

Starting Simple: THE PHOTO LIFEBOOK for Young Children

By Jean MacLeod

One of the easiest paths through recounting an adoption story is by fashioning a simple, photographic version of a lifebook. Teaching our children to identify how they *feel* about their life story is even more important than the words we use to *tell* the story, so creating any foundational tool for adoption understanding becomes a two-part process:

1) THE FOUR FEELINGS

A lifebook is basically the story of an adoptee's life prior to his or her adoption. Most of us have very little information about our internationally adopted children, but we can use what we do know with powerful effect. As parents, we can really think about the images we put on a page, and be prepared to talk about not just the photos, but the *emotions* that lurk behind each innocent picture. Even very young children can learn The Four Feelings: Happy, Mad, Sad and Scared, and can apply them to people's expressions in photographs as they browse their lifebook albums. For a child, this is an empowering step! Identifying feelings is the first leap toward understanding that adoption is both a happy life changing event, and a great personal loss. The written and / or visual lifebooks we create, or co-create, for our children, are both historical documents and tools of connection. We can make them fancy or simple, but if we are willing to discuss what lies *beneath the print and behind the pictures*, we can also reach a special spot in our children's hearts. . . .

2) THE PHOTO LIFEBOOK for Young Children

A visual life story is easily created by putting chronological photos in a sturdy mini album. Begin in your child's birth country, with the earliest referral photos you have of your child. Include photos of the birth family, foster family or orphanage caretakers, if you are lucky enough to have them. Add photos of your child's city or province, the local people and rural countryside. Use copies of the original images for a photo lifebook, so that a child can keep the album on her own shelf.

Periodically flip through the album with your young child, and matter-of-factly discuss each photo. No writing required! Ask your child what she thinks is happening in each photo, then describe what you see. This automatically, naturally, and regularly makes parents use 'tough' words like adoption, birthmother, orphanage, abandonment, finding place, Baby House (Russia/EE), and foster parents. Ask your child what she thinks is happening in each photo, then describe what you see or know.

The photos also give parents an important opportunity to talk about *how the child must have*

felt at the time of each photo, judging by the facial expressions and body language in the pictures. Talking about the emotion in the photos helps children to think a little more deeply about what they are looking at, and helps parents get comfortable with adoption conversation on a truly intimate and connective level. You can end the baby-album at a first birthday party, or first adoption anniversary, but it doesn't really matter; the focus just needs to be on the child's life, pre-adoption, and on her transition to her new family and home.

Surprisingly, I have found photo lifebooks and adoption narratives to be as emotionally important for parents as they are for children. Helping our sons and daughters with their stories allows us to process our *own* feelings about our children's early lives-- and gives us an empathic place in our children's pre-adoption experiences.



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