

Helping children under special guardianship to understand their situation

Your child's sense of identity

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 their 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 and may start **asking questions**. This can be upsetting for children and their carer. The important thing is that special guardians are prepared 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.

Supporting your child to develop a positive sense of identity

- 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.
- 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 can help

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, or add to an existing book, by gathering pictures of their 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.

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

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.