

Guide To Later Life Letters

Later Life Letters are required by law and are written by the child's Social Worker to a child who is being adopted, the aim is to help the child understand their past, increase their self-esteem and strengthen their resilience.

The letter is given to the prospective adopters after the adoption order is made - usually within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony. The adopters should then give the letter to the child at an appropriate time in the future.

More often we are being asked to write these important letters for our Looked After Children too.

Again the aim of these letters is to provide the child with an honest narrative of their lived experiences.



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Purpose of the Later Life Letter

The Later Life Letter should explain the child's history from birth and provide an explanation of why they were adopted or are in Long term foster/residential care, including the reasons why they could not live with their birth family.

The child or young person is the focus of the letter and it must be remembered when writing the letter that the child has a need to know why they were placed for adoption or cannot return to the care of their birth family.

The letter should be able to give the child a personal sense of their own history and a sense of their value and worth, something that a court report or the Child's Permanence Report (CPR) cannot provide.

The letter should, whenever possible and appropriate, include the views of all the people involved in the adoption process, including the birth family.

Remember that every child will see the letter at a different age, and so the letter, whilst being truthful, must be written so that a child can understand it.



The expectation would be that the child sees the letter when they are around 10-12 years, but the final decision on timing is at the discretion of the adoptive parents and carers.

With complicated or traumatic situations (e.g. incest, mental health problems, abuse) it may be better to write two letters. The second one for when the child is in their mid-teens, and better able to understand their history.

The letter is in to be given in addition to the child's Life Story Book and should not be a substitute for the book.

The main difference between the Later Life Letter and the Life Story Book lies in the depth of the detail being shared with the child. More detailed and sensitive information should be included in the Later Life letter as the letter will be shared with the child at a later age when they are emotionally able to understand and deal with the information.

What is important...? Everything!

The information may be lost if not gathered together at the start of the child's journey.

The letter can be personalised by the social worker who knew the birth parents and the child at the time of the placement.

Put yourself in the shoes of an adopted person or a person in Long Term Care, what information would you want, what questions would you ask your birth parents?



What a Social Worker produces will be slightly different as in each case the written style of the Social Worker and the information available will be different. Try to avoid copying information from Social Work documents verbatim; the letter needs to be personal to the child.

It is a good idea to write the letter in sections, for instance the legal situation could be separate from the more personal information. As stated earlier, in very difficult situations it is a good idea to have two letters.

Visit www.thejoyoflifework.com for explanations of how to write a child friendly explanation of a difficult story.

What information should be included?

Beginning the letter

- ▶ Begin by introducing yourself;
- ▶ Acknowledge that some time will have passed before the letter is read and that the child may not remember you;
- ▶ Talk about your role in relation to the child, the length of your involvement, and the reason for writing the letter;
- ▶ Mention other previous significant Social Workers who were involved (if that is the case) - give their names, and when and why they were involved;
- ▶ Acknowledge that it might be difficult for the young person to read the letter and that they can ask of help from their adoptive parents or carers while reading it.

Write about the mother's pregnancy and the child's birth

It is important to include as much information possible about the mother's pregnancy and the child's birth. This is often the information that children would like to know.

- ▶ Include:
- ▶ Date and time of birth;
- ▶ Name of the hospital;
- ▶ Weight;
- ▶ Experience of pregnancy;
- ▶ Length of labour;
- ▶ Type of delivery;
- ▶ Time spent in the hospital with birth mother;
- ▶ Who was present;
- ▶ What happened next?
- ▶ Who cared for the child after their birth?

Include Information about the Child's Life Before and After Care

It is important to include all facts related to:

- ▶ Where the child lived – include names of carers, dates, description of carers and their family and talk about why they had to move;
- ▶ Names and descriptions of any nurseries or schools attended;
- ▶ The child's development milestones – such as when they said their first words, had their first tooth, took their first steps, learned to read;
- ▶ The child's particular characteristics, sayings, activities, interests at various stages;
- ▶ Details of any child's friends and pets.

Describe the Birth Family Members

It is important to focus on those family members who have had the most significant relationships with the child and had an influence on the child's experience. Details of other family members who were not significant to the child's experience could be found in the CPR or in the genogram and the letter can refer to these additional sources if necessary.

What to focus on:

The birth family's situation at the time you became involved in the case - where the children were living (mention the house, surroundings, etc) and the situation of the birth parents and siblings;

- ▶ Describe the family members:
 - ▶ First name;
 - ▶ Date and place of birth if known;
 - ▶ Their age when the child was born;
 - ▶ Ethnic origin;
 - ▶ Physical description, appearance and personality.

Include as much information possible about birth parents:

- ▶ Their background and upbringing;
- ▶ Academic and employment history;
- ▶ Interests;
- ▶ Health;
- ▶ The parents relationship;
- ▶ Use the term 'birth mother/father' to avoid confusion with adoptive parents.

Include information about siblings if they were not placed together. Are they adopted? If they live with birth parents, explain why. The child needs to know what happened to their brothers and sisters, who cares for them, and if relevant, why there is no contact. Be careful to give only first names for all birth relatives and do not use addresses or other identifying information. Be mindful about the amount of information you include, it should be long enough for the child to know what happened to their siblings, but remember that the child is the focus of the letter.

Talk about reasons for adoption

There will already be enough information to help describe the events that led to the child being placed for adoption or in Long Term Care. However the key thing about the Later Life Letter is that it gives the opportunity to explain these events in a more personal way.

- ▶ The following explanations are found to be the most common for why the birth parents could not care for their children:
- ▶ Their parents were struggling with problems or troubles of their own;
- ▶ Their parents have never learnt how to look after and care for others;
- ▶ Their parents might be too ill;
- ▶ Their parents may have been shown the wrong way to look after their children.

- ▶ It is important to include clear explanations of when and why the big decisions were made, and who made them.
- ▶ The child needs to know the reason behind these decisions and need to have a confirmation that the decision was in their interest and the best option for them.
- ▶ The letter should also include, wherever possible the birth parent's attitude to the adoption or Long Term plan and their hope for the child's future.

In the case of Adoption

Explain how the family was chosen

- ▶ Write about:
- ▶ Some details of the adoptive family, including the process of choosing and the reasons for choosing the current family;
- ▶ The child's introduction to the adoptive family - the process of introductions, reactions, etc.;
- ▶ Date of moving to the new family;
- ▶ Final visits with birth parents or other birth family members - mention who was involved, where the visit/s took place, what happened, positive comments made and any gifts given.

How to put the letter together?

Write it to the Child

Be creative and imaginative.

- ▶ You can write a letter or letters.
- ▶ It could be a book.
- ▶ It could be a loose leaf folder.
- ▶ It could be a combination of all the above or anything else you feel is appropriate.
- ▶ Remember the age at which you want the child to get this information and write it to the child at that age.
- ▶ Sometimes there should be two letters or if you use a loose leaf binder, sections could be geared to different ages.

- ▶ The basic information needs to be given to the child as early as possible, and this should include the true reason for the adoptive placement.
- ▶ Brothers and sisters must have separate letters even when placed together, and this includes twins.
- ▶ You should also give the date the Adoption Order was granted, the name of the court, and the names and office bases of all the social workers and family placement/adoption social workers involved prior to and after the placement.
- ▶ Tell the child what it was like to work with them, what you enjoyed about your time together.
- ▶ Talk about the child's hobbies, achievements and future aspirations.
- ▶ Date and sign the letter. Keep a copy on file and give the original to the Adopters or carers to be shared when appropriate.

When to give the Later Life Letter?

It is important that the child receives this information at a time when they are emotionally able to understand, accept and digest it.

There is a school of thought that this can be from 12 years onwards, this would depend on many factors including are they in a safe, secure placement, do they have a secure support network, do they have the emotional tools to understand the information.

Therefore it may be better for the letter to be shared when the child reaches 16 - 18 years of age.