

Information leaflet

Understanding your child's situation and talking to them about it

Your 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. You or your child may find this upsetting. The important thing here is to be prepared for such questions so that you can all handle them in a way that feels comfortable.

As a carer you should be prepared for discussions with your child regarding your role and what this means for them. You should be aware that they are seeking your feelings about the situation too and this will help them with their perception of what is 'normal'. If you are relaxed and happy about being their special guardian this will transfer to your child.

It's important to maintain a positive viewpoint regarding your 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 their birth parents. You shouldn't pretend that bad things have not happened in the past but do try and maintain a sense of balance and a perspective that there is good and bad in all of us.

For this reason you should stop other adults speculating about the birth parents' behaviour and the consequences of that behaviour in front of your child or in a way that can be overheard by your child. Such conversations will be a great source of conflict and distress for your 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 their childhood makes 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 trying to accept the past. It allows them to remember the good times shared with their birth parents and put their lives into better context.

For ideas or help to construct a life story book, have look at the list of useful resources below. You could also contact the team your local authority has in place for adoption support as they will have lots of experience and may be able to help you. The team is usually called the 'Adoption Support Team' but can also be known as the 'Kinship Support Team', 'Family Placement Team' or 'Post Adoption Support Team'.

To find out what the team is called in your area contact your local Families Information Service or your local authority.

You could begin the process of creating a life story book yourself by starting to gather together pictures of your child from different stages in their childhood and by asking other people who have known the child at different stages to contribute their own pictures or written memories of the child at different ages and stages..

Attachment

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

Useful books

There are a number of children's books published relating to identity and kinship care. These resources may be useful for children living with special guardians. Look at the publishers CoramBAAF and Hinton Publishing who 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

- 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
- 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 raised 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. You can read this book online here.
- Heidi by Johanna Spyri
Heidi lives with her grandfather.

Useful organisations

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.

Family Action Head Office 24 Angel Gate, City Road, London, EC1V 2PT

T: 020 7254 6251 F: 020 7249 5443 info@family-action.org.uk www.family-action.org.uk

Registered as a Charity in England & Wales no: 264713. Registered as a Charity in the Isle of Man no: 1206.

Registered Company Limited by Guarantee in England and Wales: 01068186.

Patron: Her Majesty the Queen. Chair: Bryan Portman MBA FCCA FCIS. Chief Executive: David Holmes CBE.

Vice Patrons: Christine Davies CBE. Dr Andrew McCulloch. Dame Denise Platt DBE. Katie Vanneck-Smith. Professor Harriet Ward CBE.