

Information leaflet

Helping special guardians to understand their child's situation

A child's sense of identity begins to come together in the pre-school years. This is when they begin to identify aspects such as sex and gender and notice differences in skin colour. It is also during these years that a child can take an interest in how they came to join a family.

Depending on how young they were at the time the Special Guardianship Order (SGO) was granted, they may or may not be aware that there is anything different about their situation at home. However it is during this time that other children begin to notice differences too. For special guardians who are grandparents they may get asked lots of questions by other parents and children as to why they are older. They and their child may find this upsetting. The important thing is to prepare special guardians for such questions so that they can handle them in a way that feels comfortable.

Special guardians should be prepared for discussions with their child regarding their role and what this means for them. They should be aware that a child will seek their feelings about the situation too and this will help them with their perception of what is 'normal'. If a special guardian is relaxed and happy about their role this will transfer to the child.

It is important for special guardians to try to maintain a positive viewpoint regarding the child's birth parents and to acknowledge the child's love for their birth parents and any good experiences they may have had as a family. This is true even if they themselves are critical about or angry with the birth parents. Special guardians should not pretend that bad things have not happened in the past but should try and maintain a sense of balance and perspective that there is good and bad in all of us.

For this reason special guardians should try and stop other adults speculating about the birth parents' behaviour and the consequences of that behaviour in front of the child or in a way that can be overheard by the child. Such conversations will be a great source of conflict and distress for the child and are avoidable.

Life story books

Life story books are required for children who have been adopted but there is no reason that the process cannot be valuable for a child under a SGO.

A life story book is a scrapbook which tells the story of the child's life through words and pictures and aims to give them an understanding of their identity and history.

They help children by giving them a record of their history, allowing them to integrate the past into the future so that their childhood makes more sense to them. It also gives them an on-going narrative they hopefully feel they can add to as time goes by.

It can be a valuable tool for the child to return to when confronting old feelings or when trying to understand or accept the past. It allows them to remember the good times shared with their birth parents and put their lives into better context.

Special guardians can begin the process of creating a life story book by starting to gather together pictures of the child from different stages in their childhood and by asking other people who have known the child at different points in time to contribute their own pictures or written memories of the child at different ages and stages. As this website develops we hope that special guardians and local authority professionals will share their tips and experiences of life story work too.

Attachment

Attachment describes interpersonal relationships between human beings. To thrive, children need to feel that they 'belong' and have strong attachments with the people who are caring for them, usually their parents. Special guardians need to understand the importance of attachment too. They need to ensure that they are emotionally available to the child and recognise when the child needs attention and respond accordingly.

Useful books

There are a number of published children's books relating to identity and kinship care that may be very useful for children living with special guardians. The publishers, CoramBAAF and Hinton Publishing both produce a range of relevant books.

Publications discussing how to construct a Life Story book:

- Life Story Work with Children Who are Fostered or Adopted: Creative Ideas and Activities by Katie Wrench and Lesley Naylor
- Digital Life Story Work by Simon P. Hammond and Neil J. Cooper
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- Life Story Therapy with Traumatized Children: A Model for Practice by Richard Rose
- Reminiscence and Life Story Work, Fourth Edition by Faith Gibson
- Life Story Work: A Practical Guide to Helping Children Understand Their Past by Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker

Fiction books for children featuring kinship care

- Spiderman Peter is brought up by and lives with his aunt.
- The Cat Mummy by Jacqueline Wilson

- Verity lives with her grandparents and father after the death of her mother. The story looks at how she and her family come to terms with the loss of her mother following the death of a loved pet cat.
- Secrets by Jacqueline Wilson
- Treasure goes to live with her grandmother but fears having to go back to her mother and violent step-father.
- Max and Tyra by Kim Bedford (Australian)
- Max and Tyra go to live with their Nan because their mum has a problem with drugs.
- Heidi by Johanna Spyri
Heidi lives with her grandfather.

Useful links

Life Story works

www.lifestoryworks.org

The Life Story Works website aiming to help you with ideas and techniques when constructing a Life Story Book, including a step-by-step guide regarding how to make one.

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