

Chapter 1

Why do digital life story work?



What is life story work and why is it important?

The ability to tell stories is a key part of everyday life. We are storytellers, with the most important story we have to tell often being about who we are. When we meet new people, we are normally called upon to tell this story. Commonly, these stories include information about where we were born, where we grew up, and so on. This knowledge tells others about who we are and informs our own self-understanding as we tell familiar stories and weave in new experiences. In childhood, in our everyday conversations with others and especially family members, information is given to us about how we fit into our family histories and carry on family characteristics. Children and young people who have had disruptive early life experiences may struggle to pull together information which enables them to create coherent life stories – that is, a story which they can easily understand. They may also have many significant questions about their early experiences to which they understandably want answers.

Life story work is often carried out with looked after children to fill in gaps in their self-knowledge and attempt to create a sense of coherence. The term is applied to a range of approaches commonly undertaken to aid the transition of younger children between short-term to long-term care and adoption placements. In this context, life story work seeks to help children to construct a story describing their own early life experiences and their relationships to those close to them. It is undertaken to assist children in establishing a keener understanding and acceptance of who they are, alongside how their past experiences have affected them.

Although there are a wide variety of approaches that fit under the umbrella term “life story work”, there are some common underpinning ideas.

- Firstly, all the approaches seek to work with the child, their records and, where applicable, previous carers and birth family members to produce an age-

appropriate explanation of how the child came into care and how they ended up living where they live today.

- Secondly, this work is undertaken so that the child may come to terms with, or at least be helped to manage, complex feelings towards birth relatives and previous carers.
- Thirdly, work is usually aimed at younger children up to the age of 12.
- Finally, each form of approach aims to create, with or for the child, a coherent biographical story.

Due to the emphasis on working with younger children, many life story work approaches use activities that younger children are comfortable with, proficient in and, in the case of different media, already using. For instance, younger children enjoy painting pictures and cutting out shapes; by using such activities adults facilitating life story work can record artwork and writing in life story work books, which provide a place for the carer and child to store and organise information. Although these books can be created for numerous reasons, including to provide a record of the work undertaken with the child, more importantly their production is an end goal of a therapeutic process. In this way, life story books are viewed as a product created as a consequence of the process of doing life story work. The book needs to be continually updated and can be used to construct answers to the growing child's questions about their past. The process of life story work includes discussions with and reflections by the child upon their story, supported by an adult in such a way that the child feels absolved of responsibility for their admission into care.

In the most recent edition of their book *Life Story Work* (2007), Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker sum up the benefits of undertaking life story work as a way of enabling troubled children to leave behind negative emotions that may have accumulated before and after moving into care. While life story work creates some form of resolution and aids transitions, when undertaken in childhood it needs to be continually revisited. From a psychological perspective, the benefits of being able to share one's stories, particularly those which contain emotional disclosures, have been shown to strengthen immune functioning, lower rates of depression and increase communication with others. Having one's story heard and understood by others can be a powerful and therapeutic experience; conversely, for those who do not feel their stories are heard or valued, this may lead to problems with emotional wellbeing and self-understanding, which in turn make for less than advantageous transitions to adulthood. Life story work can encourage reflection, aid self-knowledge development, identity coherence and sequential connections between important life events.

Despite the potential benefits of undertaking life story work with older looked after young people, it is generally thought of as something undertaken in childhood. The approaches used cater for younger children, which is not to say that older children do not enjoy activities such as making collages and drawing, but the resources which are produced to assist in life story work are designed to appeal to younger children and tend to be led by the professional.

Life story work with young people



This book acknowledges the benefits of undertaking life story work with younger children in care and seeks to widen the availability of these benefits to include adolescents. We start with the recognition that adolescents communicate in different ways than younger children and want to be treated and communicated with differently. The goal of widening access to the benefits of life story work through the promotion of its usage with adolescent care populations is informed by ideas derived from narrative psychology and the concept of communicative sensitivity – that is, making use of communication media commonly used by young people, and attending to the ways in which they use these media.

A narrative psychological approach emphasises humans as storytellers, and highlights how stories offer us an organising principle for experiences (since stories have a beginning, middle and end). This narrative understanding emphasises the importance of time when creating meaningful stories and how we use stories as a way to make sense of ourselves and others. The sharing and retelling of stories therefore becomes a way to enhance the understanding of important life events and their sequential relationship to each other. In this way, life story work is viewed as a way of facilitating the organisation of, and reflecting upon, lived experiences.

Communicative sensitivity emphasises the need to pay attention to how young people choose to communicate and encourages professionals to use similar methods. In the article 'Untold stories: a discussion of life story work' (Baynes, 2008), Polly Baynes focuses upon child-orientated approaches to life story work. In this discussion, she highlights the need for the adult working with a child to be 'prepared to make themselves vulnerable by entering the child's world and having the courtesy to communicate in the child's way' (p. 47). In this way, the importance of the communicative tools used during the life story work process double up as a way of conveying respect. This communicative sensitivity is perceived as a key element in the application of life story work to looked after adolescents. Adolescents have a stake in how their stories are told and a right to be listened to, and those working with young people need, as Baynes suggests, to enter the young person's world.

A window of opportunity

Adolescence is a term used to describe children aged 13–18 years of age. In the past, this phase of the life cycle has been linked with confrontation and seen as key in the formation of identity. Modern understandings view adolescence as a life phase that possesses a reflective quality, reinforcing the potential benefits of life story work to address self-knowledge gaps. The need to revisit life story work throughout adolescence has been highlighted but there is little in the way of detailed recommendations.

Adolescence offers an individual time to take stock before moving on to adult roles. This period of reflection can be considered to be especially important for adolescents living in care. They tend to have suffered more ambiguity in their lives, and therefore potentially have a great deal to reflect upon. In this way, adolescence can be seen as a window of opportunity for personal change, as opposed to a window that has already shut. This view invites the pursuit of new ways to communicate with vulnerable adolescents that may help them relate to others, manage their behaviour, understand their feelings and make beneficial decisions, helping them discover for themselves the value of making connections between past and present and articulate what is important to them in their life stories.

To capitalise upon this window of opportunity, attention needs to be paid to the way in which adolescents choose to communicate with those around them and each other. In acknowledging the use of digital technologies (including mobile phones, smartphones, digital cameras and camcorders, as well as laptops, desktop and tablet computers) by young people, the potential applications of these technologies to facilitate life story work emerges. Digital tools offer the ability to help young people to express thoughts and feelings which can be continually updated, edited and reflected upon. Using interactive computer-based media grants the user flexibility to make changes frequently and easily. Digital material can be copied, printed, saved or deleted as desired, making it an interesting medium for the construction of life story work. As well as the ability to continually make and remake digital creations, everyday technology represents a familiar, non-threatening, non-judgemental and non-invasive communication tool already used by many adolescents. Digital technologies can also record the more process-based elements of life story work, in that the relationship between the young person and the adult facilitating the work may be recorded. They enable young people to enjoy and reflect upon the reminders of the relationships and experiences, promoting reflection and reminiscence with those present at the time and also those new to viewing the material.

Adolescents, digital technologies and risk

For many people, digital technologies have become part of everyday life. In some cases technology is so commonplace that its importance is noticed only when it stops working. The use of digital technologies by adolescents is not without its potential problems, and these need to be explored before seeking to engage them. However, the potential harm of digital technologies is linked not to adolescents in particular, but rather to the growth of digital media in society in general.

Digital technologies are characterised here as the hardware or physical tools used to record text, images, sounds or both in the case of video clips. Computers, smartphones, cameraphones, digital cameras, camcorders and webcams are all examples of such technologies. Digital media tend to be intangible tools which



allow users to connect with others and share created content. Social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Bebo, Twitter, MySpace, Instant Messenger (IM), platforms such as MSN Chat, Skype, Facebook chat and Blackberry Messenger (BBM) as well as video and sharing websites/communities such as YouTube, Dailymotion and Blip.TV are all examples of digital media. Digital technologies and digital media are in many ways inextricably linked, as too are their potential benefits and risks. The most noticeable risks for those working with looked after children and young people include privacy, disclosure and cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is a term used to describe a:

...child, preteen or teen being tormented, threatened, harassed, humiliated, embarrassed or otherwise targeted by another child, preteen or teen using the internet, digital technologies or mobile phones.

(www.stopcyberbullying.org, accessed 6 June 2012)

This type of bullying can occur through a range of digital media including emails, in online chatrooms, instant messengers, text/picture/video messages sent to the victim's phone or posted on websites. When promoting the use of digital technologies and media, one needs to be aware of how to assist the young person in creating or using strategies to minimise the associated risks.¹

For professionals working with looked after young people, the potential risks of digital technologies and media are of paramount importance, whether this involves looked after adolescents maintaining or getting in contact with those deemed inappropriate via social networking websites, or making deliberate/accidental disclosures in online domains due to an inability or a desire not to control privacy settings. Despite research in the US suggesting that public concerns regarding sexual predators using digital media may be exaggerated, the existence of paedophiles and the possibilities of online grooming reinforce the need to manage risk, particularly as real world vulnerabilities tend to be replicated online.² It is worth noting, however, that research appears to emphasise how social networking websites are mainly used as an economic way to maintain pre-existing offline friendships;³ Lenhart and Madden (2007) report that the vast majority of their US adolescent sample used social networking websites to connect or reconnect with previously known friends. Such potential benefits may be particularly important to looked after populations as adolescents in care have consistently reported feelings of social and geographical isolation, a point stressed by Professor Andrew Kendrick in his contribution to *Facing Forward: Residential child care in the 21st century* (2005). We need to be aware that although looked after young people may be locally isolated, digital technologies enable them to be remotely connected. These advantages need to be viewed in relation to the young person in question and what such contact may mean to them.

¹ A range of websites and web resources have been created to combat cyberbullying; see Appendix 3.

² For more practical advice on the use of SNS by looked after populations, see the excellent and comprehensive book *Social Networking and Contact* (Fursland, 2010).

³ See 'Facebook friend or Facebook foe?' (Hammond, 2011), for an accessible insight into this area.

The internet and digital technologies are like cars, in that they are not dangerous in themselves, but in how they can be used. How technology is used by young people and those who wish to take advantage of vulnerable populations is where dangers and risks should be located. We need to help young people to learn to drive safely on their own, and negotiate an increasingly complex online and digital world. By engaging with digital life story work, young people can receive a wide array of benefits, as the workers or carers undertaking the work can use this opportunity to engage with the young people in a communicatively sensitive fashion, allowing for conversations regarding the wider uses and risks of such technologies, promoting technological responsibility and safety.

Digital technologies in life story work

Digital technologies and their relevant software offer unprecedented flexibility to create and edit audio, audiovisual and photographic material. The high value placed on digital technologies by adolescents means that just the very use of computers can attract the attention of disengaged and socially excluded young people. Digital technologies and media, such as the mobile phone and internet, provide an attractive approach to use with this group, as it conforms with their existing practice of using such technology to spontaneously record events from their worlds.

In seeking to make the benefits of life story work available to adolescent care populations through digital technologies, we should realise that simply integrating technology into existing life story work approaches is unlikely to engage adolescents. Additionally, the more adult-led approaches to life story work, which have clear benefits when working with younger children, may need to be altered when working with young people. Digital life story work seeks to be less prescriptive and more participatory than conventional work undertaken with younger children. Nevertheless, there is still the fundamental need to familiarise oneself with records that provide information about the young person's life and reasons for coming into care and to assess the risks of digital life story work with the individual.

Digital life story work aims to support adolescents in the production of, and reflections upon, the stories they choose to share. However, the introduction and inclusion of digital communication tools does not detract from the central role played by the relationship created during this process. Though the communication media used to facilitate this relationship and portray the young people's stories are different from traditional life story work, the importance of an engaged, sensitive and caring adult, carer or professional is not.

Adolescents will only share stories if there is an audience to share them with. This audience plays a pivotal role in the construction and production of, and reflections upon, these stories. As storytellers, we may tell the same story differently depending upon this audience. The role of the adult who facilitates digital life story work is complex and discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. For now, it is sufficient to highlight that this adult needs to balance the participatory

ethos of digital life story work alongside negotiating the responsible and safe use of digital technologies, whilst also supporting young people's reflections on what could be a host of fragmented and emotionally sensitive memories.



Technological difficulties

Show me a person who never made a mistake and I will show you a person who never achieved anything.

Regardless of one's level of proficiency, or indeed the proficiency level of the adolescent you aim to undertake digital life story work with, you should recognise that occasionally technological difficulties will arise. A point worth remembering is that the digital equipment referred to throughout this book is simply a tool that can fill a range of needs. It is how these tools are used in the relationship experienced between the adolescent and adult that is the key factor.

When working with digital technologies, there are certain points to keep in mind. You will need to be patient and remain optimistic – try to use any technological problems as opportunities for engagement with the young person. Suggest resolutions and ways in which problems can be managed together – listen to the young person, as their suggestions may resolve the problem. Above all, you will need to have a sense of humour and the ability to learn from mistakes. We all get frustrated with technology but it is important not to get overly frustrated with the technology in front of the young person. This may be an obvious point to make but it is worth emphasising – if the young person decides to take their frustrations out on the digital technology, this may be a costly lesson to learn.

In an attempt to avoid unnecessary and potentially costly frustrations, it is a good idea to “play” with the hardware (the technology itself) and software (the programmes which run the hardware) yourself before attempting to engage the young person. Try one or two of the projects in Chapter 2 for yourself from start to finish; this will give you an insight into how the equipment can be used and a firsthand experience of the processes involved from a young person's perspective. Doing this will also enable you to ensure that, when it comes to later stages such as editing and production, the software you need is already installed and both you and the young person are fairly familiar with how it works (more advice about installing software and hardware is provided in Chapter 6). On a final note, it may be worth investing in “whatever happens” or accidental damage insurance, or checking whether this is covered under your household or workplace insurance (where applicable) and if this insurance stretches to accidental damage outside the home or office. Accidents happen and accidents with electrical equipment can be costly.

