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RESEARCH-ARTICLE

Communicative Openness within Adoptive Families: The Role of Photos and Visual Communication

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COMMUNICATIVE OPENNESS WITHIN ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

THE ROLE OF PHOTOS AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

HCI has a long history of designing to support family life, despite this little is known about the unique needs of adoptive families. Though work has explored the role of photos, and photo sharing in the family home, this does not take account of the essential role of photos in supporting the well-being of adopted children. We report on a Research through Design (RtD) project investigating how adoptive parents communicate life story, which is essential to a child's sense of identity. In this pictorial we show the role of photos and visual communication in enabling core aspects of communicative openness between parent and child, as derived from interviews with adopters about their child's life story book. We conclude by discussing the need for visual guidelines and tools to support a more nuanced use of photos and illustrations.

Adoptive families, narrative identity, photos, visual communication, life story

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INTRODUCTION

Despite HCI having a long history of studying family life [19], including communication [1,3], values [14,25], and the role of photographs in the home [8], there has been little consideration for the unique interaction and communication needs of adopted children and their families. Kirk [13] emphasises the importance of acknowledging that adoptive and non-adoptive families require very different approaches to parenting. This is not least because directed support is required to ensure a coherent sense of self, due to separation, loss, and traumatic events that can lead to confusion and uncertainty that impacts on a child's mental health and well-being [21].

Children who live securely with their parents from birth have their narrative identity supported by their family members, who help carry their memories and histories throughout childhood [5].

“Their parents might remember the first thing the midwife said when they were born. Older siblings might recall their first words or the fall that explains the scar still there on their top lip.” [26].

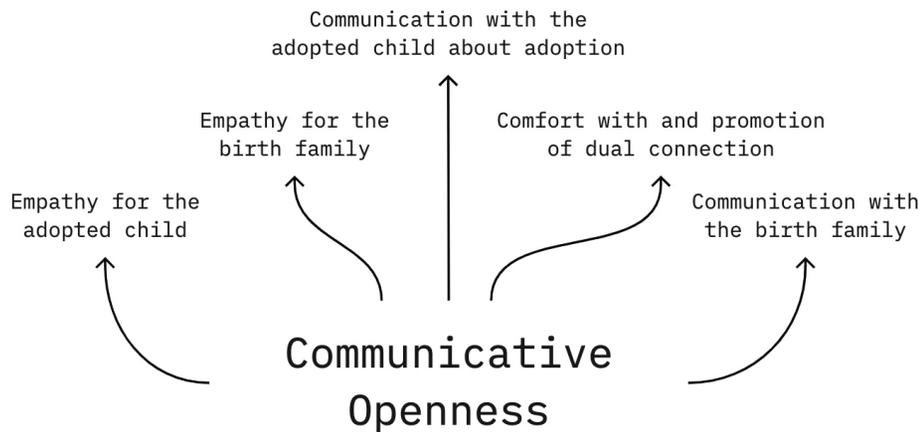
Adopted children require additional tools, such as a life story book, to help collate and store their early life so it is accessible to them. UK law states that all adopted children should be given a life story book by their

adoption agency [7] and, whilst this study is based in the UK, life story books are commonly used in other countries [22]. A life story book generally consists of photos, graphics, words, and memorabilia that provide information and a chronology of the child's life up to the adoption. The book should provide answers to questions a child may find difficult to ask and provide adoptive parents with a tool for empathy and communication [23]. Commonly used reference material, templates and existing research that supports the creation of life story books [4,15,20,23,24] provides a range of advice: this includes the use of appropriate language [15], ways of demonstrating security, love, and permanence [23], how to build self-esteem [20], and the need for coherence and truthfulness [24]. Despite the evidenced value of life story books, research with adoptive parents [27] and adoptees [28] has found the quality of form and content of these books varies substantially. CORAM, a leading charity in the UK that supports adopted children sees the quality improvement of life story books as a priority area [6]. Whilst social care practitioners and academics have provided guidance on the content of life story books, there remains a dearth of design research looking in detail at the role of images and visual communication.

The content of a life story book can enable a child to reminisce and therefore co-construct their past; and this is understood to support the formation of a sense of self [28]. The life story book, and openness about adoption in

everyday family life [12], can support children with identity construction by providing a coherent narrative account of their past life experiences [5]. Central to this narrative and the construction of self is the retelling of stories: “*Through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity*” ([17], p.235).

Storytelling is something that the child learns through their interaction with the parent. This requires practice through conversations about events that enable them to develop emotional responses that lead to improved narrative skills [16]. A related concept is communicative openness, which is the extent to which information is shared within adoptive families, and the ways in which an ongoing connection with the birth family is fostered [12]. According to the related theory of genealogical connectedness [21], direct contact is not required to identify with the birth family, but rather emotional well-being is dependent upon adequate and favourable information being communicated to the child [ibid, p.201]. Neil [18] conducted an extensive study of communicative openness and proposes five core elements that we draw on whilst considering the role of photos.



In this pictorial we contrast the role of photos with the use of illustrations in life story books given to adoptive parents by adoption agencies. We then reflect upon the ways in which photos can enable child-parent interaction and communicative openness in adoptive families. In doing so we highlight the complex design challenges presented by communicating life story through books and consider the unmet need for visual guides, and supportive tools for making books and curating media.

APPROACH

The work presented herein is part of a Research through Design (RtD) project investigating the realities of life story in adoptive families to understand how knowledge and experience in communication and interaction design might contribute to their enhancement. The project was led by the first author, who is an adoptive parent and was personally motivated by his own experiences to explore this context. This position provided the author with additional context and awareness of the adoption processes in the UK and allowed for engagement with adopters in a more personable and relatable way.

Study Design

The first author (A1) conducted an interview study in Winter 2021 with 11 adoptive parents living in England, UK. Focusing on the role of adoptive parents and their children, the study aimed to understand how they could be better supported with navigating the realities of co-creating stories in family life. This focus was further informed by the level of disappointment observed in adoption communities regarding the qualities of life story books received from adoption agencies.

Participants were recruited via adoption community groups across various social media platforms. An initial recruitment (screening) survey was completed by 57 respondents, capturing demographic information, attitudes, and feelings of adopters towards their life story book, and understanding if they had made changes to their book.

We selected a sample from those who expressed an interest in participating. To account for differences in adoption processes we ensured geographical diversity by engaging with adopters in different regions. We considered the length of time a family had owned their life story book, to better understand how they use it with their child; and if they had edited or recreated their book, so that we could gain insights into the issues they had with the original book, and how they would have preferred for it to be designed. The interviewees (10 women, 1 man) held a variety of occupations including graphic designer, teacher, and social worker. All participants had adopted a child aged 3 to 10, in England, within the last 9 years, and all had their life story book for at least 3 months. Of these participants, eight had changed or recreated their life story book (or were in the process of doing so).

Our study gained ethics approval from the institutional ethics board of A1 and the second author (A2). Prior to the interview participants signed a consent form and were posted a set of sensitising materials along with instructions for activities to complete. Many adopters told us they did not use the life story book given to them by the adoption agency, and so activities encouraged reflection before the interview. A1 conducted semi-structured interviews on Zoom, lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews

were structured around the following core themes: their initial responses to the life story book received by the local authority; details about any edits or new versions of the book they had themselves made; how they used, or intended to use, the books; any changes they would make regarding the process of making the life story book.

Life story books belong to the adopted child and the adoption community sees the story as the child's and so it was for participants to share if they wished. The life story book can also reveal details that should not be shared. To respect this, we emphasised to participants that they were not obliged to show us their life story book, though we did wish to talk about it. Most participants showed some of their child's life story book, and in some cases were excited to show books they had made as an alternative to the book received from their local authority. Similarly, we did not ask participants to document the sensitising activities, but a majority did talk about them during the interview.

A1 took field notes including loose sketches of details that A2 and A3 were shown on video calls. Given the sensitivity and personal nature of the materials, we chose not to capture this directly. Audio recordings of the interviews were later transcribed. This mixed data was collated and organised into individual files; the dataset was thematically analysed using Atlas.ti. Thematic analysis was led by A1 who regularly met with co-authors A2 and A3 to discuss codes and themes, guided by the original study objectives. The role of images in visual communication was of strong interest at

study commencement, but the role of photographs in familial communication became an analytic focus as their special significance to participants became apparent. A1's own experiences and engagements with other adoptive parents, enriched the analysis by providing an in-depth empathetic understanding of the research based on their own experiences.

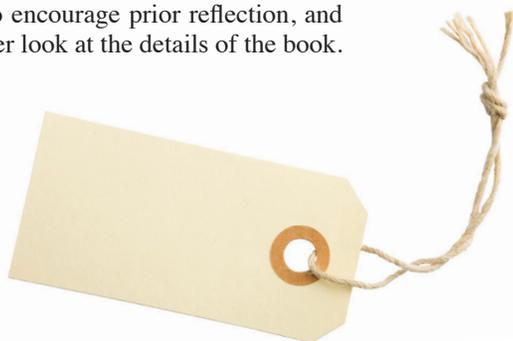
On disseminating visual analytic insights

During a collective analysis of early findings by the three authors, we recognised the importance of recreating some of the image's adopters were describing, to understand the visual salience of what was being described. A1 explored this by combining elements of multiple photos, sketching from them, and adding a little colour to give the appearance of a photo. Through this medium of sketching, we wanted to express key insights from the visual analysis of the data, whilst also respecting the photos' referents and the ethical sensitivity of the context engaged at interview. We endeavoured to visualise our interpretations of the photos, making clear that they are representations and not actual photos from life story books. The photos that were sketched from consisted of a mixture of the A1's own family photos, as well as stock photos. These sketches form our visual argument by giving a sense of the emotion and meaning conveyed to children that was illuminated in the analysis of interview data.

Sensitising materials posted to participants



Participants were given post-it notes and asked to reflect on thoughts and feelings that emerged. The intention was to encourage prior reflection, and a closer look at the details of the book.



To understand the role of things and their connection to the life story book, we provided participants with item tags, and asked what things were important to their child in relation to life story.

Participants were given a small carefully bound book with blank pages and asked to reflect on their aspirations for an ideal life story book. We felt that, by following initial activities, participants would have thoughts on what could be done differently and why.



FINDINGS

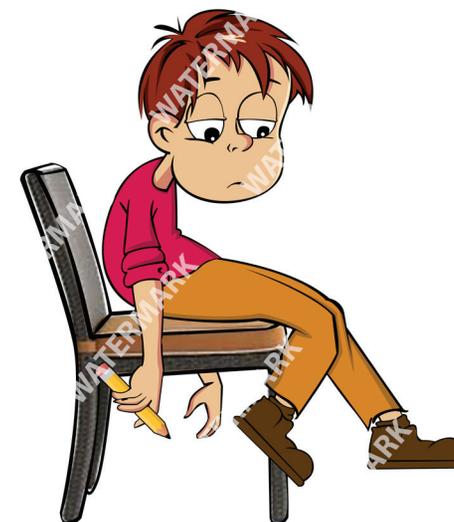
Careless use of imagery

Our interviews revealed the complexity of designing life story books for adopters and the need for care and attention to visual communication. Adopters felt that images were often of poor quality meaning the book lacked the sense of care and attention it deserved, given its importance to their child. Evident throughout our interviews were concerns about the potential for a life story book to impact on the well-being of a child, through careless messaging. Several participants were unhappy with the life story book they had received from their local authority because of messages communicated by specific images. Participants felt images had been used carelessly, “for the sake of sticking a picture on” [P1], or “so there were at least two images per page” [P4]. It is important to note that most adopters empathised with the social workers making life story books, describing them as clearly overworked, having other priorities, and lacking the skills or training.

Images can be powerfully suggestive, and we show how they can influence the way a birth parent is viewed by the child. According to Bempath [21] the more favourable information is about birth parents; the more likely children are to identify with them. Relatedly, a key aspect of communicative openness is empathy for the birth family, which was considered by participants to be influenced by certain images. On this page we see the challenge of balancing favourable messaging, empathy and at the same time conveying the truth.

Telling an untruthful story

“The biggest picture on the page isn’t the picture of birth mum as she is. It’s an anime style person with big eyes and a crockpot and that’s not who she was, or that’s not who she was to my son. She never sat him down and cooked him a meal. We want the book to be factual and we want the book to be kind, but we don’t want the book to be misleading and that gives a bias as to who this woman was to him. It’s trying to make the story light and fluffy, but it gives the wrong impression. This page doesn’t feel like it’s being honest about who birth mum was, we didn’t want to go in, cutthroat all guns blazing, your mum was a raging alcoholic, but it doesn’t sell her in the right light. It just feels dishonest.” [P3]



Making insinuations

“In the part that is meant to be positive about birth-dad they talked about him not really sticking at school, needing help with his reading, not getting on with his teachers, and they have this really crap image of a kid swinging on their chair in the classroom, and you think, what is my daughter going to think. How is she going to feel when looking at that? They were suggesting negative things about birth family without directly saying them, which is going to incite shame.” [P1]

* Often images had transparencies or watermarks, or were pixelated, and this contributed to the books being seen as lacking care.

The strength of feeling about the importance of photos, over and above other imagery and text, was evident throughout our interviews. Adopters often contrasted the use of illustrations, and text, with their preference for photos. Those adopters who recreated their book emphasised their desire to include more photos.

Factual accuracy, honesty, and truth

Evident across our interviewee accounts was a desire for factual accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness wherever possible. A central tenant of communicative openness is providing a truthful account in an age-appropriate manner [18]. Two adopters talked about their worries that the story could become a fairy-tale, with too many cartoon images.

“Clip art and illustrations are good for stories. But these books are not stories. They’re not make-believe, they’re not fairy tales.” [P2].

In contrast photos were seen as providing a means of being factual. P1 emphasised the need to “*just show photos*” as a way of “*sticking to the facts*” and avoiding insinuations, something they were doing in their own life story book. On this page we see a contrast between the use of a clip art, and a photo as a means of forming a personal connection and accurately representing those involved in the adoption process. An actual photo of the judge more closely represents the nuances of how P2 understands and wants to convey their child’s story. Hence why they are arguably in a better position to create a more personal life story book for their child. Participants often commented that more involvement in the process of making the adoption agency book would have led to an outcome that was more appropriate to their child.

“But again, it’s spending the time with adopters and having those discussions of what are you comfortable with? What would you like us to add in? Because that’s a big part of what is missing with this process.” [P6]



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Photos being more truthful

“There is a clip art of a male judge, and her judge was female. I can find a photo of the actual judge, and I think that is more personal and meaningful to my daughter. I mean, the judge even sent a card through. When her paperwork came through a card came so rather than this being obscure and random, it would tell the story more coherently.” [P1]

“The cartoon images are sexist and basic and not well thought out. Predominantly the social workers are women. So why are there all these meetings of men? With angry fingers. I would like to tell the story more truthfully and reflect the actual people that were involved”. [P1]

Honestly communicating emotions

Adopters often talked about accessibility, particularly for young children, and felt that photos were a more appropriate mode of communication.

“The books I made are very photo heavy because you can say so much, reading’s difficult so we can talk around the photo.” [P6]

Photos can honestly communicate emotions to children in an accessible and age-appropriate manner, providing a means of talking about and acknowledging more difficult emotions involved in the adoption process. Any adoption comes with a range of different perspectives, and while an adoptive family may be celebrating the arrival of a child, the child will be going through a period of loss and transition [23].

Prompting conversations about emotions

“They’re not necessarily going to sit down and read lots of words they don’t understand. Photographs can convey so much emotion which they can see. And we’ve got a brilliant photograph of the girls when they first moved in with us and they look so nervous, they look so scared. They just look terrified. Those dead eyes. Lank hair, literally, bunnies in a headlight. But we revisit some of these photos and say, well, what do you think that little person is looking like? How do you think they might have been feeling?” [P4].



© Thomas Dylan



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P2 emphasised a desire to ensure their child knows that their birth family loves them.

“On every single page of the story I’ve made it clear that my daughter is loved by her birth family. Nothing she can do, or say, or act out, nothing will ever change that she is loved by her birth family, and she is loved by her family now. And I’ve made that very, very clear throughout my story [...] my version of the life story book for her. Because that’s absolutely vital.” [P2]

Being comfortable with the promotion of dual connections is an important facet of communicative openness that can be represented effectively through photos. Given the multiple adult voices involved in writing and composing the child’s story, something seen by Baynes [2] as a possible exertion of power, one can see how a photo of birth mum can have a strong sense of honesty for a child when communicating emotions, as emphasised by P2.

Conveying love

“Pictures tell a thousand words. And as much as I can say, till I’m blue in the face, your birth mum loves you. That is never going to come across as strongly as me saying it, or me writing it, than a picture of her birth mum looking at her when she was born. Nothing that I can say or do is going to change that. Is going to highlight that any better and I want her to know that.” [P2]

Promoting dual connections by giving meaning to experience and things

Photos are rich with detail and contextual information that is not only engaging for children but can also enable them to make connections with their birth family in their everyday life. P6 and the sketch on this page shows how unexpectedly connecting a photo of birth dad with an everyday experience, can potentially imbue contemporary events with a co-created narrative about the birth dad.

Giving meaning to experience by connecting with birth dad

“We were looking at my son’s book last week and there’s a picture of him as a baby in a football kit. A football baby grow. And we got free tickets to watch the football last weekend and it turned out to be the same club [...] not our local club. This is one of only three pictures we’ve got of our son and his dad, and it was nice to see. Like, oh wow! This is a team my dad supported, and this is me in the baby grow for [football team] and we’re visiting. That really meant a lot to him, to go and see them and this is something special. There’s a photo of him wearing this little kit. That really meant a lot to him.” [P6]



© Thomas Dyan



Giving meaning to things by connecting with birth mum

“There was a really nice photo of birth mum, and it was a real missed opportunity not to have this included because there’s only one picture of birth mum in the whole [adoption agency] book. And actually [...] there is a really nice photo that we have of birth mum with my daughter with her favourite teddy, her snuggly, and she still has the snuggly now, and she still sleeps with her snuggly every night. It was such a missed opportunity in the book we received. Because that picture, in her book, links with her now. And with what her story is now, and by literally having that one photo.” [P2]

As with adults, children can form strong bonds with things [9], especially as they come to represent important relationships through narratives; these can reflect memories, emotions, and meanings [11]. Though an adopted child may not have memories associating a thing with a birth

relative, photos may provide precedent that supports an emotional connection. Such associations could equally facilitate conversations with an adoptive parent, thus providing further ways of extending communicative openness into everyday life.



© Thomas Dylan

Love and Belonging

Van Gulden and Riedel [10] state that:

“All humans need to feel that they belong in their families and that their family unit claims them.”

Birth families often keep family photo albums that naturally come to represent love through curation and their association with family life. Adopted children have been cared for by different people, in different homes, and this sense of security and permanence needs to be directly emphasised, nurtured, and reinforced by adoptive families [23].

Communicating love and belonging through representations of family life was a central role of photos for all our participants. Participants talked of a desire for their life story book to have positive messaging so that children have a good experience and want to engage with their life story.

Supporting difficult stories

P9 included over 200 photos of family life before and after more difficult aspects of their child’s life story.

“The photos take away some of the sadness, or give a child something to look at, so they have space to process what they just read. They soften the blow of some of the bad news. When we showed [our daughter] her storybook, she did know quite a lot of her story. But there were some surprises in there that she didn’t know that she was quite taken back about. Those photos gave her a soft landing if you know what I mean [...] this works really well because they get into looking at these photos and memories and it shows where we are now and how far they have come. They really enjoy that part of the book, it gives them a sense of how much time has gone past.” [P9]



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Not having any photos

Several of our participants either had very few photos to choose from, or had none, and were concerned about gaps in their child's life story.

“I asked for more photos from birth family, a bit more of a story when they still lived with them, and some pictures of them when they were babies [...] because we never had them. I think that is such an important part of their history. So, when they get older, they can look back and say that's what I looked like. But we didn't have any of that captured. It was just this is how much you weighed. There was one picture and that can be quite tricky sometimes. I remember asking could you get some photographs. I know birth mother gave them to the [adoption agency] on a memory stick, which was lost.” [P6]

Where photos are missing, adopters felt their child may have significant questions and so strived to get hold of them. Throughout this pictorial we have argued that photos of significant people are particularly effective when communicating life story. However, there is no guarantee photos will be available and this can have an impact on the coherence of a life story [20].

Though there is no replacement for having photos of birth parents, photos can still play a role in supporting the narrative of a life story book, as well as representing aspects of birth parents' identity. P9 who worked as a graphic designer and had a keen interest in photography showed that photos can foster conversations that link with birth parents. P9 also suggested that photos which are more open to interpretation can facilitate conversation without telling a child what to feel or think.



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Connecting with identity

“We use the Daffodil because she is Welsh, it is quite a pretty flower, but we took a photo with the flower turning away. There was something quite odd about it, and she picks up on things like that, it's something we talk about. Where we've got difficult stories, we've tried to use the photos to create conversation. Like a prompt and they are much more relevant to our situation.” [P9]

Not telling a child what to feel

“I tried to use photos where I needed generic images because the life story book you get from local authorities, are full of clip art and black and white images and they're really poor quality. I tried to find much nicer photos that were much more personal to us and maybe even deliberately vague [...] I was very aware that I didn't want to get drawn into using the life story book to tell my children, what to feel. Or put across my own thoughts about it.” [P9].

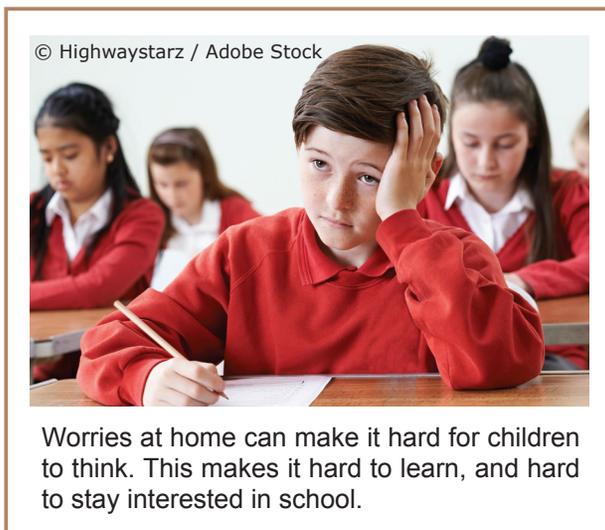
DISCUSSION

In this pictorial we explicate how photos can be chosen with greater care and attention to details that could support parent-child interaction and specific facets of communicative openness. Photos, or detailed representations of photos as shown in this pictorial are rarely used in reference materials for life story books; Rees [23], for example, provides vague line drawings to show where photos may go. Given our findings, and the importance of our sketches in visually disseminating the role of photos, we believe that the further detailed study of visual communication with adoptive families and carers, can allow designers to create visual guides that include photos. The aim would be to encourage a more nuanced appreciation and use of photos.

Our findings show a contrast between the use of photos with clip art commonly used by adoption agencies and more bespoke representations. This contrast can allow us to better understand how to choose and compose drawn illustrations. For example, the clip art images on pages 4 and 5 have been designed to insinuate specific messages, which are exaggerated. The wide-eyed woman with a pot appears as a cosy motherly figure; the boy slouched in the chair appears lazy and miserable at school; the court judge is angry and points his finger judgementally. In contrast, the photo of the judge (page 5) appears factual, honest, and truthful, qualities that were considered as important by participants. This is likely because the photo of the judge is neutral in the messages conveyed (compared to the clip art), there are no insinuations and exaggerated meanings. When choosing an illustration, messages that are incidental to the chosen narrative should be avoided, the illustration can instead be as neutral, and as factual, as possible.

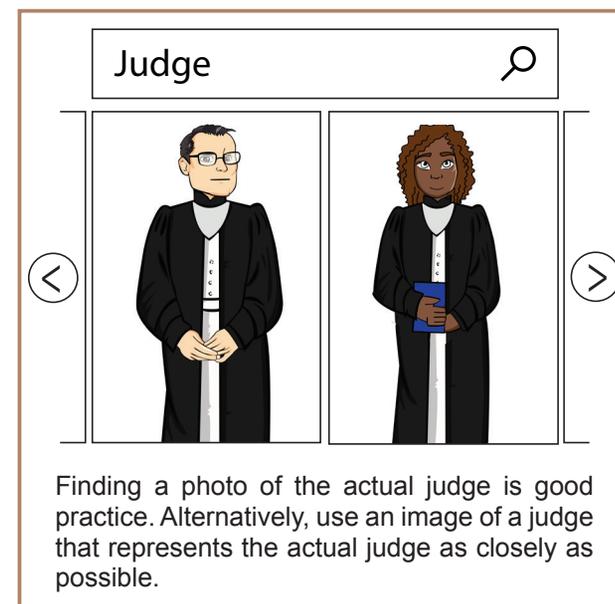
Creating life story books presents a complex design challenge. For example, participants suggested there was a contradictory need to balance truth with empathy for birth parents. As an example of how visual communication might be drawn upon more effectively to

address this balance, we can consider the boy slouched in the chair and a participant's concern that this might "incite shame". In this case, empathy for birth parents should be of principal concern, with illustrations used solely to support a child's understanding of a complex topic. This could be achieved by choosing images that are less demeaning and more descriptive, visually delineating the image from birth parents, and using a caption that depersonalises its meaning to a factual statement.



More care and attention in visual communication could support the likelihood of adopters accepting and advocating for the life story book concept. Achieving this could involve the integration of guidelines into a bespoke, curated, and searchable database of stock images (including photos and drawn illustrations) to support those making life story books. The images, and guidelines require further research that could be supported by child social care and other disciplines studying both child development and communication. A broad aim would be to ensure the best choice of images, whilst ensuring no additional workload for those making the story books. Evident from our interviews is that life story books have common features that can

form categories for those images. The aim would be to achieve some consistency across life story books, and to carefully consider the specific role of each image rather than selecting images "for the sake of sticking a picture on".



We acknowledge that a limitation of this research is that the adopted child's voice is not captured. Future work could consider the views of adopted children and invite them to explore ways of enhancing life story books and associated tools and resources, through design. Also, whilst ethically sensitive, there is an unmet need to better understand the perspectives of adopted children on the use of photographic media, for family communication and relationship-building through life story books.

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