

My Experiences with Lifebooks

By Carrie Kitz

What is a lifebook?

Lifebooks are a wonderful narrative tool that parents and children can use to discuss the child's story, from when they were born, not just from when they joined a family. A lifebook is a concrete tool for meaningful conversation. It is as fact based as you can make it, and an honest and loving biography. It makes adoption everyday conversation and allows us parents a structure for working through difficult material, both for us and for our children. It allows parents to honor ALL of their children's lives...every minute and everyone who has played a role. Most importantly, it allows control of the story (what, when and where to share) to the adoptee.

A lifebook works for a child from any adoptive circumstance: domestic infant placement, international infant placement, fostercare placement, older child adoption either domestically or internationally. It is the place to tell the story with truth and love.

Lifebook vs. Scrapbook

Many people have created beautiful travelogues about an adoption trip either domestically or abroad. But we as parents need to be careful that the story in this book is that of our children, not of us. Think of it as the "Book About Me", the "me" being your child.

Beth O'Malley details some key lifebook vs scrapbook differences in her book "Lifebooks, Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child" and they include:

- *The Lifebook always starts with the child's birth
- *Talks about the birth mother and birth father
- *Discusses the reasons why the child was adopted
- *Lifebook pages revolve around information, scrapbooks, around images
- *Lifebook is private, scrapbooks are shared

It's a great tool in the adoption parent's toolbox. But what if you are creatively challenged? Keep in mind it's the facts and the feelings that are important. And Center Stage is your child, not you.

Why do I need to do one?

What if I told you that this book will help you to use the tough words and process the tough thoughts surrounding how your child came into your family. Most of this stuff is going to be harder for you as a parent to work through than it is for your children. For them, the facts are their story. They live it everyday in the questions at school and the dreams and fantasy at night. Allowing your child ownership and control of their own

narrative is a huge foundational building block in identity formation. And any additional fact or detail is like gold. For those with an unknown beginning, we parents need to look for clues and use those to help us understand what our children were like before they came to us. For those children come with more known information, this book is a place to keep it all together. Who wouldn't want a special book just about them?

Once you have laid out the facts in this book, read the words a few times and let yourself work through feelings you might be having. This will give you an increased comfort level for those adoption conversations. Our children pick up on those subtle non-verbal cues and the practice you can get building this book will really help on that front.

A lifebook helps to promote attachment — children will build trust that their parent can tolerate their pain from the past and help them work through it. This book allows your child to connect to their “baby-self” and understand that all babies are made to be loved and cared for. This connection will help to create positive cultural and personal identity. Since the book is factual, it is a wonderful way to confront fantasy with the reality as we know it. And the biggest benefit? Front load the emotions and feelings for adolescence. It is much easier to do the work on emotions with your child before all the extra layers with hormones kick in.

What form should it take?

The choices are as varied as the people creating it. It's up to parent and child to decide. Each child will have different needs and the parent has different skills. The best thing you can do is to just get started, regardless of how you do it.

- * Quality level can vary depending on your skills. You don't have to be a scrapbooker to make one of these. If you have a computer and a printer, you are in business.
- * Have two sets for stains and anger (or save to a disk so you can reprint easily)
- * Make sure that all the information is from the perspective of the child
- * Make it flexible to be able to accommodate new information and a growing child.
- * Allow lots of space for personalizing by your child, drawings, words and decorations.

(I have personally used a top loading presentation folder available at office supply stores. It allows for easy updating as our children's awareness and understanding grows around adoption issues.)

What I personally have done

In my seminars with Jean on Narratives, I usually ask for a show of hands for these next questions. So how many of you know what a lifebook is? (usually everyone in the room holds up their hands) How many would like to create a lifebook for their child? (A few less hopd up their hands) How many of you have actually made one for your children? That number is usually significantly lower. Generally I can count them on one hand. If

you are one of those who didn't raise your hand on the last question, there is still hope for you, read on.

First a caveat, every family and child is different and will have different needs. This is what has worked for us. Your experience may be different.

We have used a "baby lifebook" one with just photos of caregivers, orphanage and early together family shots. There are no words, I can change them depending on the mood of the child or the topic we are working on at the time. My youngest daughter is big into her baby lifebook right now and she is 4 (it lives under her bed and she often browses the photos before bed.)

Basically, I am a procrastinator. We talk adoption issues in our house, have dealt with loss and gain and still, I hadn't found the right time to sit down and put together "the book." It seemed too daunting a task. For some reason, the timing never seemed to be right. Until my daughter learned to read and write. She came home from school one day and her teacher had told her that perhaps she would write books like her mom. Bingo. What better story than one about her?

I spent about 5 hours piecing together her "Just the Facts" story, with all the stuff I had tossed in what I like to call my lifebox. The place I toss all the stuff that I feel is important and related to the lifebook. I have discovered that lots of others use this box system as well.... I used a combination of Beth O'Malley, Cindy Probst and Jean MacLeod's book *At Home in This World* (hint, there are some great ideas in that book!) (Beth's book is a hands on, idea driven book. Cindy's is more introspective and a workbook for the parent, both were helpful to me.) Then I dug into the collection of clues I had been saving for the day I started the book. The weather on the day given to her as her birthday, notes from her foster family, photos of the orphanage and foster family, photos of the city she was from courtesy of Asia Threads, facts about her country of origin. As part of many of the pages, I put open ended questions ripe for discussion and my daughter's input. That is where we started.

Part B of her lifebook was entering her thoughts and feelings about the facts of her life as we know them. Each time we read her lifebook together, there are things she wants to add. The computer makes it so easy. I save the last file and modify a new one so at some time we can see how she evolved in her understanding. For us, this is an evolving tool that she has ownership and control over. Since she likes to write, I would guess that this might turn into a journal at some point. The evolution is in her control and has been wonderful to watch. For your family, one book might be the ticket. For us, the evolution has been so powerful. You as a parent know your child best.

To see the starting point (the "Just the Facts" story I wrote to get the ball rolling), I have saved it as a .pdf file available for downloading on our website. My daughter has graciously allowed others to see the beginning of her story so other moms and dads can make one for their children as well. Private information has been removed, as that is owned by her. She thinks that everyone needs a book about them and hopes that this will help moms and dads get started on a book for their child.