

## Therapeutic Life Story Work



Understanding our identity is the way we define ourselves. For children who are living in alternative families their life history is often fragmented, leaving them lost, with a confused identity and no sense of belonging.

Therapeutic Life Story Work from Families Empowered helps children to talk and learn about their life experiences with the help of a trusted adult.

We work carefully to support children in the creation and acceptance of their own unique narrative.

## Life Story Work with an Attachment Focus

Families Empowered's Therapeutic Life Story Work is a powerful intervention drawing from the Richard Rose model 'Life Story Work with Traumatized Children' but with a specific attachment focus: we underpin our work with Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) and model the values of PACE throughout.

We also emphasise a narrative approach, in which storytelling is compelling and where we discover the meaning of our lives through the stories we tell of our experiences. Our therapeutic practitioner takes on the role of the narrator.

This therapy has been developed for children who have found safety in alternative families after being removed from the care of their birth families. It is ideally suited for adopted children and children with special guardians or foster families.

For these children, an incoherent life narrative and identity can increase their vulnerability – both now and in future – and impact on all areas of their development, including attachment to current parents and caregivers, social development, behaviour and self-esteem.



To meet these needs, we offer a comprehensive package of support for the family in three phases:

1. Preparation and information gathering
2. Therapeutic support (16 sessions)
3. Creation of a Life Story Book that tells the child's story in a way that feels comfortable and accessible.

## The Three Stages of Intervention

The needs of the child are always at the heart of the work we do. Our therapeutic practitioners recognise the importance of establishing and maintaining a safe environment that allows a traumatised child to feel secure and contained throughout the process.

Parents and carers are included in the therapeutic intervention but the focus is always on the internal world of the child – helping them to externalise their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires and have these met with acceptance and empathy.

The therapeutic practitioner remains open, curious and without judgement at all times.

### Stage 1: Preparation and Information Gathering

‘If you really want to understand how a child is functioning in the present, you need to understand their personal history because the brain more than anything is a historical organ... it stores experiences. So, it’s very important to take high-quality developmental history of the child and also have some understanding and insight into the child rearing beliefs and practices of their current caregiver.’ (Perry 2003)

The therapeutic practitioner will initially have a consultation with the referring social worker and gather as much information about the child’s early life as possible, they may make contact with foster carers, professionals who have touched the child’s life and even birth family members, where appropriate, and from this information the child’s early life story can then be told truthfully and sensitively.



## Stage 2: Therapeutic Support

### Session 1-3 Direct Work with Parents/Carer

Life Story Therapy is more successful when the parents, guardian or carer are an active part of the process. We first consider the nature of their role, which may provide insight to their respective blocks, vulnerabilities or anxieties.

The direct work with parents establishes acceptance that the intervention is a collaborative work between therapist, parents and child. It is important parents feel valued and are able to be a source of comfort for the child as they go through the process.

It is also important that they are aware of the child's known history and are able to accept it. In these early sessions any areas of discomfort or conflict will be worked through before the joint sessions can begin. It can be traumatic for both child and parent/carer if they learn difficult information in a joint session. Becoming comfortable with the information in advance will help them to remain available, open and comforting for the child.

If a parent's own unresolved trauma or loss is triggered then it may be necessary to talk to the parent and social worker about further individual sessions to work through this before the child can join the sessions.

### Sessions 4-16: Joint Session Work with Parents/Carer and Child

The practitioner uses a range of creative media tailored to age and developmental stage to engage the child or young person in the work. Alongside this we have created an 'All About Me' booklet, which is a dyadic resource and creates two-way communication between the child and the practitioner. The booklet is the backbone of the Life Story Book and ensures that the child is constantly involved in the writing of their story. It also helps to open up communication and sensitively address 'the difficult narrative'. Through the 'All About Me' booklet, the child learns to be proud of their story.

Through their extensive experience working with children who have suffered significant loss and trauma, and their knowledge of DDP, our therapeutic practitioners are able to accept, hold and analyse with sensitivity every element of the child's story – good and bad, before beginning to create a coherent life narrative. This helps the child/young person to regain a sense of self, to follow their life journey and to understand and accept who they are. Where parents have been fully involved in Life Story Therapy it can also rebuild connections, establish greater attachment and improve relations

### Stage 3: The Life Story Book

Each Life Story Book will look as unique as the life it represents.

We use an A4 lever arch file as a base and the child is then involved in choosing or creating the design. This will include photographs, narrative, family trees and some of the work that has been completed in the therapeutic sessions.



Some pages will be fixed and laminated, some pages can be hidden – to be shared or read by the child only when they wish to do so.

The practitioner puts the book together in draft form which is shared in the penultimate session. This enables feedback to be explored and changes made so the child/young person is entirely happy with the book at the final session.

They receive a hard copy and an electronic copy of the book. Subject to the child's agreement, a copy can be made and kept by the Local Authority and/or in the Families Empowered archive, in case the book becomes lost or damaged.

## Find Out More

We place children and their families at the heart of our work. With warmth, understanding and expertise, our small team of skilled practitioners offer highly effective, attachment-focussed therapeutic interventions, training and consultancy services.

We are dedicated to improving the lives of children and families living with trauma by supporting Local Authorities and agencies in providing transformative care.

To find out more about Therapeutic Life Story Work and the other services we offer, or to discuss pricing plans and programme options, please contact Deborah Sharratt on [07917 440 683](tel:07917440683) or email [deborah@familiesempowered.co.uk](mailto:deborah@familiesempowered.co.uk)

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