

Stacy Gehringer ([00:05](#)):

Hello. Welcome everyone. Thank you for tuning in to the CASCW podcast channel. My name is Stacy Gehringer and I am the Outreach Director at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. We're excited to share our latest podcast series with you. The series is titled It's the Process, Not the Product: Supporting Therapeutic Lifebook Work for Kids, Youth and Beyond.

Keely Vandre ([00:28](#)):

Hi there I'm Keely and I coordinate CASCW's Permanency and Adoption Competency or PACC program, which is a cohort-based training that enhances permanency and adoption competence for professionals working across child welfare and mental health settings statewide. While we discuss life books as a practice tool throughout our curriculum, the research bears out that there is a significant underuse of life book and life story work across child welfare and therapeutic spaces. Even though it is evidenced to be a highly effective and flexible practice tool for foster and adopted children and youth. And I've heard the same challenge echoed by PACC therapists and child welfare workers who want to engage life books as a tool in their practice, but may struggle with knowing where to start or how to carve out the space for this important work.

Stacy Gehringer ([01:20](#)):

We hope that this mini podcast series can demystify and streamline life story approaches that can help any practitioner center and support children, youth, and even adults in knowing and telling their stories as an integral part of their permanency and or adoption journey. Please be sure to subscribe to our channel for future episodes. We thank you for listening and take care.

Keely Vandre ([01:49](#)):

My guest today, who is a clinical social worker in private practice is Elliot Odendahl. She has extensive practice experience working with children, youth, individuals, and families of diverse backgrounds who are experiencing behavioral and mental health needs, disruptions and attachment and family relationships trauma, as well as those experiencing the negative impacts of systemic and structural bias and racism. She has also provided therapeutic supervised parenting to families, crisis support services to foster care providers and support services to families involved with child protection. Elliot is a PACC alumni and a trainer with our program. So Elliot, thank you so much for being with me today. Would you like to share a little bit more with our guests about your practice background and why life books are such an important part of what you do?

Elliot Odendahl ([02:43](#)):

Yes. And thank you for having me. I am so excited to be here with you and to be able to have the honor of talking about life books, which I am super passionate about, and absolutely I think they are a really underutilized resource and can be super, super therapeutic in a variety of ways. And so it's really important thing to talk about for us. And I would say coming back to my current practice and where I'm at, who I serve, I'm super passionate about supporting foster and adoptees as well as their families, as well as birth parents, kinship folks, all of those people, that's super important in life. Books can help everyone in that circle, which is why I think it's really important to come back to life books and recognize their value for everyone, not just the child or the young person, but I think there can be ripple effects that come from utilizing Lifebook.

Elliot Odendahl ([03:57](#)):

So at this point in my practice, I'm really, really trying to help support those folks that I just mentioned and helping to fill the gaps in services that I know, you know, as an adoptee myself I know that there are gaps there in services, in supports in resources. There were when I was coming up and there still tends to be. So a lot of my practice right now is really focusing on that. And I've been really excited to now that I have moved into more of a group private practice situation to be able to bring in things like Life book Work that I couldn't before, just because I didn't have that amount of flexibility and freedom.

Keely Vandre ([04:49](#)):

That's wonderful. And it's great to hear that this is a resource that goes beyond just the target client who may often be a child or a youth that can be for the entire constellation in the, you know, the permanency spectrum. So how have you seen Life Books used really well across practice settings, cuz I know you have spanned child welfare and clinical settings. So how have you seen them used well.

Elliot Odendahl ([05:16](#)):

I think when they, when they do work well and I can't say honestly that I've seen that often, but I think when they do work well, there's a consistency that's happening. So, you know, let's say there's a child who might be preparing for another placement, whether that's foster care or for adoption, where they get to either bring with or create a Life Book that comes along with them, that everybody is aware of. And when I do have the opportunity, I do ask the young people that I'm working with. Hey, do you have a Life Book? Have you heard of anything like this? Has anybody done anything? Are you aware of, you know, any of your workers who have, you know, recorded any of your information? Is there anything like this that you have access to? And unfortunately often what I'm hearing is yeah, but I don't know what happened to it or yeah, but it got left behind or yeah.

Elliot Odendahl ([06:24](#)):

And I did a lot of work and like, I, I don't know what happened to it. People don't know the information that I need them to know that I, that I spent time putting in there. And so I think as providers, as helping professionals as caregivers, it behooves us it's in our best interest. It's also of course, in the best interest of the child to make sure that we are keeping track of where that information is and making sure that we're documenting it and then making sure that the youth, or the child, depending on how old they are, of course has that, that they have it and that it's following them. And that we know how they want that information disseminated. So I think the other thing I'm hearing too is that they don't always wanna have to go into their story.

Elliot Odendahl ([07:20](#)):

So part of the purpose of the Life Book is to be able to share some of that history so that they don't have to recount and give you their story all over again. Especially when, you know, we're working with young people who, have maybe had multiple transitions, multiple disruptions, multiple moves. Yeah, so it, it's that's a, a big answer to a really complex question. And I think there's a lot of things that go into that. And unfortunately, I don't feel like I have seen them used super effectively. And I also wonder if that's because do people have access? Do they know how to utilize Life Books? Do they know how to do some of those things?

Keely Vandre ([08:10](#)):

Well, I think what you're adding here is maybe a little more of the context for why it isn't utilized. Maybe at the level we would like to see because there is a worry, perhaps on certain providers that they, they

might not do it right. Or, you know, I think I heard you mentioning some ways that if this is not implemented in a way that centers, the child's voice, it can actually be another source of loss and harm for that child. So that, I think that is something where practitioners want to be careful, but that doesn't mean that we should be worried about doing that work.

Elliot Odendahl ([08:51](#)):

Right. Right. Because there's so many different ways that you can do that work. I don't think there is a one right way. And I think what it comes back to, as you identified is that how do we center the child and centering the child means that sometimes we gotta check in with them <laugh> and just ask them, what's gonna make sense for you? What do you want, what do you feel like you have the capacity to do right now? And, what things can maybe adults take on for you to help.

Keely Vandre ([09:25](#)):

Right. And to be really careful that the work does stay with the, the child, you know, this idea of them not knowing where it is is really, you know, concerning to me when we already know that a loss of story and history is such a big part of the experience of people who have experienced out-of-home placement and adoption.

Elliot Odendahl ([09:49](#)):

Right. Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Keely Vandre ([09:52](#)):

So can you talk a little bit more about the Life Book as a process and not, not only, uh, a product, could you talk a little more about what that process can look like logistically?

Elliot Odendahl ([10:05](#)):

Yeah. And I think, you know, part of, I think that's a really good question. I think that's where a lot of us can get stuck in thinking about a finished product and so to distinguish and differentiate a little bit. So we're not expecting a Life Book to be a, what comes to my mind is a polished thing. We're not expecting this to be necessarily like a scrapbook that is pretty and beautiful. And again, like I come to the idea of like polished. We don't need it to be polished. We need it to serve a therapeutic and sometimes really functional purpose of not only storing information, but connecting information and providing information. That's what I think of is we don't need a finished product. That's gonna look pretty, it might look pretty like it might look cool. And that's awesome. You know, I know some highly artistic creative folks who really put a lot of work into their Life Books and that's fine.

Elliot Odendahl ([11:12](#)):

Because it's theirs. They get to own it, but that's not the intent. The intent is the work that's going into it. And that work can be specific pages that might be prompting exploration or thoughts, things like that. So it, it really does come back to how is the young person able to utilize the Life Book that supports that therapeutic process of bridging the gap between what happened to me? Who am I right now, what's going on? And what about my future? I do have a future. And, what is that future going to look like? What do I, what do I imagine for myself? So it's more of thinking about those things and providing opportunity and space for people to be able to process. And I keep saying kids and young people, but I'm a huge advocate for kinda late Life Book work. Yeah. If I, yeah. If I could offer a Life Book group or

opportunity for adult adoptees, I would, because I think it's that valuable that sometimes we as adult adoptees need to go back and do some of our own retrieval in order to put some of those pieces together for ourselves of our own stories.

Keely Vandre ([12:40](#)):

That makes a lot of sense. I think talking with Kendra, our other guest, it's a known thing, but I don't think we all kind of acknowledge how much our story is such a central part of our lives. The entire lifespan, our story is never finished. And each chapter brings up a way to revisit past stages of our lives and our identities. And so I think for, especially for adult adoptees, revisiting earlier stages, a Life Book could be a really useful tool to kind of grapple with some of those things, those things that maybe haven't completely been resolved.

Elliot Odendahl ([13:19](#)):

Yes. And I'm so glad that you brought that up. Cause I think that's another distinguishing piece of, you know, Life Book versus scrapbook keepsake kind of a thing is that it's never done. And when I was doing, I've done a few Life Book workshops here and there, and that was the biggest message I was trying to get home to parents is that this is only the beginning. You know, I'd have parents come up and say, you know, we really appreciate this space and time for a child to be able to work on this. And I'd say, whoa, whoa, whoa, right, this isn't done. This is just a catalyst. This is just the beginning. So now you get to continue to have the conversations that are needed to make sure that your child gets to continue to process and create and narrate their own personal stories. I think that's another huge difference is we're not, we're not expecting there to be an end.

Keely Vandre ([14:15](#)):

Yeah.

Elliot Odendahl ([14:16](#)):

We're always adding,

Keely Vandre ([14:17](#)):

It's a very evolving, ongoing document. So you've helped me understand that this is not about a pretty package. It is not a, a scrapbook, but how important would you say visual elements are in Life Books? I'm just kind of wondering about, especially for children and youth who might wanna use photographs that they don't have access to, or kind of be able to paint those pictures of important people and places and animals and caregivers, you know, what do you know about the use of a visual component to this work?

Elliot Odendahl ([14:59](#)):

Yeah, I mean, I think that can be really powerful. Um, and especially depending on, you know, the individual who is doing the work, certainly if they're a visual creative person, that's probably gonna be even more important for them to be able to process in that way. And I think in, in general, you know, kids, especially younger kids tend to process maybe more visually than verbally. Um, but also Hey myself being one of those people, me too. So I think, yeah, that visual piece, whether it is having access to pictures or documents or whether it's drawing or creating in some way that could be collage work too. I think that can be incredibly powerful and wanting to note that yes, lots of times there are spaces and

opportunities in Life Books and which I think is important to be able to put down important documents like birth certificates, like pictures of family, pictures of pets, maybe pictures of houses or whatever.

Elliot Odendahl ([16:07](#)):

And we all don't have access to that as you mentioned. And sometimes it is because there are no records, no known records, or we don't have the records or because someone else is in charge of those and maybe they have deemed it inappropriate or unnecessary for the young person to have that. So, and as, as appropriate, right, as developmentally appropriate, I do think it's important for young people, kids whoever's working on their Lifebook to have access to those things because they can be so grounding. And that is the purpose of Life Book is to say, Hey, guess what you did come from somewhere. There was a life before foster care before adoption. You didn't just spring up. Right. Um, out of nowhere. And sometimes those, those things, those documents, pictures, whatever can be super grounding to let people know that, oh yeah, something did happen.

Keely Vandre ([17:16](#)):

Well. And I think about how often, you know, we might think of kind of protective factors being withholding things or kind of safety of, of information. But I think of, you know, you, and so many of our other facilitators in the PACC program, Angela Tucker, who really kind of name that there really is no age at which a child should not have access to their full story again with developmentally appropriate. But I think that we also need to kind of reconcile that with this, this notion that we need to withhold information, especially in a process like this, if there is information that that's yeah, like you said, it can actually be really grounding because a child is most likely questioning and wondering about those things regardless.

Elliot Odendahl ([18:07](#)):

Right. Exactly. Yes they are. And then what happens if we don't have information, which maybe your other guests talk about, or maybe other people are aware of, we kinda start to revert back into our imaginations and we start to wonder, and we start to create, and I think many of us go to, some pretty fantastical magical thinking, because that's how our brains are wired. Our brains are wired to create stories, to make up reasons which can get tricky, and sometimes really problematic because then we start coming up with stories that may not be accurate and may be harmful to ourselves. And so that's a really tricky thing and yes, it comes back to wanting to be able to provide people with their own information and their own facts about their own lives and themselves. And yes, of course, depending on how old they are, there might be some things that are reworked and maybe you plan to share in a different way later, but yes, access to information. I've never heard an adoptee say that they didn't want information.

Keely Vandre ([19:30](#)):

Right. But they were glad that they, you know, waited until a certain age to know their, their story. You're saying that's not a, that's not something that you've seen.

Elliot Odendahl ([19:41](#)):

Nope. Not a thing, from my experience anyway. Yeah.

Keely Vandre ([19:45](#)):

I've heard that echoed from many of your colleagues in the field as well.

Keely Vandre ([19:49](#)):

Yes. Well I know that our listeners, many of them are really geared toward wanting to know how to do their work even better. And so tips and tricks can be really helpful. Things that are pretty tangible and maybe somewhat immediate that we can start implementing in our practice. So I kinda wanna move into that phase of our conversation. So, where do you recommend starting this kind of work with a client regardless of if you're working in child welfare or in a clinical mental health setting or in an educational setting? There's all kinds of places that this could be useful. You know, there's a couple different contexts. If the person already has a Life Book and process, or if this is the first time, so kind of like giving us some pointers of how you might start that depending on the experience of the particular person.

Elliot Odendahl ([20:43](#)):

Right. Yeah. And I think that's such a good question. And I think sometimes especially right now, as maybe people are starting to become more aware of the value of Life Books, where we might have to do a little bit more legwork on our end to ask around and to say, Hey, has anybody started this? Cuz I have found that sometimes families, they pick up on that and so they will start to document or at least like amass <laugh> amass documents and information for their child, but it may not be altogether kind of a thing. Right. Or other, yeah. Other people might have information too workers, that maybe they just haven't thought is important or unnecessary.

Keely Vandre ([21:32](#)):

So a note in a file, a previous caseworkers notes or a letter from a fictive kin person in that child's life or a former foster provider, those could be elements of Life Books.

Elliot Odendahl ([21:48](#)):

Oh absolutely. Any, anything and everything. And to kind of like self share a little bit, I didn't start my Life Book until my late twenties myself. And when I, and I had, you know, written to the state in, you know, requesting some of my information and what I got back was nurses notes. And I cannot tell you how valuable those are to me still to this day, if I had a fireproof, flood proof safe that's where that's where my Life Book would be. Yeah. So anything, even if it's a little post note like kids, you not, I saved the manila file folder with notes that my adoptive mom had like scribbled on this folder that, you know, was just to herself like dates like court dates and things like that. Even those little things that helps me put into perspective, my timeline, I get a little bit more grounding just from those little notes and then to have nurses notes. I understand now about those first few days of my life and what was going on.

Keely Vandre ([23:06](#)):

Wow.

Elliot Odendahl ([23:06](#)):

That's huge. Right. So yeah. Anything and everything. And I think sometimes people forget about that or maybe don't think about, oh one little scribbled note on a file folder. That's not important, but you don't know until you ask or check in or present that.

Keely Vandre ([23:29](#)):

Well, it's making me think about how all children are sort of detectives about their lives. You know, I'm thinking about absolutely my own kids and the questions that they wanna know about exactly where or when something happened. Yes. And so I think that's really helpful to think about all of those little notes and scraps and moments that, you know, a lot of the kids that we are talking about, can't just go ask a family member, those questions. Right. But having any, any of that documented, maybe even literally on a timeline could be part of the Life Book work.

Elliot Odendahl ([24:03](#)):

Yes. And that's something I've actually started to incorporate a little bit more is timeline, work into Life Books, which again, depending on the situation and the circumstances can be really challenging and the, those little pieces that you do have can also be super grounding again. And I think that goes back to like some of the things that you're saying around all kids wanna know about where they came from. Right. I mean, how often have you had to share with your own kids, like, Hey, what happened on the day that I was born? Yeah. Or what happened, you know, on the way to the hospital or like

Keely Vandre ([24:42](#)):

What was the weather like

Elliot Odendahl ([24:44](#)):

Exactly. Exactly. We just have that, want to know to put it together. How did I get here? All of that stuff. And if we can give that back, if we can help these kids and individuals and young people put some of those pieces together, that's awesome in whatever way that looks right. So whether it's, yeah, I have this scrap of information or maybe you're the worker who has a lot of the information that you can share. So working collaboratively, of course, with parents, caregivers, whoever to help make that possible.

Keely Vandre ([25:24](#)):

It makes me think of Darla Henry's 357 model in this kind of these questions. That all children want to answer. And that also, if we don't have a good idea of where we've been, it's much harder to map out where we are and where we want to go.

Elliot Odendahl ([25:39](#)):

Exactly. Yeah. And that we are worthy of going somewhere. Right. And that's the other piece is, is through this process. Yes, we are grounding. It is therapeutic work and we are trying to hit home. The idea that you do matter, you do have a story that you, that you can have control over in some way. Right? Like of course life is, there's a lot of unknowns. There's a lot of gray areas, which for many people can be scary, especially for these kids cuz they know exactly how that feels. And we wanna give back some sense of control and autonomy self-efficacy right. And all that stuff leads to kids and young people being able to think about possibilities and possibilities, meaning future.

Keely Vandre ([26:38](#)):

So that helps. That helps me kind of wanna ask my next question about who owns this, this work. <Yes>. I know a lot of us are coming into work with younger people, children and emerging, you know, adults when they're still accompanied by a guardian mm-hmm <affirmative>. And so how do we collaborate

with parents who also wanna be a part of this process while we continue to center the voices of the storyteller, who is the child or the youth.

Elliot Odendahl ([27:11](#)):

Right. And I think that looks like handing over control to the child, which right. That's gonna look different, depending on the child's age, their capacity, their ability, all of that. But ultimately we want the child to be doing a lot of the work, a lot of the processing, I think, you know, and as a parent myself, I get the want and the urge to, I just wanna jump in and do this for them. So then they have this like nice book, that we can read together and all that stuff. And Ooh, you know, you gotta take a step back, right. Because it's not your work to do. You get to do your own work as a parent, as a caregiver. And we wanna make sure that again, we get to center the child in this and ultimately this is their story with that said, we wanna make sure that we can come alongside.

Keely Vandre ([28:15](#)):

I wonder, you know, you and I both were able to attend a recent webinar with Richard Rose. Yes. we talked a bit about him in our first episode and I thought that his notion of having parents or care, you know, caregivers and workers all be doing their own work sort of alongside simultaneously that that was a creative idea to me that I wonder, have you ever seen that used effectively maybe with a parent who really wants to kind of drive this project? I mean, can a parent do their own Life Book as their child is doing their Life Book? Have you seen that?

Elliot Odendahl ([28:55](#)):

Yeah, I haven't, but you know, I've done more work, I guess, with non foster and adoptive siblings. And I think it's the same concept because we're still recognizing that yeah, this is a family everyone's impacted here and we all need to do our own work and we are all certainly impacted by the complexity of foster care and adoption situations. So absolutely. I think parents could do their own Life Book. And what does it mean to parent a child that, you know, all of the things that you have not given birth to who has had maybe a traumatic history, all of the above, right? All, all of the things that come with parenting, but certainly the unique things that come with parenting a foster adoptive kid. Right. I think that is imperative and some of that work also might be therapy.

Keely Vandre ([29:58](#)):

Right. You also just mentioned siblings. That was another focus of that webinar that I mentioned with Dr. Rose. I thought that it was really important to consider the notion of truth within that, that idea with a sibling group so that there might be multiple kinds of experiences or truths. And so mm-hmm, <affirmative> when you've worked with siblings, how do we hold space for multiple truths that doesn't take away from their bond? Can you talk about that a little bit? That must be really hard.

Elliot Odendahl ([30:36](#)):

It can be challenging. And I think here, like in my Life Book work, that has been more of okay, where there has been an adoptive child and then a non adoptive biological child. So different work than if there's, a, the same biological family who maybe have very different experiences within that family when it's really hard. Sometimes it tends to be one child who's maybe had a traumatic experience and another child who has not. And that could be for a variety of reasons that are maybe beyond the scope of <laugh> of this podcast episode. But, that can be tough. And I really like how, Mr. Rose laid out that, you know, you do really need to affirm everybody's experiences and bring people together to talk about



those differing experiences. And that can kind of result in this fact finding of, oh, what, what was really going on there.

Elliot Odendahl ([31:46](#)):

And maybe I've been harboring some pretty big feelings about my sibling or about my parent or about my situation that is maybe not realistic. I think that's kind of what he was getting at. So then siblings can see that, Yep, I did have this experience. My experience maybe was really traumatic and difficult or maybe my experience was really good and my siblings was, was not right. Being able to make space for, like you said, those, those multiple truths, but I think at the core, being able to sort out what are the feelings that are coming along and how are those feelings feeling current behaviors, and can we help to sort that out so that we can work on maybe more connection and relationship and attachment stuff.

Keely Vandre ([32:36](#)):

Right. I know we've already talked about this a little bit, but I'm wondering if you have any more tips for people who may be working with older youth and emerging adults, or even adult adoptees that would like to do Life Book work that don't have much, if any record of the kinds that we've been talking about today, how, how might you still engage this process where there's very little to go on?

Elliot Odendahl ([33:03](#)):

Yeah, I think then that becomes, I mean really centering that individual and certainly what do you know? And I think sometimes walking the line between what do you know and what smart guesses can you make based on what you know about yourself. For instance, in kind of using myself as an example, you know, I could say, and I know our listeners can't see, but I've really curly hair. And so I could surmises right. That like somebody has curly hair <laugh> in my, like, there's no way that you just get this very curly hair. So somebody in my background has curly hair. And so still trying to make those connections by kind of making some of those smart guesses, but also centering myself, who am I, who do I want to be? Where do I want to go? Some of that stuff that It, you know, Life Books do get at self-esteem, self-assuredness all of that. So then I think we would pivot to really focus on, well, who are you and what do you wanna be? And yeah. What are some of those smart guesses that you can make about yourself that might help lead back and help root you to who you are?

Keely Vandre ([34:23](#)):

Yeah. How do you recommend that we honor race and culture in this process?

Elliot Odendahl ([34:28](#)):

Yeah, I think that's a lovely segue cuz that's another huge piece. Right? And, and although we, we do need people to connect sometimes in order to connect to our race culture, ethnicity, I think that's still something that individuals can explore and can learn about there's, you know, now we have the internet, so there's a ton of resources out there. And I think making that an intentional part of the Life Book process is super important, especially when, certainly when we're dealing with people of color, kids of color, youth of color, because we wanna make sure that kids are getting the necessary information or resources. They need to develop healthy self-esteem.

Elliot Odendahl ([35:17](#)):

And that means that we as adults, caregivers, people who hold the power, that we need to be super intentional about making opportunities for people to explore that and that we provide opportunities for kids to explore that. So that might be at least what I discovered is that I had to make my own pages. I had to make my own templates for addressing that. And the unique thing about kids who have been in care, who are experiencing care, who have been adopted, especially in, you know, interracial families and all that is that there's, you're taking on a lot of different cultures, whether that's, you know, kind of what we generally think of as racial and ethnic culture, but also family culture. If you move from one family to another, that family, the new family is gonna have a very different family culture than what you have.

Elliot Odendahl ([36:11](#)):

And I think that's important to remember as well as we're not just talking about race and ethnicity kind of stuff. So I have a page that I created called like, heritage or culture mashup. So then we get to explore and look at well, okay, what did I get from my bio family? What have I gotten from my foster family, if that's applicable? What do I get from my adoptive family? And what does that look like when it's all mixed up? Sometimes that might mean maybe you're speaking multiple languages, maybe you're eating lots of different kind of food, right? Maybe you're celebrating certain types of things and what's important to you. What things do you wanna make sure that you get to hold onto? That's a part of your identity?

Keely Vandre ([36:51](#)):

Oh, I love that. That's a page. I think many of our listeners are gonna wanna sort of replicate or consider how we can have, but more of those mashups, we're all, we're all a, a product of multiple perspectives and backgrounds. But I think especially that's something we know more and more is so critical to helping, center the kids that we're working with. So that sounds like a really great example. You also have already mentioned that you do have your own Life Book, but that was, you know yeah. Maybe a process that you didn't sort of embark on until adulthood. Yes. So how, how did you decide to do that? How has it made you feel more connected to your own story?

Elliot Odendahl ([37:36](#)):

Yeah, I think that's a great question. And again, I'm really hoping that there's more adult adoptees out there who may be able to, to do their own work. I know that it's okay to do that after they hear this, but yes, I didn't come to even know about Life Books until I think I was in grad school and I was doing research on an option stuff for my own studies. And I was like, whoa, what is this? Like, what what's going on with this? Wow. And then I also happened to be my first kind of foundation level practicum placement was at an adoption agency, foster and adoption agency. And so I was hearing stuff about Life Books, mainly from the foster care side of things. Not a lot of talk or research back then was on, you know, the use of Life Books in an adoption situation.

Elliot Odendahl ([38:37](#)):

A lot of the focus is on foster care. So I think sometimes it gets missed, but that's when I first heard about this and I was like, oh my gosh, I need to do that. Like, that's something that I need for myself. And that's kind of what fueled me to obtain more information or at least start that process. And it was highly therapeutic for myself and it's something, like I said, it's an ongoing process. So I continue to add to it as I discover more because there's, you know, it's a lifelong process of learning and discovering. And again, it can be so grounding to have a place to collect all of that. And again, kind of put it in this

timeline of, okay, here's what happened then it's kind of relieving to be able to know that you have, you do have some control, you have enough control that you can kind of put these things in for yourself. And again, coming back to, even if it's not documentation, cuz like we've been saying not everybody has that. Certainly our international adopted friends don't always have that. But even being able to record significant life events, cuz those are things that can come up and sometimes poke us all of that counts.

Keely Vandre (40:07):

Yeah. Before we get to the end of our conversation, I think it would be really interesting. I mean thank you for sharing that piece of your own process.

Elliot Odendahl (40:17):

Absolutely.

Keely Vandre (40:17):

I think it's beautiful to know that it's been a meaningful thing to you, even though it makes me sad that you didn't have someone help you with it earlier in your life. I think a lot of our listeners should should know there's never a point at which this wouldn't be important and useful.

Elliot Odendahl (40:34):

Absolutely.

Keely Vandre (40:36):

I just was hoping maybe you would have a few tips on how to safely use this kind of work with a trauma responsive lens. So I think some of our workers are gonna be particularly mindful that this might set up a particular child to feel some re trauma or triggering. So you're, you're talking a lot about this as a therapeutic process, but for those of us who aren't doing therapy with a child or a young person, how can we be mm-hmm <affirmative> really mindful using a trauma response lens.

Elliot Odendahl (41:15):

Yeah. Yeah. And when I think of right, a trauma response lens, it is that being mindful. And I think that coupled with going back to who owns this story, it's the child. And so we wanna make sure that we're checking in, to see how they're doing. And I think it can be as simple as that, you know the trauma response is being mindful of somebody's history and what they have experienced and that there might be some things that are really hard that are gonna be triggering and that are gonna poke them. And if you're not in a space or have the background to do that work, then we wanna be mindful of not to necessarily get into a ton of stuff. Yep. And I, and giving back the power to the child. So by checking in, I really mean like we are, we're asking, is it okay to maybe put some of this information in here?

Elliot Odendahl (42:19):

Or what do you want to put in here what's important to you right now? And is there anything that you don't want in here mm-hmm <affirmative> is there anything that you don't want shared and even checking in to say, can we talk about some hard things today or no, is today not the day to do that. And in that way we get to give back some of that power, which is lost in trauma experiences a lot of times for all of us, if you've experienced a traumatic event, a lot of your sense of control and power feels like it's been taken away. So we wanna be able to give some of that back. And I think that's absolutely in line

with trauma-informed care. And I think it means that we really have to check in. Yeah, we have to just make sure that we're constantly checking in to see how people are doing.

Keely Vandre ([43:13](#)):

I also think the point you made about also knowing that maybe there is a boundary depending on what work and when we are doing that work and that sometimes the best practice is also to outsource some of that or to make a really good referral and say, absolutely, I know this is a need and this needs, this particular work should be done in a very therapeutic environment.

Elliot Odendahl ([43:39](#)):

Yep, absolutely. Yep. And that's where then yep. You get to refer out right to say, Hey kid or parent or whoever I'm recognizing that there's, there's a lot of pain and there's a lot of loss there's trauma here and we don't want you to be stuck in that trauma. And so yep. A referral to somebody who has a background in trauma work for kids that can definitely look like trauma focused, C B T um, sometimes cognitive processing therapy for older kids and certainly adults. So someone who has that experience, who is credentialed, obviously who can take on some of that work and ideally you would collaborate, so that there could be a consensus and a clear path moving forward between everybody of who's doing what, but also communication about how that work is happening.

Keely Vandre ([44:40](#)):

Well, that's a big part of the PACC program too. We wanna foster a lot of that, right. Interdisciplinary collaboration and mm-hmm <affirmative> in terms of making good referrals. I mean, that's a big part of what our program wants to establish this network of providers and we have our own alumni directory, but I also think of the MNAdopt therapist page. I think there's a lot of great places to find really good referrals for specific situations. So that's a great point. Okay. Last question. Before I ask for some resource recommendations, if you just have maybe one story that sticks out to you from your work in practice with kids in adoption or foster care when a Life Book was a really meaningful tool where you saw a positive outcome through implementing that process.

Elliot Odendahl ([45:30](#)):

Yeah. And <laugh>, that's a tough question because I

Keely Vandre ([45:35](#)):

If one comes to mind.

Elliot Odendahl ([45:36](#)):

Yeah. I see several instances, I mean, and including right now, you know, working with a young person who was in foster care for some time now has been adopted by a family. But was old enough to recall her removal from her home, which is very traumatic. And we've just kind of been working in really timeline fashion. So, you know, starting at her birth and just noting what were the big events that happened. And eventually we'll do some more work to kind of flush those out. But I think even just having a space to document and to say this thing happened to me, it's real, it had an impact. That stuff is huge. So there's her. But then also having done a workshop years and years ago at the Southdale library specifically geared towards children adopted from China. So I had a whole group of <laugh> younger little kids, lots and lots of energy.

Elliot Odendahl ([46:53](#)):

Mm. And we were so thankful to have not only a, someone who could translate documents and someone from the culture to kind of explain some of those documents as well. So we had two just invaluable resources with us and just kind of being there to witness those kids' faces and seeing some of their documents for the first time, maybe their birth certificates that, you know, were written in Chinese and seeing their names and just then being able to have those culturally appropriate resources for them to go to, to ask questions. That was pretty amazing. I'm so happy and thankful that we were able to provide that. So I don't even know like how important it was that they all got to leave with the beginnings of a book, but I, again, there's that process. That process was the meaningful piece that they took away,

Keely Vandre ([48:00](#)):

Even just the process was being in that space yep. With a cultural mirror that could help them see something in their, you know, their birth name written yes. As it was. Yeah.

Elliot Odendahl ([48:16](#)):

Wow. Yeah, it was, that was lovely. And I just remember that, that moment so well, and that seemed really powerful. Very, very powerful.

Keely Vandre ([48:25](#)):

Yeah. It makes me excited to think about how we could create more of those kinds of spaces for all different kinds of groups that could really come together and have some of those more specialized, experiences that are, that are culturally appropriate and reflective. Well, I was just wondering before we wrap up, if you have a few favorite Life Book, resources to share, we'll add anything to our show notes page, but if you have a few.

Elliot Odendahl ([48:57](#)):

Yeah. And I know there's some that, you know, we kind of added already, but I also wanna give another shout out to Beth O'Malley I feel like is kind of the Life Book guru and has been for many, many years, and she just has a wealth of information. And I think you have her information already. She just has a ton of actual pages that you can easily access, download, print that can make things a lot easier. So you don't necessarily have to reinvent the wheel. And I know we kind of discovered another one that A Social Worker's Guide to Life Books, which is pretty detailed and specific. So anybody who's kind of really looking for, and especially from maybe more of that worker clinical side, if you're needing support around how do I get this? But, you know, I'm defaulting back to Beth O'Malley because she also has really great. She has a small article on dos and don'ts of Life Books. That's just a quick, like two pager gives some really nice, quick tips on how do you get this going? What's important and what's appropriate.

Keely Vandre ([50:16](#)):

That sounds really helpful.

Elliot Odendahl ([50:18](#)):

Yeah. And that can be helpful for both parents, caregivers and, workers as well.

Keely Vandre ([50:24](#)):

Wonderful. Well, I can't thank you enough Elliot. It's been a pleasure talking to you today. Thank you so much for sharing all your wisdom with us.

Elliot Odendahl ([50:32](#)):

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. So happy to be here.

Stacy Gehringer ([50:38](#)):

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