



Tools, processes and practice guidance: Life story work and life story books

Practice Paper

1. Introduction

This practice paper provides an overview of life story work and using life story books which is included in the 'Tools, processes and practice guidance' element of the Practice Approach. This practice paper will assist practitioners to develop their understanding of the purpose and practice of life story work and its importance in supporting children and young people in care. This document is relevant to all DCP practitioners who work directly with children and young people (such as case workers, senior practitioners, supervisors, youth workers and specialist roles).

Life story work can apply to children and young people from all backgrounds and life story books are the common medium for this activity. The Department has created Aboriginal Life Story Books that can be ordered, but these should not to be used for Torres Strait Islander children and young people. Life story books for Torres Strait Islander and other children and young people should be created together with the child or young person.

Life story work promotes the safety and wellbeing of children and young people in care by supporting them to enhance their sense of identity, belonging and connection.

It is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people's physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing to maintain connection to family, culture and community. Life story work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people can play a crucial role in supporting them to learn about, and be positively connected to, their family, community and cultural identity.

2. What is life story work?

As we grow, we develop a sense of who we are and where we belong. This is often due to the stories we are told and the mementoes we collect throughout our childhood and adolescence. Our stories and memories are often held for us by our families. They are complemented by the mementoes we collect along the way. We gain a sense of ourselves and our place through our own family's history and stories. Life story work is a process which supports children and young people in care to develop a balanced, realistic and consistent narrative of their history (life story) that they are able to develop and integrate into their sense of self. This includes information about their experiences and connections with family, including the reasons they came into care and their journey within the care system.

Life story work is an ongoing process that commences when children and young people first enter care and continues until they transition into adulthood. Any life story work undertaken with children and young people belongs to them, and life story books should travel with them throughout their care experience, including if they move between care environments. Life story work can happen in any



interaction with children, young people, family members, carers or other people significant to the child or young person. Life story work can be undertaken during home visits, care team meetings, family contact or other meetings. Specific times may be set aside to focus on gathering stories or memories to be incorporated into life story work.

The Aboriginal Life Story Book is a tool to help Aboriginal children and young people learn about their culture and identity. It assists them to track their own personal and cultural journey while they are in care and is a hard copy book designed for them to record their life story work in addition to the recording of information in other ways.

2.1.1 Why is life story work important?

Life story work allows children and young people to understand where they came from and to recollect and make sense of their journey through the importance around stories and narratives. This in turn assists young people to develop their sense of identity. For more information, refer to the [Support the development of the child or young person's identity](#) section in the Manual of Practice. When the child or young person is able to make sense of their past, it supports emotional stability in their present and can improve their self-esteem and wellbeing. Being able to make sense of their present helps them to develop a clear sense of identity for the future.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, life story work supports active efforts to ensure that children and young people remain connected to culture, family, communities, traditions and language. Life story work is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people to develop their cultural identities, which begins by knowing where they come from and how they fit within their family, kinship structures, and community.

For further information about the importance of connection to culture, refer to the [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper](#). To obtain an Aboriginal Life Story Book for an Aboriginal child or young person, you can make a request for a book by downloading the [Aboriginal Life Story Book Order Form](#) and follow the instructions.

It is critically important that children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds be supported to develop connection to culture. For children and young people from CALD backgrounds life story work is a tool that can positively support their development, identity and wellbeing. For further information about working with CALD communities, refer to [Working with cultural diversity Practice Paper](#).

Whilst life story work is important for all children and young people in care, DCP case workers should be particularly mindful of how important it is to save information and memories for children and young people who have lived with multiple carers. Children and young people who do not have a consistent carer may not have anyone who can remember stories about that child or young person's milestones and significant events. It therefore becomes more important that this information is recorded and stored by those who provide care for the children and young people and DCP case workers as part of case management.



2.1.2 What information can be included in life story work?

Life story work begins with those who provide care, including DCP case workers collecting memories for children and young people so that they are available when they are ready to engage in life story work. DCP case workers work with children, young people, their families and carers to gather information and hold memories for children and young people. These memories should be kept in the child or young person's Life Story Book and the greater volume of saved information should be stored in the electronic case management system (C3MS), so that they are available to children and young people. In addition to DCP maintaining a copy of the life story related materials in C3MS, children and young people should be offered their own safely stored electronic copy of the materials they have collected on their journey through care.

It is important to encourage carers to take photos and keep mementos for children and young people and to encourage carers to share these with DCP for collating as part of the overall life story work repository. DCP case workers should also take photos, for example during family contact, so that the children and young people have mementos of these occasions. Other information that can be used to develop a child or young person's life story includes:

- genogram (or family tree)
- age appropriate, sensitive information about their entry to care
- information from their infant health records
- information about their developmental milestones (for example, age when they walked, talked)
- photographs of family, friends, milestones, pets, place of birth, holidays and outings
- information and photos or mementoes of country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people (connection to Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people is a connection to their ancestral lands and seas) and cultural events
- the child or young person's birth certificate
- their own and/or siblings' and/or parents/family members' artwork or craft or art completed during family contact
- letters or stories from significant people in their lives (for example, family, siblings, teachers, community elders, therapists)
- certificates and awards
- school reports
- mementos
- details of holidays
- information about placement history
- information about the exploration of culture, including which country the child or young person's birth parents come from, their familiar kin and cultural background, religion and/or language, any national foods or dress, holidays and special events associated with their culture and/or religion.

Life Story Work is the responsibility of the DCP case worker to regularly review and promote activity. The Aboriginal Life Story Book is considered a component of an Aboriginal infant, child or young person's cultural maintenance plan and is essential for all of those in care. Creating a life story book for a Torres Strait Islander infant, child or young person's is equally important.

Attending to the elements of life story work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's should align with a plan of activities articulated in the child or young person's Aboriginal Cultural Identity Support Tool (ACIST) and also be a feature in their case reviews. Finding a culturally appropriate volunteer or family or community



member to support the activities involved in life story work can be explored with the Principal Aboriginal Consultant, family and community. Activities such as Return to Country and Cultural Camps can contribute significantly to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life story work.

3. Life story books

A meaningful way to present life story information as a visual product is by arranging this information into a hard copy life story book.

The department provides Aboriginal Life Story Books for Aboriginal infants, children and young people. DCP case workers must ensure that Aboriginal infants, children and young people have an Aboriginal Life Story Book. DCP case workers must complete the [Aboriginal Life Story Book Order Form](#) and follow the instructions on the form. The Aboriginal Practice Directorate administer the Aboriginal Life Story Book supply.

The Aboriginal Life Story Book has been designed to give Aboriginal infants, children and young people a basis for connecting to culture and recording some of their care journey. The books help capture specific information about a child or young person at significant times in their lives and information such as their favourite things (colours, foods, people, and places for example), strengths, milestones and people who are important to them. The books are tailored to include information about a child or young person's Aboriginal Nation and language group and cover areas including cultural and kinship groups, Elders, kinship genograms, the Dreaming, and their Dreaming story. Books are individualised for the infant, child or young person's gender and Kinship group.

It is Important when completing an [Aboriginal Life Story Book Order Form](#) that you state the child or young person's Aboriginal Nation(s).

Every effort must be made to identify a child or young person's Aboriginal Nation so that a book specific to that Nation can be provided. If identification of their Nation is pending, a generic Aboriginal Life Story Book is available. DCP case workers should work in partnership with family, community, carers and any significant person in the child or young person's community to develop and maintain the child or young person's life Aboriginal Life Story Book. For information about how to order an Aboriginal Life Story Book, refer to [Aboriginal Practice life story work](#).

Note: At this time, there is no Life Story Book available for Torres Strait Islander infants, children and young people and Aboriginal books should not be used for those from the Torres Strait. Instead, be creative and work with the family to identify the places in the Torres Strait where the family originates from and produce a book similar to the Aboriginal Life Story Book, potentially using 'scrap booking' techniques.

For non-Aboriginal children and young people, life story books should include information about the child or young person's life with their family of origin, developmentally appropriate information about why they came into care and information about their care placements. This could include information about, or photographs, of significant people in their lives and other information that the child or young person would like to include about themselves.

Life story work can be presented in a variety of other mediums including treasure or memory boxes, backpacks or by digital means.



Where possible, for best practice, the DCP case worker should take responsibility to save the information used in the life story book, including copies of photos and certificates to C3MS. It is extremely important that information collected by the child, young person and others about them be stored securely and a secure copy of the collection of materials be made available to the young person to recall in a digital format.

The efforts to maintain copies in a central repository like C3MS will help overcome losses of the copies held by young people and through changes placement or case worker.

The Aboriginal life story book, and all life story books in general, should be kept by the child or by the carer in their placement for the child to share and work on regularly. The DCP case worker should not keep the Life Story Book at the office.

4. Supporting children and young people

Children and young people must be supported to develop their life story when they are ready to do so. Whilst life story work can be positive and empowering for children and young people, DCP case workers must also recognise some information may not be appropriate for a Life Story Book because that it may be challenging, painful or traumatic for some children and young people.

It is essential whilst engaging in life story work to ensure that children and young people are supported and encouraged by DCP case workers and their carers (and any other significant supports) to express themselves and work through their understanding of their care journey. Children and young people must be allowed to choose who they want involved, and what supports they need in their life story work. This could include their DCP case worker, carers, family members, therapist or community elders. For further information, refer to the [Identify and respond to the psychological and emotional needs of the child or young person](#) key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice.

The first step in life story work is for the care team to build supportive relationships with the infant, children or young people and families they are working with. Such relationships assist children and young people and their workers to better navigate the process. For further information regarding building relationships and relationship-based practice, refer to the [Relationship based practice Practice Paper](#).

It is vital that DCP case workers seek children and young people's views about what information they would like included in their life stories, who to seek this information from and how it is presented. For further information about seeking children and young people's views, refer to the [Seek the views of the child or young person](#) key step of the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice).

Life story work does not need to occur in a particular order. Children and young people at times may only want to focus on a narrative about the present or may want to display information that is not sequential. When engaging in life story work with children and young people, DCP case workers should consider the child or young person's age, developmental stage, level of functioning or any disability. This will ensure that life story work meets the child or young person's needs. For further information, refer to



[Child and Adolescent Development Practice Paper](#) and [Working with children and young people with disability Practice Paper](#).

4.1.1 Supporting carers

Children and young people’s carers play an important role in life story work. It is often the relationship between a carer and the child or young person that supports the child or young person emotionally if the process of life story work becomes challenging for them. As part of the life story work process, carers may hear information that could be difficult to understand, or distressing. Anyone helping a child or young person, including a carer, will need to discern how a life story is told, and to what extent sensitive information is used. This gatekeeping is very important for the safety and wellbeing of the children and young people.

Because of this gatekeeping role, it is therefore important to consider what supports a carer may need, to work through any distress caused to them by information they heard or decided to keep back. Think about what measures are in place to support carers’ wellbeing and decision making. In summary, DCP case workers must consider who is supporting the carer whilst they are supporting the child or young person in their exploration. For further information, refer to the [Support the placement](#) key step of the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice. Workers should consider the principle of the Statement of Commitment when working with and supporting carers. For more information regarding the Statement of Commitment, refer to childprotection.sa.gov.au/soc.

5. Reflective practice prompts

Practitioners are better able to develop their skills when they engage in reflective practice. The following reflective practice activity is offered to encourage reflective practice among practitioners.

When preparing for or reflecting on life story work, consider,

- *What information/memories have I gathered for the child or young person? How well do I know the child or young person’s story?*
- *What do I need to know to develop my understanding? Who can provide appropriate information to support this?*
- *What supports will the child or young person need to engage in life story work?*
- *Who is the best person to support the child or young person?*
- *If the carer is supporting the child or young person, what supports do they need?*
- *How would the child or young person like their life story work to be presented? What would work best?*
- *If you were the child or young person, what would you want to know about your life? Who would you want to be involved in helping you understand your story?*



- *What consideration have I given to child or young person’s developmental and cultural needs when thinking about how to develop their life story?*
- *What does their story say about their cultural identity and connections? What have I done to assist the child or young person to create a story that is supportive of growing up strong in their identity and culture?*

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