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| Samira’s answer | |
| Q | How might a life story book be helpful in a care relationship? Use examples from work with **either** a young person **or** an older person with a dementing illness. |

A young person who has been in care in a home, in foster care or adopted, can lose their sense of who they are. For them life story work can be a very powerful tool to help them come to terms with their past and so enable them to cope with the future.

Ryan and Walker talk about how a child can feel responsible for the mistakes of adults, and life story work can help them to accept that it’s not their fault. Jamie Knight is a 21 year old living at present with his girlfriend and baby daughter. He last lived with both his parents when he was 5, and had been in various care situations. Sarah Burrows, his keyworker, suggested when he was 10 that he should have a life story book. They had regular sessions and included his date of birth, other important dates, photos, pictures and written memories of his childhood. They revisited places he had been to. The life story book held even more significance for him as his case notes had been lost in a fire. The sessions helped him to come to terms with what had happened in the past. Sarah talks about a very angry little boy when the process started.

Confidentiality when recording a life story book is imperative. You cannot betray their confidence unless you hear of a potential abuser in which case you need to tell the child that this is too important not to tell, and maybe agree a timeframe with them when to tell, always assuring them that you will be there for them if any questions need to be asked.

The other care workers in Jamie’s life benefited from the life story work although it’s confidential. It helped him to re-establish his identity of who he was and where he had come from, and accept that it was not his fault he was in care, some adults are just not good parents.

When doing life story work Ryan and Walker stress the importance of the same person following the book through from start to finish with the support of keyworkers, social workers, foster carers etc. It has now become established practice when children go into foster care or for adoption that a life story book is continued as Jamie’s was. He talks about it still being an ongoing process and how he is now considering looking for his sister who he lost touch with.

Life story work can give a care worker greater insight into a child in care. A better understanding of a child leads to better care. It offers a continuance for the child. The life story book could be used to plan for a child’s future and could be a way for a young person to tell about an abusive or potentially abusive situation in their past.

When a child or young person goes into foster care or moved to another care environment, the life story book offers a continuance. It gives the new carers something to work with and add to actively participating in a young person’s life.

If life story work makes a young person happier then that makes the job of caring easier and more effective. When you look at Erikson’s model of Identity v Role Confusion, you can see the importance of a young person establishing his/her own identity. What you know about their past reinforces their present and their sense of self.

So life story work is an excellent way for the young person and carer to work together in partnership. You should remember though that it is not always suitable for all young people and if a child/young person does not want to do it they should never be forced. It is hard to accept now that not so long ago children in care when they reached adulthood had very little to hold onto that belonged to their childhood. In a ‘normal family’ environment your sense of self is reinforced by your parents, siblings, extended family, photos, videos, shared memories. You cannot presume that any of these are available for the young person in care.

The life story work is an enabling process for the young person as well as the carer and can have a very positive effect on both the care given and the personality of the young person. It has to be a big step forward in the care of young people enabling them to maintain their identity.