

Therapeutic Life Story Work International

More About Me – Descriptor

More About Me – the second process of the Creative Life Story Approach developed by Blue Cabin, Therapeutic Life Story Work International and partners.

I am often asked what 'More About Me' work is in connection with the concept of Therapeutic Life Story Work. Questions like - what is the difference? Is it not just their therapeutic life story work but quicker?

To understand 'More About Me', one must first understand the reasons for doing the work, so that when you experience it, the outcome of the work and the best interest of the person that you're working with is evident. Not all children would benefit from Therapeutic Life Story Work, this being the 12-month approach which, as a model of practice, is extremely intensive and takes the child on a journey from their grandparents all the way through to the present day and to the future.

In my model, Therapeutic Life Story Work is a very well thought out and well-rehearsed approach to working with extremely hurt and often dissociated children and young people. Where their reality is confused with the trauma, the loss and often the separation from their birth families - especially when that trauma has not been resolved.

Often Therapeutic Life Story Work is provided if a child or young person feels that they are defined by their past, and that past being so challenging, develops further challenges to survive – it is at this stage that we need to try to support them in rediscovering their past to understand what's occurred, their role in that story and to make sense of other roles played by the people that have been part of their life history. By doing this, we can support children and young people to make sense of their journey and provide an opportunity to release themselves from the shame, guilt and often blame which is so unfairly felt. If we do our job properly, our young people will be able to move forward in a much more positive light.

We see this in relationships they began to forge, the renegotiation and resetting of relationships already experienced and the reality that they are not only worthy, lovable and also have esteem, but they can also begin to rely on other adults and people around them in the belief that they will keep them safe and they will not harm them.

Ultimately Therapeutic Life Story Work is designed to free the child or young person from the past, understand their present and to move forward into the future which, through support from adults around them, they can design, shape and embrace all that is around them.

More About Me is an approach that uses a lot of the skills found within Therapeutic Life Story Work but concentrates on the particular area of need. More About Me is delivered by a professionally trained Therapeutic Life Story Worker and can take between 8 and 12 sessions. Each of the sessions are designed to support the child or the young person and a carer (supportive adult) to explore their journey that has led them to the particular challenge they currently face.

Typically, a More About Me engagement would suit a young person who finds themselves in a connected care environment such as a Special Guardianship Order, an extended family member or a foster placement that has been approved as a guardian.

When children are placed in these households, it is often the case that those placed and those offering care do not have a clear understanding of how they came to be placed. They may not know the reasons for not being able to stay with their birth parents, they may not know if the birth parents are still mindful of them, they may not know if they are left temporarily or permanently. As we all know, children and young people will blame themselves when they don't understand an event or an action. Unaddressed this initial blame can become overwhelming for the child or young person and they may feel it hard to invest in a connected placement or feel that they are not good enough to be part of the new placement.

When it comes to young people placed in special guardianship orders, it is often the case that they do not know what there is ahead, and so there is no clarity of the future. There may well be thoughts about the family of origin that are no longer visible such as parents, sisters, brothers and so forth that may not be living together.

Questions such as 'Why did I move? How come I live here? How long are they going to last? What if it goes wrong, where will I go then? Why would somebody want me to live with them if I'm so horrible that the other people I used to live with don't want me anymore?'

We are not always able to explain or know what to say when difficult decisions are made in their best interest, or indeed what is 'best interest'. For some children, they take on the responsibility and the blame, and in a few cases the shame. These burdens may lead to things such as self-harm, aggressive behaviours, withdrawn presentations and rejection. These, left unchecked, may develop into more

concerning thoughts and emotions, and sadly stresses and anger can become aggression and internal and external harm.

To counter this, and to provide a response to support children and their carers to address their children and young people's hurts and sadness as well as other related behaviours, I brought in the notion of the 'More About Me' book. I am so pleased that Blue Cabin have incorporated the 'More About Me' into the Creative Life Story programme.

The process is broken down into three parts, each part is essentially linked to each other so that we have an opportunity for all those involved with the child or young person, and particularly with the child or the young person to help make sense of their lives. The More About Me is designed to provide children and young people (and their families) with a sense of closure from some of these past events.

I have detailed the model below and you will see that it has three sections: -

Information bank

Externalisation

The More About Me Book

Information Bank

The first stage is the creation of an 'Information Bank' to build a clear understanding of the child's pre-birth and post-birth history. This will develop chronologically and include evidence, both physical and written, which becomes the basis of the interaction. This approach will require the worker to collate the information, consider the validity and usefulness of the material and then interview those involved to gain a historical perspective. The Information Bank will not depend upon the social work file, as this is only part of the story. It will include parental contributions and health information, particularly centered on the child's early year's history which will allow the worker to consider his 'internal working model' and 'attachment' issues.

Good information banks also provide essential information for those who are decision makers for the child - not just social workers but also educators, carers and health professionals. By taking time to understand where the child has come from and what part people have played in their life, the worker can begin to plan the intervention and share appropriate information with those who have care of them.

Externalisation

Once a clear information bank is created the Therapeutic Life Story process can move on to the second stage, called 'Externalisation'. It is essential that the approach is delivered alongside the primary carer since this provides a multitude of benefits, among them the creation of a safe and contained relationship for all those involved.

The development of this relationship between the carer and the child will be facilitated, promoting understanding and growth by inviting both to consider and explore through the thinking cycle already presented.

More About Me takes place over 8 to 12 sessions and, if done well, the facilitated work will support the placement and commitment between the carer and the child. The detail held within the Information Bank can be broken into session plans and any work carried out in this fashion should be done fortnightly, each session lasting not more than an hour. The Externalisation process includes 'wishes and feelings' work, exploration of feelings and the vocabulary and behavioural representation of these.

The More About Me Book

The 'More About Me Book' itself is the third stage, and this is typically presented as the evidence of the work being achieved. The book is a representation of the Internalisation process explained above. That said, many children who have engaged in this process are able to decide what they have in the book as a representation for others to see, whereas the work that is completed in the direct sessions can be stored confidentially by remaining within the Stage 2 process.

The More About Me book concentrates on the reasons behind the current placement of the child/young person, the decision making and concerns that led to the life course the child/young person has experienced. It is a more concentrated therapeutic life story approach that does not present the whole life journey, but the sections of life history that may help to understand the current and help the child or young person to move on.

More About Me books can also be helpful when working with children and young people who have particular challenges that can be addressed through specific incidences of historical events such as trauma and child protection.

What does this mean for the carer (those caring for the child or young person)?

I am often asked by parents and carers how they might be able to help their child or young person settle, to move forward rather than living in the past, and to be safe and loved. Some carers come from similar histories and see their hurts in the hurt of the child or young person; their unresolved trauma can impact on the child's and then we have emotional fraught and unsafe environments. Many carers feel hopeless around the child or young person, and this hopelessness, that often turns to fear and rejection, shapes itself as a barrier to connecting with the child – especially if that child also carries a protective shield as a result of experienced challenging, sometimes monstrous, events.

I have always said if you want to know how to care for your child in the best way possible then think about how you yourself would like to be cared for. This is achievable, but for some, it is too enormous a task. Our job therefore is to support the carer in leading, exploring, challenging, listening, learning and through all those events and techniques supporting the children or young person to do the same.

By listening to the stories of your young people and your children's past, we are in reach of developing a new narrative that incorporates shared lives and shared stories. In doing so, by accepting who we are, where we have been, why we are and with new attachments, secure in the knowledge that we are going (together, rather than apart) forward, we can recover from the past.

Our stories are our anchors to the past, but these anchors are there to keep us safe and to allow us to move forward when we are ready. We remove the anchors to allow this, we take risks, and sail to the future. At times, we may need to lower our anchors to the seabed, but the seabed is different and now supportive. That seabed has been created by the new healthy attachments forged through More About Me.

Professor Richard Rose