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## Lifebooks in Child Welfare: Why Isn't a Great Idea Used More Often?

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### ABSTRACT

Lifebooks are a crucial resource for children in the child welfare system. Lifebooks help these children know about and reflect on their history, both as children and for the rest of their lives. As a result, lifebooks are required in many jurisdictions around the world yet there is little data about their actual utilization rate. This study gathered surveys from 196 foster or adoptive parents and child welfare caseworkers and documented a 56% usage rate of lifebooks. Further analyses especially noted an association between the presence of a lifebook and the influence of actively involved foster parents, both in the transition planning and in the relationship with the adoptive parent.

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Lifebooks have been used extensively in many countries as a means to document the history of a child in the state's custody since at least the 1980s (e.g., Beste & Richardson, 1981) and are required by many jurisdictions, e.g., Louisiana, Great Britain (Department for Education, 2014; Louisiana Department of Social Services, 2009; Rose, 2017). Lifebooks are collections of content to document children's journeys from their birth through adoptions, often involving the child welfare system but not necessarily. Lifebooks were originally in the form of scrapbooks in which photos and stories about the child and families they had lived with were organized but have evolved into structured workbooks, physical containers that can hold valued objects as well as narratives on paper, and even digital collections (Shotton, 2010; Watson et al., 2018). The content for lifebooks can be provided/created by caseworkers, foster parents, adoptive parents, birth parents and also the child in collaboration with the adults. Examples of content include photos or videos of the child with important others, stories about the child, artwork created by the child, the child's own narratives recorded or transcribed at the time they are produced or later on, and information about important transitions in the child's life. The content can document at a developmentally appropriate level the child's life with their birth family, why they left their birth family and

details about that transition, their life with one or more foster families, and their shift to the adoptive home and life there. More recently, the lifebook has evolved from something done for the child to something done with the child as a therapeutic/attachment intervention (Hooley et al., 2016; Rose, 2012, 2017; Shotton, 2013). Lifebooks have also been called life story books, memory stores.

Lifebooks are theorized to be based on the role of narratives in helping children develop their sense of identity by integrating past relationships and events with their current living arrangements and relationships (Watson et al., 2015a). Children being adopted out of foster care have almost universally experienced loss and trauma (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2008; Mitchell, 2016); events that they may have little to no conscious memory of. In addition to the content of lifebooks being useful to children's identity formation, the process of creating a lifebook by a child and a trusted other is seen as therapeutic for the child (Rose, 2012; Watson et al., 2015a) and facilitative of the relationship between the child and the trusted other (Shotton, 2010, 2013).

## Literature review

Given the general consensus that lifebooks should be used as part of adoption transitions (e.g., Smith, 2014), how often are lifebooks actually used? This author could find no research examining frequency of use of lifebooks, except for two studies. Berry et al. (1996) reported that adoptive parents using a public agency received a lifebook regarding the child 24% of the time (as opposed to private agencies or independent adoptions where the rates were lower). Wind et al. (2005) related that 10.5% of their overall sample of adoptive parents (N = 1219) had had an opportunity to review a lifebook, however, 21% of the adoptive parents of children who were at "environmental risk" (children with a history of physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, out-of-home placement, and/or older age at adoption) had reviewed a lifebook. It should be noted that the samples for both of these studies come from the state of California only

There is almost no research on the impact of lifebooks in the United States and United Kingdom, except findings that it is seen as helpful by children (Davis, 1998; Watson et al., 2015a), social workers (Backhaus, 1984), child welfare experts (Burnell, 2009; Kurnatowski et al., 2018; Riggs, 2017), and caregivers (Shotton, 2010, 2013). Conversely, adoptive parents were critical of the quality of the life story books accompanying their children—they found them incomplete, or providing material that was too sensitive for the children (Watson et al., 2015b). The importance assigned to lifebooks by different groups involved with adoption and the dearth of

research about lifebooks led to the need to gather more information about them.

### **Current study**

This study is part of a larger project on children's transition to adoptive placements (Reams, 2021). The goals of this study are to:

- document the utilization rates of lifebooks, and
- examine the associations between whether a lifebook was used or not and demographic and descriptive variables related to the child, the foster and adoptive homes, and the transition process.

The study used a convenience sample from the State of Oregon of respondents retrospectively recalling the circumstances of the adoptive process. Given the dearth of research on lifebooks, it was felt important to proceed with this research despite its methodological limitations.

### **Method**

Subjects were recruited from trainings presented to the child welfare community in the State of Oregon in the United States and through the outreach of the Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center (ORPARC). Although the State of Oregon encourages that lifebooks will be created for children placed in its custody, it does not mandate them (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2020). The data collected are thus from a convenience sample and may not be representative of adoptive parents, foster parents or child welfare caseworkers. All three groups were present in the community trainings while the outreach of ORPARC mostly resulted in surveys from foster and adoptive parents. Each participant responded about one child's transition and each transition had only one respondent describing it.

Surveys were completed about 205 children. The Lifebook question was "Was a lifebook (a book with photos and text documenting the child's life) used as part of the transition?" Possible answers were "Yes", "No", and "Don't know". Only those questionnaires with yes or no answers were included in this paper. There were 9 surveys that responded "Don't Know" regarding lifebook usage yielding a final sample size of 196 surveys (identified as 54% female and 46% male). Each child had a survey completed by one adult; 92 by adoptive parents, 59 by foster parents and 45 by state child welfare caseworkers. Using demographic data, it was confirmed that no child had more than one survey completed about him or her.

The relationship between the child and the adoptive parent was as nonrelated strangers in 65% of the families, nonrelated but had a preexisting relationship in 16% of the families, and a kinship placement for 19% of the families. It's important to remember that we did not include adoptions where the child's existing foster families adopted the child. Unfortunately, due to an oversight, questions about the racial make-up of the children and the parents was omitted. Proportions of children experiencing different risk factors or forms of maltreatment were reported as: physically abused 29%, sexually abused 17%, neglected 76%, exposed to alcohol and drugs in utero 66%, exposed to domestic violence 55%, and lived with substance-abusing parents 69%. Children were identified as receiving, at the time of the transition, early intervention/special education services in 36% of the cases, mental health services in 45% of the cases, and ongoing medical monitoring for a chronic medical condition for 17% of the children. Adoptive parents were adopting for the first time 78% of the time. Other characteristics of the sample are presented in [Table 1](#). More detail about the sample can be found in Reams (2021).

Respondents were instructed to answer about the child in the most recent transition they were part of. If more than one child was involved in that transition, they were directed to answer about the youngest child. Only transitions that entailed a child moving from a foster home to a separate, different adoptive home were included because these transitions

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

Characteristics	N	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Range
Child's age at transition (in months)	204	56.7	46.5	41.5	3–204
How long had the target child been in that foster home at the time of transition (in months)	202	16.9	14.0	13.5	0–96
Child's age at removal from birth home (in months)	187	25.8	14.0	29.9	1–132
Number of prior foster placements	197	2.4	2.0	2.7	0–17
Foster parent's age at time of adoptive transition (in years)	61	45.2	39.0	12.0	28–75
Number of children in foster home at time of transition (not including target child)	201	2.2	2.0	2.3	0–15
Length of time foster parent had been fostering at time of transition (in years)	174	5.5	3.0	6.4	0–40
Adoptive parents age at time of adoptive transition	93	38.3	38	7.3	23–60
How many children in adoptive home before target child joined (50% had none)	203	1.2	0	1.7	0–9
How long ago did the transition occur (in months)	175	36.5	17	51.1	1–360

were felt to be of a wholly different kind than adoptive transitions when a child is adopted by their foster parents. Children's demographic data were compared to make sure that no children had more than one survey completed about them. All transitions occurred in Oregon and included children in the state child welfare system. All questions used in this study were either yes/no or multiple choice. Transition was defined as "the time between the first in-person contact between the child and the future adoptive parent and when the child is living permanently with the future adoptive parent."

All surveys were about the respondent's most recent adoptive transition. Thus, this is a retrospective study with transitions occurring between one month and thirty years prior to the survey being completed; with 95% of the surveys being completed within 10 years of the transition. Because foster parents and caseworkers were involved in more transitions than adoptive parents, they were more likely to be responding about a more recent transition. This retrospectiveness has many issues with it that will be discussed later, however, the decision was made to include all surveys to add greater statistical power and also to provide a view into the way adoptive transitions may have changed over time.

The survey was designed to include characteristics of the child (e.g., the number of prior foster homes the child had been in), the adoptive home (e.g., whether the adoptive parents had adopted children before), the foster home (e.g., how long had the foster parent been a foster parent at the time of the adoptive transition), the caseworker (e.g., was the caseworker involved in the planning of the adoptive transition) and the transition process (e.g., were there in-person visits between the children and their foster parents after the children had transitioned into their adoptive homes). Some items were only answered by some respondents based on their available knowledge; e.g., caseworkers were not asked about the child's behavior during visits but foster and adoptive parents were. Potential items were generated from a literature review and clinical experience. An early version of the questionnaire was previewed by members of the local Special Needs Adoption Coalition and input was given and integrated into subsequent revisions. Respondents answered about adoptions that they were involved in and whether a lifebook was given to the adoptive parent but they were not necessarily involved in the creation of the lifebook.

Analyses were conducted using the SPSS statistical package. After reporting percentage use of lifebooks, exploratory analyses will be conducted to look at what child, caregiver, or transition process variables are associated with whether a lifebook was used or not employing bivariate t-test and chi square analyses with missing data excluded on a pairwise basis.

## Results

The focus of this study is on the frequency that a lifebook was used in adoptive transitions and whether there are variables associated with its usage. A lifebook was used in 56% of the adoptive transitions surveyed. The use of a lifebook showed few relationships with demographic variables: child's gender or age at transition. There was no statistically significant difference in how long ago the adoptive transition had occurred between cases where lifebooks had been or had not been used in ( $t=0.94$ ,  $p = .35$ ).

The one demographic relationship related to lifebook usage was the child's age at removal from their birth home: children where there was a lifebook used were an average of 20.8 months of age at removal and children where a lifebook was not used were an average of 31.1 months of age at removal ( $t=2.36$ ,  $p = .02$ ). This may be connected to two other findings: that children reported as having been neglected had a lifebook during transition less often (51%) than children who were not reported as neglected (72%) ( $\chi^2=6.58$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Similarly, children who reported as having had parents with alcohol and/or drug problems had a lifebook during transition less often (50%) than children not reported with parental alcohol and/or drug problems—69%; ( $\chi^2 = 5.80$ ,  $p = .02$ ). These two variables showed significant differences in age at removal but so did all the other risk factors (reported as sexual abused, physically abused, exposed to domestic violence, prenatal exposure to alcohol and/or drugs).

There were a number of variables related to the foster parent and the relationships between foster and adoptive parents. Transitions with lifebooks had foster parents who had been in that role longer (6.52 years vs. 3.71 years;  $t=3.11$ ,  $p = .002$ ). Transitions which had foster parents contributing to the planning had higher rates of lifebook presence (66% vs. 39%;  $\chi^2=11.80$ ,  $p = .001$ ) compared to transitions where the foster parent was not in on the transition planning. This was not the case regarding the involvement of caseworkers or adoptive parents in the transition planning process. Respondents were asked whether information in each of seven categories (the child's daily routine, likes and dislikes, personality, history, behavior as well as birth family information and effective parenting strategies with the child) was shared with adoptive parents by foster parents and these were combined into a single variable—amount of shared information. When a lifebook was involved in the transition, then more information was shared from foster parent to adoptive parents ( $t=3.01$ ;  $p = .003$ ). In addition, when there was a lifebook, there was more emotional sharing between foster and adoptive parents versus when there was no lifebook (2.52 vs. 2.07 on a 1-5 scale,  $t=1.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ). After the transition, adoptive and foster parents who were in touch on social media were also more

likely to have had a lifebook involved in the transition than those who weren't in touch through social media (72% vs. 52%;  $\chi^2=4.75$ ,  $p = .03$ ). There was a trend ( $p = .07$ ) in that same direction for any kind of written contact (texts, letters, social media, email) and the use of lifebooks.

One of the most important variables defining children's transitions from foster to adoptive homes are the number of visits between the child and adoptive parents before the child goes to live permanently with the adoptive parents. Transitions that included lifebooks had more visits than those without lifebooks (4.92 vs. 3.80;  $t=1.94$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Not surprisingly given that finding, transitions with lifebooks also had the children alone with the adoptive parent without the foster parent present at a later visit (2.35 vs. 1.95;  $t=2.26$ ,  $p = .03$ ) than transitions without lifebooks.

One other finding important to report is that children in early intervention or special education were more likely to have lifebooks present in their adoptive transitions than children not receiving those services (65% vs. 50%;  $\chi^2=3.93$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

Just over half of children transitioning from a foster home to an adoptive home were accompanied by a lifebook. Although this is a substantial percentage and much better than the 21–24% reported previously (Berry et al., 1996; Wind et al., 2005), it is by no means universal. What might account for the higher percentage of life book use found in the current study? One possible reason is the time frame in which data were collected—both of the previous studies used surveys from adoptions from the late 1980s when awareness of the lifebook was initially developing based on publication dates of lifebook articles while over 98% of the surveys in this study were from after the year 2000. A piece of evidence against the time frame hypothesis is that there was no statistically significant difference in when the adoptions occurred in this study based on whether a lifebook was used or not. Another possible explanation for the differences between the studies including that the earlier studies were done in California and this one was done in Oregon and the possibly varying attitudes and/or policies regarding lifebooks in the two states.

These data are from one state in one country; however, it is from a state that assumes a lifebook for each child being adopted (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2020). As with many other policies in many jurisdictions, a policy does not equal implementation. One takeaway is that just because a jurisdiction has a rule concerning lifebooks, it is important to check on the implementation of that rule.



What of the 44% of the children who had no lifebook when they moved into their adoptive home? What did they lose? They have potentially lost a narrative that is part of their identity, both at the time of their transition and for the rest of their life (Watson et al., 2015a). Narratives have the power to help maltreated children make sense of the trauma and loss they have already experienced (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2008). The unavailable lifebook can then not be used later as part of psychotherapy organized around lifebooks (Rose, 2012, 2017). One of the children interviewed by Watson et al. (2015a) summed it up as “I think that having life story is probably one of the best things about being adopted, so you can know more about your other life and anything that you want to find out you’d have in it” (p. 96).

The centrality to lifebook usage of an active foster parent who forms an involved relationship with the adoptive parents is supported by the data in this study and others (Burnell, 2009). Lifebooks were used more often with more experienced foster parents who were involved in the planning of the transition and then had more emotionally supportive and information-exchanging contact with the adoptive parents. This increased level of connection between foster and adoptive parents when lifebooks were used also seemed to last beyond the transition given that there was more social media contact and a trend for more written contact of any form between adoptive and foster parents after the transition had finished when a lifebook was part of the transition. Foster parent training and empowerment seem important points of focus if we seek to raise the usage rates of lifebooks in the child welfare system.

## Limitations

This research is limited in being retrospective. Having contemporaneous reports of the use of lifebooks or not would likely be more accurate. This research is also from one location and so it is a geographic point estimate. It’s very important for lifebook utilization rates to be gathered from many more geographical locations within the United States and around the world—both from a research perspective but also for each location’s child welfare authorities to evaluate its own child welfare practice regarding lifebooks and see if there is room for improvement.

Process research is also important on what material is contributed to lifebooks, who is contributing, how they are made developmentally appropriate for the age of the child and then updated as the child grows older, and examining what is included in the lifebook and what is left out. Part of this process research could also look at how they are used—as a

memory aide, to strengthen attachment between a child and a significant other, or to help a child work through past trauma with a psychotherapist. What elements of a lifebook help in each of these possible functions? In addition, it would be valuable to look at user experiences with lifebooks—what lifebook material is found to be meaningful to children and adoptive parents (Watson et al., 2015b). Effectiveness of lifebooks could be evaluated with randomized group studies. Hopefully, much more research on lifebooks will follow up on this study.

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