



by Beth O'Malley M.Ed.

## Talking About Adoption

I believe that lifebooks are **magic**. What other book totally changes over time, yet you never change a page? Each stage that your child enters gives them a new perspective on their lifebook. Each age gives new meaning to the word “adopted.”

Sounds simple. It is. Easy to write? Maybe – maybe not. But read on and learn why this is a priceless gift for your child.

## Missing Pieces

The stories and photos abound once a child enters their family. (How many boxes of pictures do you have stored away?) But that’s not the child’s beginning.

Imagine a picture of someone that gets cut off at the knees. This is what it feels like not to have or to discuss your history. Adoptees end up with a floating or numb sensation with no past history or roots. I should know.

I spent my first five months in foster care before getting adopted. For most of my childhood, I listened carefully to the silence that followed my adoption questions: “Who am I? How am I a part of this family?” These were questions for which I never heard answers.

Adoptees so often have that sense of *missing pieces*. Lifebooks fill in the gap with words, artwork, and photos, if available. The words create pictures when none exist.

## Magical Thinking

At the age of six I decided that my birth parents died in a plane crash in Africa. I didn’t tell a soul. Later I changed the story, but the ending was always death.

Adopted children often have secret thoughts about why they were adopted. Many believe that somehow they are responsible for the separation from their birth family. It’s the power of magical thinking.

Remember the children’s rhyme, “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back”? Children believe that they are the center of the universe and so very powerful. Maybe they were moved from the foster home/birth family because they wet the bed that night...or cried too much. The damaging self-talk is endless. Lifebooks help answer the questions, increase self-esteem, and teach children the truth.

That truth is that *it’s a grown-up’s job* to take care of the little boy or girl, to make sure that they are safe and have enough food, that they have good babysitters and get plenty of hugs. It’s not the kid’s fault if that doesn’t happen.

## Family Traits & Talents

Yes, remind your children of the ways they are connected to their adoptive family, despite not looking alike. They may have similar voice patterns, talents, food choices or interests.

But also remember, this is *your* family. Feel the freedom to share your vision for your child and family.

It took me 45 years to figure out that I got my dry sense of humor from my adoptive father. (OK, so I was a little slow!) Every North Carolina family reunion I attend reminds me that genetics are not the only way to pass on family values. Never assume that your child knows these things.

## Celebrate Traits in a Lifebook

Celebrate the strengths both in your child and their birth parents. As Corinne Rayburn, co-director at the Center for Family Connections says, “Birth families are like in-laws...you didn’t pick them but you have to live with them.” If you don’t have any information, then look to your child’s talents and wonder if perhaps they got their artistic talents from that unknown birth father.

A lifebook page that talks about both kinds of family traits really helps out with those tough adolescent years when identity issues begins to peak. The more your child knows, the more that s/he will feel “real.”

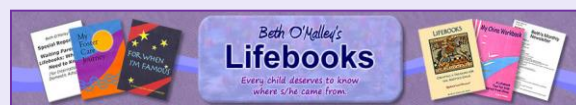
Some would argue, “Our family is very open and always talks about adoption/foster care, so why write it down?” Because a book that you and your child can pick up and hold gives the foster/adoptee control over his/her own story. They can look at it when the urge hits them, not when *you* are inspired. It becomes symbolic for adoption discussion. It’s like an adoption security blanket.

The ultimate **MAGIC** to creating a treasured lifebook is to start it, work on it as a family, and give it your child. Even if it only has five pages, it is tangible proof to your child that s/he is precious enough to deserve this life treasure.

**Beth O'Malley**, M.Ed. is a lifebook expert, adoptee, adoptive mom and professional in the field of adoption. With a Masters in Counseling, she relies on her instincts and experiences as an adult adoptee and as much as her professional skills when writing and working on lifebooks.

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