



SHARING MY LIFE STORY

By Liz Powell and Sonia Wagner
11 August 2021

The Child's Life Story

Life Story work is a term that describes activities associated with gathering and meaningfully recording information about a child's life. Often used in adoption, fostering and permanent care.

There are resources and tools to help with creating ones Life Story. See [My Life Story Book NSW Government](#) or [Beacon House What Survival Looks Like](#)

Children who have experienced trauma can find it difficult to access memories as they may be tied up with trauma. So avoidance to sharing their story may simply be their coping strategy.

Balance child's needs with teachers, other children and other parents. The child needs to lead and there is no exact rule for this. Once shared, you can't take it back.

Connect with other like - minded families and subscribe to newsletters and blogs. Help normalize what is going on for your child.

Empower your children to share their story. Suggest reading materials or professional development to educators in your child's life.

Others Perceptions



Dangerous
Depressed

Alcohol and Drug Users
Neglectful Abusers

Deceased
Single parent



Birth Family is uncaring or unfeeling



Child may be dangerous because of their experiences.



Our Role: Educate and myth bust to support the child.
Blame or criticism towards the first/birth family harms the child.



Questions & Comments

Questions...

What happened to the parents? Did the parents do something wrong?
Why do they live with you now? Can they go back to their parents?
Why can't they go back to their parents? Are you their parents now?
How long will they be with you?

Comments

Oh that's sad. That's awful. Lucky that they have you. Its so good what you are doing. I could never do what you are doing.

Looks

Looking from them to yourself, trying to work out the relationship (particularly multi cultural).

How to Respond?

Be brief but factual and redirect eg Johnny lives with us now. Would you like to go to the park for a play before heading home?

Don't overshare.

Don't blame or criticise as this hurts the child

Strategies for Sharing

[Wise Up Debbie Riley](#) Walk away, Its private, Share something, Educate

[Strategic Sharing](#) You need a plan whether you share or not

[Pro's and Con's of Sharing](#) Stories can help us make sense of experiences



Building The Childs Story

What's my story about why I'm not living with my birth family?

Visits with my family. When. Where. Frequency.

Things about me that I can share with others:

- Things I like (food, music, activities, clothes, sports)
- Previous school, friends, pets, interests or activities
- Who is in my birth/first family and in my family now
- Culture or traditions

What would I like to tell teachers, peers or parents of peers about my life and my story? Help them create their narrative. Strategic sharing.

Create my own story book that I can choose to share when I want to.



For Parents and Carers When Sharing

[How much to share with Teachers](#)



Maintain sense of Belonging and Attachment. Share only what your child wants you to share or what is necessary to best support and develop your child.



Teachers and other parents can be more open to supporting us if they know about trauma behaviour as distinct from “bad” behaviour. Supporting your child to tell their story is key.



See the draft letter (slide 8) for teachers about families formed through adoption, kinship and permanent care and trauma informed care needs



Ask the Child what they are willing to share and what they are willing for you to share.

PCAF SAMPLE LETTER TO TEACHER

Dear Teacher,

CHILD is excited about this school year, and so are we. I wanted to share some information about our CHILD that will help you get to know him.

CHILD was adopted/joined us in kinship care/joined us in permanent care at (age), and we have (limited information on his early life, are in an open adoption/kinship with his birth family, etc.). Here is all our relevant contact details (any persons permitted contact and on what basis)

CHILD has a number of interests which (include)

Due to some of the disruption in CHILD'S early life, while CHILD is ? years old chronologically, CHILD is actually ? years old neurologically. As a result CHILD needs to be provided with activities and support that promotes their neurological growth – at the right stage of development so that they can progress to someday catchup academically, emotionally, physically and socially.

For some children that disruption might also mean they have difficulty concentrating, holding pencils and writing or find transitions or noises in the classroom overwhelming. They may also get confused, be forgetful, daydream or become irritable, withdrawn and anxious or aggressive. They need your help to maintain relationships and to help them with triggers like harsh lighting, shouting, bells and loudspeakers, slamming doors and unwelcome or unexpected transitions or touch. They need reassurance to build their trust and a calm, structured environment with someone that will encourage them to try again. They would also benefit from a quiet space to go to when they feel overwhelmed.

You are in a significant position to send a message about families formed by adoption/kinship or permanent care to the other children in this class and their families. Our hope is that students will receive a positive message about the many ways that families are formed. Some children are born to their parents, and sometimes families are formed by kinship, permanent care or adoption. Regardless of how families come about, they are all families.

I thought it might help you if I shared some appropriate responses to common questions children may ask about this. These are questions that our child has already heard, and we practice answers together that feel most comfortable to CHILD.

- **Where are CHILD'S real parents?**

CHILD has two sets of real parents: the parents who gave birth to him and the parents who raise him as his Mum and Dad forever.

- **Why didn't CHILD'S birth parents keep him?**

CHILD'S birth parents were unable to parent him (raise him, be his parents, whichever fits your classroom) when he was born. Sometimes in families it is not safe for the child to stay with their parents and they need to go to another home. CHILD is now in a safe home just like yourselves.

- **Why doesn't CHILD look like CHILD'S Mum?**

Children usually look like the parents that gave birth to them, don't they? CHILD probably looks like his birth parents.

Some school assignments may be hard for us. I'm not asking that you change the task, but I would appreciate an advanced warning and some flexibility to adapt the assignment to fit our family's circumstances. Some examples of school assignments that might be challenging for CHILD would include:

- creating a family tree
- bringing in baby pictures
- sharing birth or young infancy stories
- discussions of inherited traits
- birthdays, mothers day or fathers day.

I would welcome an opportunity to meet with you after you have had a chance to get to know my wonderful CHILD. Can we schedule a time to talk in about three weeks? I would also love to read some books or provide you with some books about families formed through adoption, kinship, permanent or foster care for the class or library. Our family has quite a collection that we read together. We find books to be excellent conversation starters and this helps increase CHILD'S understanding too.

If you are interested in learning more about how early childhood experiences like trauma affect my CHILD, I would also be happy to share some resources with you. A couple of good resources are:

- this 5 minute video on childhood trauma
- trauma informed practice in schools
- needs of adopted and permanently placed children guide for schools
- becoming a trauma informed school
- A teachers introduction to attachment podcast series
- What survival looks like in schools
- The impact of secondary trauma and burnout on teachers.

If I can also help you with sharing this message more widely to the broader school community, parents and staff, these resources might be of value too:

- Removed Videos – 1 and 2
- Beacon House trauma behaviours diagram
- Beacon House Primary Schools
- Beacon House Secondary Schools

There are 50,000 like minded children that have had different experiences living away from birth parents who need support in a manner that addresses their needs.

We are looking forward to working with you to make this a great year for CHILD. Thank you so much for being part of CHILD'S journey and helping CHILD to build his emotional, behavioural and developmental capabilities.

All the best,
YOU

Source: Adapted from <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/adoption-blog/a-letter-to-my-adopted-childs-teacher/>

For Teachers

Share Medical Records, Previous School Records and Information about who is the parental contact and on what basis contact with birth/first family is allowed.

Consider a short story book about your child that you create with your child eg people in the child's life, interests, why they can't live with their first family.

Utilise Beacon House Booklet [Survival Story](#)

Further Information and Links

- This [5 minute video](#) on childhood trauma
- Trauma informed practice in [schools](#)
- Needs of adopted and permanently placed children [guide for schools](#)
- Becoming [trauma informed school](#)
- A teachers introduction to [attachment podcast](#)
- What [survival](#) looks like in schools
- The impact of [secondary trauma](#) and burnout

How Trauma Affects Me

Trauma affects children in many ways requiring teachers to support social competence, relationships with peers and adults and access to opportunities to grow and develop. Be calm, reassuring, explain they are not responsible so they don't blame themselves. The aim is to avoid later mental health problems (latent vulnerability).

Safe environments like schools can make it hard for traumatized children to adapt because their brain is programmed to cope. They can be hypervigilant to threats rather than receptive to the safe space. That means conflict, irritability, aggression and withdrawal can be more likely.

Reassure them that they aren't at fault and encourage them to try again, believing things can change.

Triggering of past memories can mean they become worried, anxious, blame others, have difficulty thinking about the future and have concentration problems.

Reassurance that I am safe, building trust and asking me what I need can help.

Reward system can respond in an odd way because they have had inconsistent rewards or a lack of them.

That means they may lack motivation, struggle with concentration, be increasingly tired or present with a low mood.

A structured environment, with encouragement and help with planning or other support can help.

Need help to build and maintain everyday relationships and to cope with stressors to build brain adaptations from the past.
Encourage them to try again and to believe things can be different.

Transitions and change can overwhelm them. Allow them to seek your help or a quiet space as they need it.

Attachment is impacted by trauma which results in challenging behaviours and emotions. Helping me to build and maintain relationships is key.

A high nurturing, calm environment where trust is built and I am reassured of my safety can help.

For Teachers

Please understand

Developmental and Childhood Trauma

can mean I need extra help with social competencies, relationships with peers or teachers and access to opportunities to grow, learn and develop.



Things that wont help me:

1. suspensions and expulsions
2. punishments and consequences

Social situations can be scary as my negative memories are often more prominent, so I:

- need help to build and maintain relationships.

When I am under threat, because I am hypervigilant to threats, I am more likely to:

- become irritable
- be aggressive
- withdraw
- self harm or self soothe
- be clingy or fear separating.

Need a calm, structured environment and planning help
Someone to reassure me and explain things aren't my fault
Encourage me to try again and believe things can be different
Allow me to seek your help or quiet space when I feel overwhelmed
Reassure me that I am safe
Build my trust and ask me what I need
Establish a student support group with regular meetings that include me and my carers.
Keep expectations high, building on attendance first and the school work later

Triggers of past memories may make me:

- worried
- anxious
- depressed or unable to think about the future
- unable to concentrate easily
- blame others unnecessarily
- feel guilty, ashamed or alone.

My reward centre may not respond as you might think because I have had inconsistent rewards or praise or a lack of rewards or praise, so I may:

- lack motivation
- be increasingly tired
- have low mood
- show poor concentration.



Resources

[Lookout Education Centres](#)
uktraumacouncil.org

2

Minimize Triggers.

Some elements of school environments push students to suddenly re-experience the stress and hurt of adverse experiences. Think about ...



HARSH LIGHTING

Try using lamps or covered overhead fluorescents.



SLAMMING DOORS

Use door stops; and consider how covered windows or screens may serve the same purpose.



SHOUTING

Rugs and other noise-absorbing fabrics can help reduce and muffle hectic noise from outside or out in the halls.



BELLS AND LOUDSPEAKERS

Advance notice of jarring sounds may help students prepare for them and avoid being startled or triggered.



UNWELCOME OR UNEXPECTED TOUCH

Ask permission or give warning before physically touching a student.

For Parents

UK Trauma Council have explained how the brain adapts to adversity in an animated 5 minute video. Easy to share with other parents.

[See here](#)

Share Beacon House Fight, Flight, Freeze response flyer.

[See here](#)

Highlight that my child might

Find new faces threatening

Feels unloved or anxious inside

May lose friends over time

May miss social cues or misinterpret them

Finds safe places the hardest spaces to navigate

Needs friends that keep turning up, even when my child blames them, withdraws from them or is irritable or depressed. Changes in the brain can take years.

Need friends that encourage them, remind them that they are safe and that they need not be ashamed or guilty, that things can be different.

Resources for Interested Parents

Removed Videos - [1](#) and [2](#)

Beacon House [trauma behaviours](#) diagram

Beacon House [Primary](#) Schools

Beacon House [Secondary](#) Schools

Print me and give me to a friend or relative who might need it. Why not also stick me on the fridge & in the car for when you need the information quickly!



Noticing Freeze

- Bored, not interested
- Confused, forgetful
- Distracted, not listening
- Clumsy
- Talking about something else
- Not moving to where you've asked
- Scanning the room
- Wide eyed, pupils might dilate
- Daydreaming, staring into space

Grounding Freeze

- Stay with me, don't leave me
- Tell me I'm ok & that I am safe
- Watching TV
- Deep breathing
- Spinning on a swing
- Climbing & hanging
- Rolling or cycling down a hill
- Digging in mud or sand
- Jumping on a trampoline
- Do my chores with me
- Gently wonder where I have gone & invite me back to you
- If I have forgotten what I was supposed to be doing, remind me again gently
- Hot chocolate & toast
- A warm bath & a warm towel
- A soft teddy for bedtime

Noticing Flight

- Hyperactive, manic, silly
- Aggressive, threatening: stiffening up, clenching fists
- Running away, escaping, disappearing, hiding under the table/bed/sofa
- Clumsy
- Disruptive, loud & noisy
- Can't cope with free play
- Can't follow house rules
- Not doing what you've asked
- Lonely
- Keeping super busy
- Baby talk/silly voices
- Bumping into people
- Needing to get into the car/house/park first

Grounding Flight

- Keep me close by
- Find me again happily or patiently
- Deep breathing
- Give me a familiar & easy chore
- Crunchy foods - carrot sticks, a biscuit, a rice cake or crisps
- Tell me that I am safe with you
- Hanging from monkey bars
- Talk through what you think I am finding tricky using a kind voice
- Heavy blankets
- Create a safe space where I can hide away I when I need to
- Tug of war
- Cup of warm milk or hot chocolate
- Hot water bottle & a soft teddy
- Recognize I sometimes find 'normal' family life threatening
- Accept that if I feel threatened, I feel in real danger.
- If you send me to do something & I forget, just patiently ask again

Noticing Fight

- Hot and bothered
- Argumentative, angry and aggressive
- Controlling, demanding and inflexible
- Lie or blaming
- Unable to concentrate on one thing
- Unable to follow the house rules
- Confrontational
- Disrespectful
- Disregarding of others, pushing away friends/family members
- Shouting, loud and noisy
- Immature

Grounding Fight

- Tell me you love me even when my I push you away
- Don't punish me for being cross; reward me with your kindness and love for getting calm again
- Keep me safe from hurting myself
- Match my energy
- Deep breathing
- Chewy foods
- Support me socially
- Hanging, swinging and climbing
- Warm bath with lots of bubbles
- Warm milk or a hot chocolate
- Hot water bottle
- A super soft teddy and/or blanket
- Give me a task that makes me feel important
- Connect with me and show me empathy before exploring the consequences of my behavior
- Create somewhere safe to go to so I can calm down
- Make things predictable. Tell me about changes before they happen, especially if strangers are coming to the house or I'm going somewhere new
- Accept I might not know why I behaved in that way & I might not remember what happened
- Listen and acknowledge how I feel, even if you see it differently, it will help me feel listened to

Noticing Submit

- Unhappy, low mood
- Alone or withdrawn
- Fidgety but not disruptive, anxious
- Never questioning or asking questions
- Never drawing unnecessary attention
- Yes or no answers - doing just enough to avoid being noticed, unable to think
- Quiet & passive, compliant

Grounding Submit

- See me, listen to me
- Give me small repetitive things to do
- Weighted blanket
- Building with Lego or Play-doh
- Tell me I am safe
- Deep breathing
- Swinging
- Let me spend quiet time just with you
- Understand that social media might symbolizes a comforting connection
- Hot chocolate and a crunchy biscuit
- Wrap me up in a soft blanket & watch TV
- Understand that playing computer games, lets me be by myself somewhere safe
- Recognize I am hurting inside & might need professional help
- Know that I am easily bullied, look out for this don't expect me to tell you.
- Notice I will say what I think you want me to say
- Be aware that I am an easy target & can be coerced easily to keep the peace
- Know I can't cope being the center of attention
- Watch for me removing myself
- Warm bath and a warm towel
- Warm pyjamas

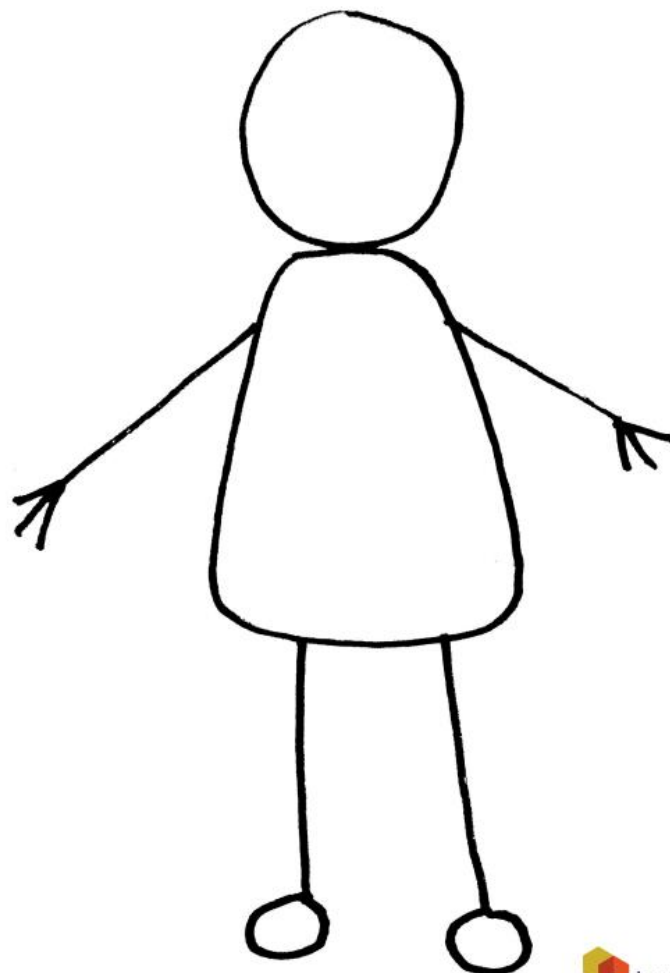


What survival looks like...

FOR ME

Created by

.....





RESOURCES

- [My Life Story Book NSW Government](#)
- [Complex Trauma Explained](#)
- [Infographic](#)
- [PCAF Flyer](#)
- [PCAF Letter for Teachers](#)
- [Removed Videos](#)
- [Lookout Centres](#)
- [Supporting Students](#)
- [AFT Infographic](#)
- [Beacon House](#)
- [How much to share with Teachers](#)
- [Wise Up Debbie Riley](#)
- [Strategic Sharing](#)
- [Pro's and Con's of Sharing](#)
- This [5 minute video](#) on childhood trauma
- Trauma informed practice in [schools](#)
- Needs of adopted and permanently placed children [guide for schools](#)
- Becoming [trauma informed school](#)
- A teachers introduction to [attachment podcast](#)
- What [survival](#) looks like in schools
- The impact of [secondary trauma](#) and burnout
- Beacon House [trauma behaviours](#) diagram
- Beacon House [Primary](#) Schools
- Beacon House [Secondary](#) Schools