie G and Mackenzie J, 2011, pp. 36–37)

One way of setting the scene for openness is to have books around the house about where babies come from, as this is likely to lead on to a discussion of the differences of being born into a family and of coming to a family by adoption. Vera Fahlberg's three parenting circles (birth parent, parenting parent and legal parent) is another useful tool (see Fahlberg (1994) *A Child's Journey through Placement*). Also, reading relevant storybooks or watching television programmes involving fostered or adopted children will all set the scene and make it easier for adoption issues to be discussed openly in your family. It will help if you are aware of subjects being covered at your child's school, for example,

keeping safe, relationship awareness, parenting skills, sexual health and substance misuse.

Explaining and exploring adoption is a continuous process. Information takes on new meanings as children grow up and they need to hear the same basic story developed and amplified over the years. Silence about adoption does not automatically mean a lack of interest on a child's part. Appearing unconcerned or bored about the subject can sometimes mean a child is struggling to make sense of what they have already been told and only they know how much they can take in at any one time. It may also mean they have picked up and are reflecting some of their parents' embarrassment or tension in discussing the subject.

My mum all those years ago sensed a child who had been adopted was also a child who could feel terribly hurt. And no matter how much she loved me, no matter how much my dad loved me, there is still a windy place right at the core of my heart. The windy place is like Wuthering Heights, out on open moors, rugged and wild and free and lonely. The wind rages and batters at the trees. I struggle against the windy place. I sometimes even forget it. But there it is. I am partly defeated by it. You think adoption is a story which has an end. But the point about it is that it has no end. It keeps changing its ending.

(Kay, 2010, p.45)

You may worry that the letter will make your child feel less secure with you, or make them anxious about the welfare of their birth parents. But as one adopter commented: 'Initially, we worried about the information in the book leading to our son asking us awkward questions and then we realised it is not for us to take out the questions, it is for us to deal with the questions' (Watson *et al*, 2015)

You need to consider whether sharing this difficult information may help your child understand better why they needed to be taken from their family and adopted. The risks of not sharing sufficient information may well be greater than holding back on difficult facts – especially in today's world of the internet and social networking sites, which make it so much easier for a curious adopted child to search for and find birth relatives. The more you have been able to acknowledge your child's pain or to share information, the less likely it is that your child will rush into making risky contacts on social networking websites.

All adoptive parents need to realise, in the Facebook age, it is quite likely that a child with unanswered questions or a yearning curiosity about their birth family will one day decide to look for answers on the internet. Or they find that their child has been contacted via Facebook out of the blue by a birth brother or sister, mother or father or other family member. In many adopted families this has happened already.

(Fursland, 2013, p. 6)

HOW TO USE THE LATER LIFE LETTER

Your child may now be asking more detailed questions, and you may already have drawn some information from the later life letter that you have felt able to share with them. You may feel the time is right for your child to look at the letter itself. The usual age to share the later life letter is around 11–12 years, but this will depend on your child's individual personality and ability to understand difficult concepts, and also on the degree of difficulty in the information itself.

Introduce early, it needs to be special but it needs to be a part of growing up. Things change over time in unexpected ways – you have to be open to these and particularly your child's perspective. Adoption is only one thing in the child's life and that changes at different parts of their life. Children are often more mature about some of the issues in later life letters than their parents!

(Adoptive father)

You will already have looked at the life story book with your child, and set the scene for open communication in your family. When you feel that it is the right time to share the letter, consider the specific vulnerabilities of your child, for instance, feelings of rejection or of being different. Then list the information in the letter that is extra to what your child already knows. How do you feel about this? What will be the most difficult thing to share? What questions may your child have about the information in the letter, and what answers may you need to prepare? For example, is the young person likely to fear that they will become addicted to drugs, or prone to abusive relationships or being a bad parent?

Be flexible about whether to look at all the letter at once or to break it into smaller sections. Choose a time when your child is most likely to feel relaxed and secure with you. In some instances, you may feel it is better for your child to read the letter on their own; in this case, make sure they know that you are around and ready to spend time with them afterwards if they need this.

If your child has a learning impairment, you may need more advice from your adoption support team about how to convey the information in the later life letter. You may need to look at small parts of the letter at a time, or you might want to draw up a visual timeline to represent the child's life journey. Visiting places connected to the child may also help bring the information to life.

Be prepared for a whole range of feelings from your child: boredom, anxiety, sadness, anger. Try not to be overwhelmed, or at least don't show it. You will be the best judge of whether your child can accept a hug at such times or to share their distress. The message that your child needs to receive from you is that you are the adult and you can contain

these difficult feelings. Help your child to understand that it is normal to have a whole range of mixed feelings, love and anger at the same time. Acknowledge your child's courage in beginning to talk about this subject.

If there are medical issues, for instance, the effects of stress or substance misuse on the developing foetus, or issues of genetic inheritance, prepare yourself by updating your knowledge on the likely effects of this on the young person. Is the letter likely to raise issues in terms of ethnicity, culture or religion? What messages are there currently in the media that may add an extra complexity, for instance, "feckless parents", substance misuse, Islamic fundamentalism?

It may be difficult to predict the impact of new information on the young person. This may be the first time they have heard, for example, that they were born of an incestuous relationship or rape. They will need time to digest this, and will definitely need affirmation of their own identity and value. If the letter has been phrased sensitively, the young person will be left with a more positive feeling about themselves, and you can build on this.

The letter may raise matters that your child wants to find out more about, either together with you or on their own. This is an important time to discuss the use of social networking websites with your child, as you need to explain any possible risks of using such websites in an unsupervised manner.

You also need to be prepared for the fact that your child may now want to discuss contact with a sibling or birth parent. Before sharing the letter, you could approach the adoption agency to get any updates on birth parents or siblings so you can be more ready with an answer. Consider in advance whether this is the right time for contact, or would it be better for them to wait? Tell them that when they are 18, and if they want to search, you will support them. Prepare yourself for this by familiarising yourself with processes for search and reunion, for instance, by using the helpful CoramBAAF Adoption Search and Reunion website (www.adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk). Finally, remember that your attitude towards searching and reunion is very important in enabling your child to feel more comfortable about their past and their identity.

Adoptive parents who can take a positive view of the search are the ones who have always thought of their adoptive family, not as a second best but as a different sort of family. They acknowledge that their families have unique characteristics...In this way they involve themselves in what is probably one of the most important journeys their children will ever take.

[Adoptive parent, quoted in Feast and Philpot, 2003]

QUESTIONS FOR YOU AS AN ADOPTIVE PARENT BEFORE YOU SHARE THE LATER LIFE LETTER

- How much does your child already understand about their past?
- Are there any new facts about your child's past that you find particularly difficult to share with them?
- How comfortable do you feel personally about this information? Does it have any specific resonances for you?
- How easy is it for you to initiate discussions about adoption with your child?
- Are you convinced that sharing this information is right for your child?
- If you feel that there are some details that may be unnecessary or harmful to your child, is it likely that they will find this out later from another source?
- What will be the right setting for sharing the letter?
- Do you have expectations about the right way for your child to react to certain information?
- What might your child misunderstand or feel responsible for?
- Is the information shared likely to raise issues about positive identity concerning your child's ethnicity, culture or religion?
- Given the information that you are about to share, in what ways can you build up a positive sense of identity and self-esteem in your child?
- Where will you get your support (family, agency)?

If you feel you need help or support in sharing the later life letter, you can seek support from the local authority that placed your child with you, the adoption agency that approved you or if it is more than three years since you adopted your child, your local or regional adoption agency. They may offer training events, support groups or individual support to help you with supporting your child in understanding their past.