

# Search and Reunion

Welcome to *Search and Reunion*, a book for anyone touched by adoption. Within these pages you'll find information and advice on the process of searching for, and connecting with, a birth relative. *Search and Reunion* is intended as a guide only, for use in conjunction with the services offered by the ACT Adoption Information Service.

ACT Adoption Information Service team  
April 2009

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# The ACT Adoption Information Service

Office for Children, Youth and Family Support

## Who are we?

The ACT Adoption Information Service assists people to obtain information about ACT Adoptions.

If your adoption occurred in another state or territory, you will need to contact the relevant government department in the state or territory responsible for placing children with adoptive families. The list of contact numbers can be found in the chapter *Getting Ready to Search*.

## What do we do?

We provide:

- Written identifying or non-identifying information about ACT adoptions for people eligible under the *ACT Adoption Act 1993*.
- A Reunion Information and Contact Register.
- Counselling about adoption issues or referral to other appropriate services.
- An outreach and mediation service for people wishing to make contact with another party to their adoption.

## Contact information

ACT Adoption Information Service is located at  
11 Moore Street, Civic.

### Postal address:

Adoption Information Service  
Office for Children, Youth and Family Support  
GPO Box 158  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Phone: 6207 1335

Email: [adoptions@act.gov.au](mailto:adoptions@act.gov.au)

Fax: 6207 8888

# Myths about adoption

There are many myths about adoption. People with little knowledge or understanding of adoption may make assumptions and judgements about birth families, adoptees and adoptive families. The truth is that every individual affected by an adoption has a unique story and will have a different way of processing and dealing with the loss, grief, joy, confusion, "unknowns" and "knowns" of their adoption journey.

## Some common myths about birth parents who made a plan of adoption

- Birth mothers can forget the pregnancy and plan of adoption and get on with their lives.
- Birth mothers/fathers did not want or love the baby.
- Birth parents are morally bad.
- Birth mothers would not find a suitable partner if the details of the pregnancy and relinquishment were known.
- Birth parents should leave the past in the past.
- The subsequent children of birth parents will reject their mother/father if they are told of the plan of adoption.

## Some common myths about adoptive parents

- Raising an adopted child is identical to raising a biological child.
- Adoptive parents are "super parents" who have no difficulties in parenting.
- Blood is thicker than water. After contact is established with the birth parents, the relationship with the adoptive parents will diminish.
- Adoptive parents have failed if their adopted child considers searching for members of their biological family.

## Some common myths concerning adoptees

- Adoptees who search do not care about their adoptive parents.
- Adoptees search because the adoptive placement has broken down.
- Once the adoptee has contact with their biological family, their relationship with the adoptive parents will be diminished.
- Adoptees who are not searching, or have not searched for their birth family, are not curious about their genealogical origins.
- If adoptees have a good adoptive placement, they will not be curious about identity or genealogy.
- The relationship with birth parents will not necessarily be close.

# Deciding to search

Searching and finding can be both exciting and terrifying at the same time

## What is searching?

Searching is the process in which a person who has been party to an adoption – including the adoptee, birth parent, adoptive parent, birth relative or adoptive relative – seeks information about another person who has been party to the same adoption. This information can include contact details, family history and important documents, including birth and marriage certificates.

It should be noted that contemporary adoption practice enables the adoption to be an “open adoption” in which contact with birth family members can occur throughout the child’s life, either through face-to-face contact, phone contact or the exchange of letters and photographs.

However, in some contemporary adoptions, it is not always possible for contact to occur. Past adoption practice did not enable this contact. Past adoptions are described as “closed adoptions”.

## Reasons why people decide to search

Every person touched by adoption has a unique story, personal experience and ways of processing emotions, understanding life and dealing with uncertainty. Different people will approach the search for a relative separated by adoption in their own way.

### Adoptees

Most adopted people have grown up in secure and loving families and are not trying to replace their parents or families by searching for birth relatives. However some adoptees may feel a deep desire to know more about their origins and to further understand who they are.

Some adopted people may not have any desire to search further once they have received their information. Others may want to continue the journey. Some may only start the search after a life trigger for example, an illness, birth of their own child or the death of an adoptive parent.

Some adoptees never feel the need to seek information or make contact. Fear of a search hurting the adoptive parents is extensively documented<sup>1</sup>. Fear of rejection by the adoptive family may also be a concern for some adoptees. The decision to seek information may create feelings of disloyalty towards the adoptive parents. Many people face the dilemma of searching now and perhaps hurting the adoptive parents, or waiting until later. Some people are also afraid of what they might discover about their birth families. Some adoptees search and have contact without telling their adoptive family.

Some adoptees, in their teens and early 20s have little or no desire to seek information or search for birth parents. It is typical for people of this age to be more interested and involved in their own adult lives and identities.

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<sup>1</sup> Including:

Howe, D and Feast, J with Coster, D (2003) Adoption, search and reunion: the long-term experience of adopted adults; BAAF

Feast, J and Philpot, T (2003) Searching questions: identity, origins and adoption; BAAF

A small number of people may not know they were adopted. Discovering that they were adopted later in life can be a shock. Some of the ways people find out are:

- Being told after the death of an adoptive parent.
- When applying for a birth certificate or passport.
- From a relative or friend.
- By coming across the adoption papers.
- When an approach is made by a member of the birth family.

Adoptees may search to:

- Find out the reasons for their relinquishment.
- Find out why they look like they do.
- Gain information about medical conditions and family health problems.
- Get to know about their family background, culture and/or ethnicity.
- Link the past with the present and future, so they can form a complete sense of identity, continuity and belonging.
- Help them understand more about themselves.
- Reconnect with relatives from whom they were separated.

### **Birth parents**

Fears of rejection and memories of the adoption process when they relinquished their child mean that some birth parents are not able to deal with undertaking a search. For these reasons some relinquishing parents are happy to receive adoption information but not begin a search. This situation sometimes changes when birth parents hear of other successful stories or gain confidence from support groups.

They may search to:

- Find out that their relinquished child is alive, well and happy.
- Try to explain the reasons why they relinquished their child.
- Come to terms with the grief associated with the relinquishment.
- See/meet the child who has become an adult.
- Feel a sense of personal "completeness". It can be difficult for some people to reconcile the fact that their child is not with them but is "somewhere out there".

### **Birth mothers**

Up until the early 1970s, economic hardship, societal judgements and lack of support services made single mothering a very difficult choice. Children born out of marriage and single parenthood were not generally seen as socially acceptable.

Many women wanted to keep their children but were convinced that children are best raised by two parents who were married. Adoption was therefore seen to be a solution for single childless women when assured that neither the child nor the birth mother would experience financial hardship, lack of support or social alienation.

Many women who have given up a baby for adoption found it very difficult to deal with and live without knowledge of how their child fared in life. Most research<sup>2</sup> shows that mothers do not forget their child and will continue to think about their child for the rest of their lives. Many birth mothers feel grief and a strong desire to know that their child is well.

For many birth mothers, their anxieties and fears may make them reluctant to look for their child. They may believe that their child will reject them, not understand why they were adopted, or be angry at them about being adopted. They also do not want to hurt adoptive parents or undermine the adoptive relationship.

Like adopted people, some birth mothers choose not to use services which can give them information about their child and some choose to receive only non-identifying information about their adopted child. Please note, non-identifying information does not include the person's last name.

It is important for adoptees searching for their mother to remember that their birth and adoption may still be a secret among members of the birth family, even 30, 40 or 50 years after the event. A mother's partner, her children and many of her relatives and friends may not know of the adoptee's existence. It is possible that the birth mother continues to feel guilty about having had a child outside marriage or giving up her child.

Many mothers do not want to hurt the adoptive parents and feel that they have no right to intrude into the relationships of the adoptive family. However, birth mothers generally respond positively to requests for contact initiated by their adopted child.

There are many reasons why birth mothers made a plan of adoption for their child – they were mostly the ones who had to sign the consent papers – including:

- Lack of support from the birth father.
- Refusal of support from their own families unless the child was placed for adoption.
- Lack of access to the means to provide for the needs of the child.
- The desire to provide a better life for the child.
- A wish for the child to have both a mother and a father.
- Pressure from health or welfare workers, and society generally.

Many birth mothers say that relinquishing their child for adoption was the most traumatic event of their lives. They talk of enormous personal stress and having limited choice in the matter.

### **Birth fathers**

Many birth fathers deeply felt the loss of their child in a similar way to the mother. Evidence has shown that many fathers also wish to have access to information about their relinquished children. Some fathers are not listed on birth certificates, making this a difficult process for birth fathers. Some men may have felt left out of the adoption process. The number of birth fathers wanting to access their child's adoption information has increased in the past few years. Fathers do not always know that a child was conceived or born as a result of their relationship with the mother, or that a child was placed for adoption. Nevertheless, experience indicates that they respond positively to contacts from adoptees. Although some adoptees are initially interested in finding their mother, some adoptees may also become interested in finding their father. Some adoptees start their search with equal interest in both their father and their mother.

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<sup>2</sup> Including:

Howe, D, Sawbridge, P and Hinings, D (1992) Half a million women: mothers who lose their children by adoption; Penguin

## **Birth relatives**

Many of the feelings and issues for birth parents are relevant to birth relatives. They may feel reluctant to interfere, yet wish to know about the welfare of the adoptee. During their search, adoptees may find that they have brothers and sisters. Finding a brother or sister you never knew you had can be as significant as finding parents, including cases where the mother or father is deceased or decides not to meet you.

It is surprising how often people searching have not realised that they may form relationships with brothers, sisters and a whole family rather than one person.

## **Adoptive parents**

Some adoptive parents can feel left out of the searching process. Their child may feel unsure about whether or not to tell their parents they want to search for birth relatives and sometimes this can be confusing for everyone.

For some adoptive parents the searching process can be stressful especially for those who adopted children when the process was carried out in secret. Adoptive parents may fear rejection or may be worried about what their child may find when she or he searches. However, for a large majority, the search has enhanced their relationship with their adopted child.

They may search to:

- Provide information to their adopted child to help them with developing their identity.
- Provide answers to their child's questions, such as "Why was I adopted?" and "Why do I have red hair?"
- Possibly meet with their child's birth parents in order to reassure them that their child is well.
- Enhance the relationship they already have with their child.
- Give peace of mind to their child, especially if the child is angry or distressed about their adoption.

## **Telling your family about your decision to search**

Adopted people, birth parents and adoptive parents will have to decide whether to let their families know about their search. For some, the decision will be an easy one. For example, their families already know, while others may decide that they will not tell their families under any circumstances. Some will tell if their search is successful.

Only you can make the decision as to whether to discuss your search or not. However, you may wish to consider the following:

### **Adopted people and adoptive parents**

In some families, discussing adoption may be a difficult topic. It is only in the past 15 to 20 years that adoption agencies have provided adoptive parents with education seminars, resources and support on the challenges faced by adoptees. Prior to this time, adoptive parents received very little help in how to go about discussing adoption with their child. Adoptive parents may assume the child does not raise the issue because they are not interested.

Consequently they do not discuss it. The child may assume that their parents will be upset if they raise the issue of adoption and search and consequently do not discuss it. In general, however, adoptive parents want to support their adopted child in any way they can.

Many people decide to tell others only if their search is successful. However, adoptive parents may find out anyway, perhaps inadvertently or from someone else.

Adoptive parents may also have information that can assist adopted people. Information may include the Memorandum of Adoption.

This is a legal document that gives the original name of the adopted person, who usually has the birth mother's surname. Not all adoptive parents are aware that they can access the Memorandum of Adoption. In some earlier adoptions, it is possible that the adoptive parents were given the full names and addresses of one or both birth parents. They may also remember other information about the birth family that can assist in the search.

### **Birth parents**

Telling a partner and children that you relinquished a child can be difficult and many birth parents do not tell anyone, particularly as until ACT legislation changed in 1993 allowing people to apply for identifying information and to place their name on the Reunion Information Register, there seemed no possibility of contact.

Some birth parents decide to tell only when their child makes contact. The question to consider is how will your partner/children feel if they find out after the event?

Partners may react to the news that you relinquished a child in many ways. They may be understanding and sympathetic of the decision you made or was made for you, or they may take time to understand what happened.

They may or may not understand or support your decision to search.

Living with the fear of rejection and judgement can be more painful than the reality of telling. Although it is often a shock, the vast majority of children and partners are supportive of a parent who relinquished a child. In fact, it often helps them to understand the parent better.

If telling is difficult for you, consider first discussing it with a social worker from the Adoption Information Service or another adoption counsellor. You may also find it helpful to contact a support group.

### **Feelings that may be experienced when searching**

Identifying and acknowledging feelings can have a positive effect on a person's well being. Once a feeling is acknowledged, a person can then decide how to deal with it and make decisions for future actions.

Adopted people may have a number of conflicting feelings about their birth family and birth mother. At different times in their lives they may feel anger, indifference, resentment, compassion, longing, hope and love.

Birth mothers may feel that they have no rights as far as the child is concerned. They may be fearful of being rejected by the child they relinquished and may feel reluctant to intrude into someone else's life, believing it better to "let things be".

Birth mothers may be angry at a society that gave them no means of support, the birth father who may have abandoned them and their own parents who may have encouraged or pressured them to relinquish their child. They may recall with some bitterness their experiences at the hands of hospital staff, doctors and adoptions officers.

Birth parents may, in some circumstances, also feel some resentment towards the parents who have raised their child and cared and provided for them when they did not have the same opportunity.

Some adoptive parents fear that if their child meets their birth parent they will immediately turn away from the adopting parents and return to their blood relatives. This fear motivates some adoptive parents to discourage interest in birth families.

Such fears are unfounded in most cases. Adopted people who have met members of their birth family say that ties within their adoptive families are often strengthened. Part of the reason for this is that meeting birth family members may "complete" the adopted person's sense of identity and remove underlying tensions related to the adoption.

Many adoptive parents feel grateful to birth parents for allowing them to parent their child. Many recognise that a child can have loving and fulfilling relationships with many different people. Birth parents are often relieved to know that their child was reared in a loving, secure family.

### **What do I need to think about before I start searching?**

The process of searching may lead you to find information about the adoptee, the birth family or the adoptive family that you did not expect. Furthermore, you can never be fully prepared for the outcomes of your search. Below is a list of issues and questions you should ask yourself before embarking on a search.

- What do you hope to achieve? A reunion? Identifying information only? Having your curiosity satisfied?
- Is it just information you are wanting or are you hoping to address other problems in your life?
- What are your fears and dreams?
- Have you thought about what the other person's experience of adoption may have been like?
- What might the implications be for you and your family?
- Should you inform your adoptive parents, family members or significant others that you are thinking about searching and contact?
- Consider all the possible outcomes – are you ready to deal with the best outcome through to the worst outcome?
- Contact can be a rollercoaster ride with emotions ranging from joy to anger. Do you have friends, family or other support networks to talk to during this process? You may need to consider professional help.
- Are your expectations of the outcome of contact realistic? Are you aware that expectations and wishes may change after contact?
- Have you carefully considered all the options and information you have received?

- Are you approaching possible contact with an open mind and willingness to compromise and accept difference?
- Have you faced the possibility of silence or unwillingness to form a connection? How will you deal with these responses if they occur?
- Are you prepared for the discovery that the person you are seeking has died? Have you thought ahead about how you may deal with this?
- Are you prepared to be sensitive to the other person's feelings, try to understand them and respect their wishes and situation?
- Are you willing to give the other person as much time as they need to decide about contact?
- Are you prepared to proceed at the rate they are comfortable with?
- How do you feel about ongoing contact?
- Have you read literature on reunion that may help you prepare for its stages and the emotional and practical issues that may emerge?

There are no guarantees as to how long your search will take or where and how it will end. Sometimes in our lives we feel more able to take risks than at other times. Try to decide rationally if this is the right time for you to start searching.

### **Telling upsetting information**

Some people become very excited about the prospect of finding a relative and forget that sometimes they may be bearers of distressing information to the other party. For instance, a birth sibling may find their brother or sister who was adopted and have to tell them that their mother is deceased.

Or a birth parent may learn that the adoptee has died or is suffering from a serious illness or disability. In situations like these, the distressing information will often be told during the first contact.

Before telling someone upsetting or potentially distressing information, time needs to be taken to think about how this information may impact on that person and how it can be given in a sensitive way.

It may be helpful to talk to a social worker in the Adoption Information Service or another agency before contact is made. It is often advisable to use the services of an experienced adoption intermediary who can provide the information and support to all parties involved.

### **If you are subject to a contact veto**

The ACT has adoption legislation which allows adopted people over the age of 18, their birth parents, adoptive parents, birth siblings and their descendants to receive identifying information about their adoptions. In addition, those affected by this law who may not wish to be contacted after information is released, can register a contact veto to ensure that their privacy is protected.

#### **What is a contact veto?**

A veto in relation to the adoption legislation is a means of ensuring that your privacy is protected. It is designed to prevent a party to the adoption, who has accessed identifying information about you, from making contact with you. It does not prevent the person from receiving the information.

If a contact veto is in place an applicant for information will be required to sign an undertaking that no contact will be attempted before they can receive the information.

If an attempt is then made to contact against the terms of the undertaking, court action is an option.

Experience shows that in the majority of cases a veto is respected. In addition, the person lodging the veto may leave a message explaining their reasons for not wishing to be contacted along with some information about their present circumstances.

There is a section to leave a message on the veto form.

A contact veto can be registered in relation to all other parties to your adoption or in relation to particular persons only. Also, a veto can be applied for an indefinite period or for a specified time.

### **Who can register a veto?**

You can register a veto in relation to an adoption where the adoptee is over the age of 18 if you are:

- the adopted person
- the birth parent
- the adoptive parent
- a descendant of the adopted person
- an adoptive relative of the adopted person
- a birth relative of the adopted person

If the birth relative is under the age of 18, their parents can lodge a veto on behalf of the child until he or she reaches the age of 18.

On turning 18, the birth relative would need to register their own veto.

### **How do I register a veto?**

To register a veto you should contact the ACT Adoptions and Permanent Care Unit to discuss your concerns and request an application form.

You then send the completed form along with certified copies of three types of identification such as birth certificate, marriage certificate, driver's licence or Medicare card.

If you are not able to apply in person, you can send the completed form back with photocopies of your identification. These photocopies must be witnessed by a Justice of the Peace.

Veto forms need to be returned to:

Adoption Information Service  
Office for Children, Youth and Family Support  
GPO Box 158  
CANBERRA ACT 2601  
Phone: 6207 1335  
Fax: 6207 8888

### **Am I subject to a contact veto?**

If you are subject to a contact veto, you will be informed when you apply for identifying information. Before receiving your information, you will be required to attend a mandatory counselling session and sign a legally binding undertaking in which you agree not to make contact with the other party. If you are made subject of a contact veto after applying for identifying information, you will be contacted as soon as possible and will also be offered a counselling session. The experience of the ACT Adoption Information Service is that most parties to a past adoption are not subject to a contact veto.

### **How long does a veto last?**

A veto remains in place until the person who registered it asks for it to be removed. To remove a veto you have put in place you need to formally contact the ACT Adoption and Permanent Care Unit in writing requesting that the veto be removed.

### **Can someone else contact the person who placed the veto?**

Under Section 73 of the *ACT Adoption Act 1993*, a person subject to a contact veto cannot arrange for another person to contact, attempt to contact, or attempt to arrange contact with the person who lodged the objection while the objection to contact is in force.

## **Adoption of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

In the past many Aboriginal children were placed in non Aboriginal families as a result of government policies which separated them from their families and communities. The policies and practices of the past have caused considerable distress to many Aboriginal people.

It is possible that some people will discover their Aboriginal ancestry for the first time when searching for their birth family. Aboriginal counsellors are available to assist you.

If you are searching for an Aboriginal birth relative, it is suggested that you seek assistance from the Link Up NSW website at [www.linkupnsw.org.au](http://www.linkupnsw.org.au). Before the 1970's, accurate records may not have been kept. Your relative's birth may not have been registered or the 'adoption' may not have been made in the legal sense but was in reality a foster care setting with all the appearances of a legal adoption.

The staff at Link Up NSW are available to support and assist family reunions. It is recommended that you use an appropriate Aboriginal mediator when approaching an Aboriginal birth relative or parent.

Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation  
PO Box 93  
Lawson NSW 2783  
PH (02) 4759 1911 or Client free call number 1800 624 332

Link Up (QLD) Aboriginal Corporation  
PO Box 1128  
Coorparoo DC QLD 4151  
PH (07) 3891 2554

## **Adoption of children born overseas**

If you were born and adopted in another country or if you relinquished a child for adoption in another country, the Adoption Information Service can help put you in touch with the relevant overseas organisation. If you have not already received one, ask the Adoption Information Service for the Post Adoption Resource Centre searching booklet relevant to the country you were born in.

Since the early 1970s, many Australian families have adopted children from other countries such as Korea, India and Sri Lanka. If you were born overseas and adopted in the ACT you have the same rights of access to the records of your adoption as adopted people born in the ACT.

Your adoptive parents are likely to have detailed information about your birth family, which was given to them when your adoption was arranged. The process of searching for your birth family however will be affected by whatever laws apply in your country of origin. Some countries may have closed adoption records, others may be more open. The majority of overseas agencies provide assistance with searching, contact and reunions, and will welcome enquiries from persons adopted from that country.

It is strongly recommended that you seek advice and help from the appropriate organisations before attempting to make contact yourself.

The Adoption Information Service will be able to put you in touch with the overseas adoption agency which arranged your adoption or with the organisations such as International Social Services. The Australia for Children Society can also provide assistance and support.

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## **Getting ready to search**

Before you start you need to obtain the following

### **Identifying Information from the ACT Adoption Information Service**

If the adoption took place earlier than 1966 it is unlikely that there will be a departmental file. However, some identifying information can be obtained from Registry and court records.

### **Authorisation from the ACT Adoption and Information Service to obtain an original or amended birth certificate**

If you are a birth parent or adoptive parent you can access an extract of the adoptee's amended birth certificate or a full copy of the original birth certificate if you are named on it.

If you are an adopted person and if applicable, you can access an extract of your birth parents' marriage certificate and/or death certificates.

The original birth certificate will provide the following information: birth mother's (sometimes birth father's) name, age, occupation, birthplace and address as at the time of registration.

The amended birth certificate will provide the following information: adopted person's name, adoptive parents' names, ages, occupations, birthplaces and address at the time of the adoption.

## How to apply for the original or amended birth certificate

Apply to the Adoption Information Service to receive your authorisation for the original or amended birth certificate.

If the adopted person was born in the ACT you then need to apply to:

The ACT Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages  
GPO Box 158, Canberra City ACT 2601 or visit 255 Canberra Avenue, Fyshwick ACT or phone 6207 0460.

The certificate will not be supplied without the Authorisation from the Adoption Information Service. If the adopted person was born in another Australian state you need to check with the Registry of that state to ascertain whether the ACT authority form will allow you to obtain the certificate you require. Also, as each state has its own adoption laws as well as separate births, death and marriages laws, some categories of applicants who can obtain information in the ACT may not be able to obtain appropriate certificates from other states' registering authorities. For example, except for in exceptional circumstances, non-adopted birth siblings of a person born in NSW but adopted in the ACT, are not able to apply for the adopted person's original birth certificate from the NSW Registry.

Contact phone numbers for adoption services and Births, Deaths and Marriages Registering Authorities in other Australian states:

### NSW

Adoption Information Service	1300 799 023	<a href="http://www.community.nsw.gov.au">http://www.community.nsw.gov.au</a>
Births, Deaths and Marriages	1300 655 236	<a href="http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au">www.bdm.nsw.gov.au</a>

### Victoria

Family Records Service	1300 769 923	<a href="http://www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au">www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au</a>
Births, Deaths and Marriages	1300 369 367	<a href="http://www.justice.vic.gov.au">www.justice.vic.gov.au</a>

### South Australia

Adoption and Family Information Service	(08) 8207 0060	<a href="http://www.adoptions.sa.gov.au/">www.adoptions.sa.gov.au/</a>
Births, Deaths and Marriages	(08) 8204 9599	<a href="http://www.ocba.sa.gov.au/bdm/">www.ocba.sa.gov.au/bdm/</a>

### Queensland

Adoption Services	1800 647 983	<a href="http://www.childsaftey.qld.gov.au/adoption">www.childsaftey.qld.gov.au/adoption</a>
Births, Deaths and Marriages	(07) 3247 9203	<a href="http://www.justice.qld.gov.au/16.tm">www.justice.qld.gov.au/16.tm</a>

### Western Australia

Adoption Service		<a href="http://www.community.wa.gov.au">www.community.wa.gov.au</a>
Births, Deaths and Marriages	(08) 9264 1555	<a href="http://www.justice.wa.gov.au">www.justice.wa.gov.au</a>

### Tasmania

Adoption and Information Service	(03) 6222 7373	<a href="http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/adoption">www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/adoption</a>
Births, Deaths and Marriages	(03) 6233 3795	<a href="http://www.justice.tas.gov.au/bdm">www.justice.tas.gov.au/bdm</a>

### Northern Territory

Family and Children's Services Darwin	(08) 8922 7460	<a href="http://www.nt.gov.au/health/comm_svs/facs/adoptions.html">www.nt.gov.au/health/comm_svs/facs/adoptions.html</a>
Births, Deaths and Marriages	(08) 8999 6119	<a href="http://www.nt.gov.au/justice/bdm">www.nt.gov.au/justice/bdm</a>

## **Other relevant certificates**

An extract of birth mother's/adopted person's marriage certificate may be able to be obtained from the ACT Registry if the marriage took place in this territory. You may also be able to search other state registries for marriage certificates, but you will need to inquire on the numbers listed for the details. In the past, the majority of adult females changed their names by marriage and many still do. A marriage certificate will give you a married name and the name of the partner, as well as the date of the marriage.

A death certificate will be issued in the state in which the death took place. Check with state registries if you wish to pursue this line of inquiry outside the ACT.

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## **How to search**

When you have gathered as much information as possible from the Adoption Information Service, you may wish to use some of the following search avenues

### **Electoral rolls**

In the ACT the current Federal electoral rolls are held in the Electoral Commission offices at:

Level 1  
Jacobs House  
8-10 Hobart Place  
Canberra City ACT

For enquiries about the rolls, phone 6257 6018.

The federal electoral rolls are updated every six months and the names are listed by state in alphabetical order. The rolls are freely available for viewing by the public so therefore you do not need to explain yourself.

Older electoral rolls are available in the National Library of Australia. However, prior to 1984, the names were listed alphabetically by electorate, so you would need to have some idea of the person's address you are looking for before searching.

Previously, 21 year olds were eligible to vote up until 1972 and from 1973 onwards 18 year olds were eligible to vote.

Also, a person may have a 'silent entry' on the electoral roll where their name will still appear without an address beside it.

### **Current and old telephone books**

Current and old telephone books are held at post offices and public libraries. However, many people have silent numbers. A call to directory assistance will at least tell you if the person is listed, even if you are unable to obtain the phone number.

## **Trade, professional and union directories**

Trade, professional and union directories are useful if the person you are seeking was in an easily identifiable occupation.

## **Baptismal records**

Baptismal records are usually held in Parish records. To obtain the records, you will need to inquire with the religious denomination concerned.

## **Other sources worth a try**

Some people have had success with old birth notices in newspapers, searching school magazines, engaging private detectives or professional researchers from historical societies, advertising in the newspaper or conducting searches on the internet.

If the adoption took place before 1965, or was arranged privately, you may be able to obtain information from adoptive parents, doctors or priests who were associated with the adoption. Up until the 1990s, the process became much more private and it would be unlikely that identifying information could have been given.

## **If the person you are seeking is overseas**

You may be able to get some assistance from:

International Social Service  
NSW Regional Office  
Suite 2/Level 7  
189 Kent St.  
Sydney 2000 NSW  
PH (02) 9252 7477

## **If you were born overseas and adopted in the ACT**

Searching and reunions are more difficult. You will need to discuss your situation with a social worker from the Adoption Information Service about avenues for obtaining adoption information from some overseas countries.

## **A few general pointers when searching:**

- Try to be methodical by keeping written records of your searches and any documents you obtained together.
- Be discreet when making enquiries.
- Talk to other people about your search as they may have useful ideas.
- Remember why you are doing it and what you would like out of it. If you have doubts about proceeding, take some time out and review the situation.

# Making contact

Be reasonably sure that you have located the right person

## **Can I ask the Adoption Information Service to contact them?**

If you believe that you have found the correct contact details of the person you are looking for, you can ask the ACT Adoption Information Service to make contact. The service is free and confidential.

Contacting someone who was involved in an adoption is an extremely delicate matter and may well call for the services of a skilled intermediary when:

- The other person's views about contact are not known.
- You feel too nervous to explain coherently who you are and why you want to make contact.
- It is unclear about the reaction to the contact.
- You are concerned that rejection is a possibility and you may not be able to cope with being told directly that your approach is not welcome.
- You wish to make discreet inquiries before committing to contact.
- The assistance of an uninvolved third person would be helpful in discussing the situation.
- You want professional support and for the other party to have the same opportunity.

Some people feel they need to maintain their anonymity when they first make contact. There could be a number of reasons for this such as safety, fear of rejection or fear of the unknown. The use of a mediator to make the initial contact is often advisable as you can elect to exchange letters and/or photos with each other via the mediator before exchanging contact details.

## **Should I involve anyone else?**

Contact attempts should be discreet, tactful and confidential and should, wherever possible, be made directly to the birth parent or adoptee. If you are not sure that the person you have contacted is in fact the person you are looking for, a simple "I am tracing my family history and need some information" is usually sufficient. Experience has shown that using a friend or relative to make contact for you can be problematic. Other people may not understand all the issues involved and may not give the other party adequate opportunity to make considered decisions about contact. This could lead to reticence to engage and a feeling that their privacy has been breached.

## **I have an address. Now what?**

Now you have completed your search and have an address or a number of possible addresses for the person you are searching for, where do you go from here? There are three options. Your first, and preferred option is to contact the ACT Adoption Information Service. The workers within the service have knowledge of adoption issues and will be able to guide you through the process.

Your second option is to seek a mediator to attempt contact. Your third option is to attempt contact yourself. However, before doing this, stop and think for a moment.

For many people involved in the adoption process, having an unknown relative telephone them out of the blue, or turn up unannounced, may be a shock. This could effect how the relationship develops in the future. Therefore, if this is the first contact with the person you have found, it is recommended that you write a letter or work through an intermediary who can make contact on your behalf.

### **How do I make contact?**

There are various means of making contact however there are some issues to consider which could result in a more positive outcome when contact is made:

- Keep an open mind and be prepared for the unexpected.
- Mutual respect, agreement and acceptance is vital.
- While you may have been thinking about making this contact for years, the person you are searching for may not have had the same time to prepare, so contact should proceed at their pace.
- Contact can be unsettling for those involved, particularly if done quickly. Many have said later that perhaps they should have taken more time to reflect on what was happening and consider how both parties were feeling.

### **Should I contact the adoptive parents first to gain their permission?**

The adoptee is now an adult and should be afforded the opportunity to decide for themselves if they wish to have contact with members of their birth family.

Involving a third person such as the adoptive parents may also be a breach of the adoptee's privacy.

If you have concerns that the adoptee may not know about their adoption then we suggest you contact the Adoption Information Service within the ACT Adoptions and Permanent Care Unit, who are familiar with adoption issues, to make an approach on your behalf.

The only time you may find you may need to contact the adoptive parents is when you have exhausted all other means of locating an address for the adoptee.

Again we recommend that you make a discreet approach, trying to avoid a long and detailed explanation, or enlist the services of an intermediary service.

### **Should I write?**

We recommend that the first approach you make to a person is to write them a letter. A letter is less threatening to people – it gives them time to think about their response and to work through their own feelings.

A letter should be written in a sensitive and discreet manner as it may be opened by someone else in the household. An example of such a letter can be found on the Post Adoption Resource Centre website [www.bensoc.asn.au/parc](http://www.bensoc.asn.au/parc) - follow the links through Search and Reunion.

Note, however, this is the Post Adoption Resource Centre for NSW and the legislation may be slightly different.

You may choose to vary this letter, but it is not advised that you mention adoption at this stage as you know nothing about the person's private life or situation, and they may not be the correct person. If you need help, contact the Adoption Information Service.

The only downside to writing a letter is that you do not receive an immediate response and you may be left wondering what is happening. If you do not receive a response, try and wait a month before writing another letter. You should consider sending the second letter by registered mail so you can confirm it has been received.

If you have chosen to use the Adoption information Service they can mediate contact or help you to prepare a non-identifying letter to ascertain whether you have the correct person and address.

### **I found a telephone number. Should I phone them?**

A telephone call gives the caller some immediate results. However, it may be a shock to the person being contacted if it has come at a bad time and it may not give them an opportunity to prepare themselves. If the person contacted seems shocked by the news, encourage them to write down your name and number before the call is finished.

While in some cases there has been a positive outcome after a telephone call has been made, it may not be the best method for a first contact.

Keep in mind that the person you wish to call may have caller ID, which can enable them to identify the last missed call which could be your telephone number. If you do not wish for your phone number to be identified you may wish to call from a phone that has a private number or a public phone.

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## **Contact has been made: now what?**

Once contact has been established and the party searched for wishes to go ahead with contact, the next step can be negotiated. Some people wish to exchange letters and photos first, others are happy to meet.

Contact should proceed at the slowest rate one party wants to take. Remember, you may have been searching – or thinking about it – for months or years and feel ready to make contact. However, contact may come as a great shock to the person found and they may need to proceed a little slower.

Even if the person found is delighted, even if they have been thinking about doing their own search, contact is inevitably a shock. Often the person found may need to reflect and talk to their family and friends about what is happening.

### **Exchanging letters and photos**

Many people exchange photographs and/or letters to begin with and may do this for some time before a meeting. This can be a good way to get to know one another in a less threatening

manner, while at the same time gaining important information about each other and also gaining a sense of expectations regarding contact.

This is also a good way to give the person you have found time to gather their thoughts and feelings and tell other members of their family about you before making a decision to actually meet.

The Adoption Information Service can mediate the exchange of letters and photos until both parties feel comfortable about exchanging personal addresses and/or telephone numbers.

### **Telephone calls**

Some people have difficulty in expressing their thoughts and feelings in a letter and feel they are able to better portray these over the phone.

While this is a more direct form of contact, it is still less threatening than an actual meeting while you are in the process of getting to know each other.

The phone provides a more immediate response and allows you to gather more detailed information about each other while also gaining a sense of how each other feels about meeting and continued contact.

You should not feel obliged to make a time to meet when you first speak over the phone. You can suggest further calls or exchange of letters and photos.

### **Email**

Many people are connected to the internet now and find this an easier and more immediate way of corresponding with others.

Email also allows you to learn more about each other and exchange photographs while maintaining some level of privacy until you are ready to exchange addresses and telephone numbers.

The Adoption Information Service can also mediate emails. You can choose to send your email to a staff member first for feedback, or to copy them in to the email until both parties feel ready to email directly and without support from the Adoption Information Service.



## **The first meeting**

You have located a member of your family, you may have exchanged letters or emails, talked on the phone once or many times and now you both decide it's time to meet. The first meeting may take place after one phone call or after months or sometimes years of communicating. So what do you need to consider when deciding about the first meeting?

### **Where will the meeting occur?**

It is best to meet somewhere neutral, for example a coffee shop or a quiet area of a public park, preferably not at someone's house. It is important that this be a place where both parties feel comfortable.

In many cases the first meeting can be very emotional for one or both of you, so when deciding on a location try to arrange to meet at a place that is not overcrowded.

### **Who should be present at the first meeting?**

While having a support person may seem like a good idea, often it is best to meet alone, given the specific nature of the first meeting. This meeting has been long awaited and should be enjoyed by the people who are directly involved. That is you and the family member you have found.

Experience shows that often there can be a feeling of being overwhelmed if there are too many people at the first meeting. Other family members can meet later on. You may want someone to drive you there and pick you up so that you may de-brief afterwards.

### **How long should the meeting be?**

As this is usually a very emotional time, often people cope better if the first meeting is no more than a couple of hours – enough time to manage the initial emotions and start to feel comfortable with each other.

Experience shows that some people who have experienced long first meetings may come away feeling emotionally drained. Often they say they do not remember a lot of what was said.

### **How may I feel after the first meeting?**

After the first meeting it is normal to feel a range of emotions, from joy to sadness or even anger. It is important to acknowledge your feelings and to be clear about future contacts and wishes. Misunderstandings can easily occur in such an emotionally charged environment.

You may feel happiness and joy at the outcome of the meeting.

You may have felt an instant connection to the other person and were able to get on with them easily and share your life stories.

You may feel a limited connection or a feeling of rejection. It may be that the other person had not had time to prepare themselves for the meeting, or they may have spent so many years trying to forget about the situation that they were unable to deal with the meeting.

Others still may feel settled in their current lives and do not want to put that at risk. Some people may share little in common apart from past experiences.

You may have found out some unusual or shocking information during the first meeting.

You may have found that you were comparing yourselves with one another. Some people feel very surprised by finding someone they look like.

You may feel a strong desire to touch, talk, share and spend a lot of time together. At times, people experience a sexual attraction to the other person.

If you are having these feelings, contact a counsellor from the ACT Adoption Information Service or the Post Adoption Resource Centre.

## **Feelings and reactions that are likely in search and reunion**

Search and contact affects not just the two people immediately involved but also their families and friends. Like dropping a stone in a pool of water, the ripples from search affect many people, in particular each person's partner and their immediate and extended families.

Be aware that each of these people will have their own concerns and fears, as search and contact progresses.

Often there is a honeymoon period, so described, because everything about the other person seems wonderful and contact is exciting. It is natural for this to end and the real work of establishing a relationship with the other person who may have a different lifestyle, values, likes, dislikes and habits needs to begin.

Honesty, patience and flexibility can prevent misunderstandings and enhance relationships. It is not unusual for it to take a couple of years to form a comfortable relationship for you both.

Most people generally search for another person but usually find many more.

These are spouses, children, brothers, sisters, half siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. It can be both rewarding and overwhelming, as new relationships are formed.

The feelings by the two people and their families can include excitement, fear, jealousy, joy, frustration, happiness, hurt and sadness. Discussing your feelings with a friend or counsellor can be very helpful. The following reactions may also occur:

### **Rejection**

If the found person denies they are the correct person it is possible that your information is incorrect and you need to recheck. It is also possible that they do not want to admit to being the person you are searching for, or they may acknowledge that they are the correct person but that they do not want contact.

Try and leave a telephone number and/or address to contact you should they change their mind. If they will not take a number let them know that they can always contact you through the Adoption Information Service (ensure you leave accurate and up to date contact details with us).

Sometimes an initial rejection changes when the found person has had time to deal with the possible shock of contact.

People who say no are not rejecting you personally as they do not know you but may be responding to their fears of reliving the past. Or, they may be fearful of what they believe the consequences of contact will be.

For example, they may fear their family will reject them if they have contact with you. Whatever their reasons, rejection is painful for anyone and talking about your feelings with a counsellor or a support group can help.

## **Extremes**

A minority of searchers find distressing family circumstances, for example incest, sexual assault, mental health issues, suicide, murder, criminal offences, physical or intellectual disabilities. Even when the truth is distressing people generally agree that it was important to find out. You may find it helpful to discuss your situation with a counsellor or a support group.

## **Attraction**

Searchers can find that they feel a strong attachment to their 'found' relatives. This is normal and natural. Wanting to look at and touch someone, especially someone you are related to by blood, especially as you have not had the opportunity to do so in childhood, is healthy. Attraction does not necessarily equal a sexual attraction or desire.

We are all attracted to activities, hobbies and people in our lives and this attraction is what draws us to spend time engaging in these activities and hobbies or to spend time with family and friends. In the circumstances of reunion, there can be an attraction due to the many days, months or years of thinking about someone and anticipating the reunion. Commonalities of interests or traits can also create a sense of attraction.

For birth parents, meeting a child who looks like their birth mother or father such as the girlfriend or boyfriend they had loved many years ago can trigger some feelings of attraction. If the attraction becomes sexual, a social worker from the Adoption Information Service can help you to work through these feelings.

## **Comparing traits**

Meeting a birth parent is usually the first time adopted people experience the feeling of sharing some physical and emotional traits with someone else in a biological relationship. Adopted people seek answers from their birth parents, birth parents look for traits of themselves in their children and if they have gone on to have other children, how similar they are.

## **Freezing**

What happens if years of anticipation and separation lead to the moment of reunion and the individuals feel frozen and tongue-tied?

This freezing can be relieved by physical activity such as going for a walk or emotional expression such as a hug or a cry.

Admitting the feeling is helpful and can lead to useful conversation. Bringing a photograph album to your meeting can give a focus and generate conversation.

## **Pretending**

A reunion does not have to be perfect – it has to be real. If people pretend they are someone they are not, a good relationship cannot be formed. Relationships are based on trust and honesty, not pretence. It is better to say you are not ready to talk about an issue or a particular area of your life than to pretend or create a false image.

## **Caution**

There is a fear at reunion that if the boat is rocked then a relationship may not be formed or people will not be accepted. In an attempt to exercise caution people may not say what they mean. They may not even know what they want but say something like:

"You have a mother, I don't want to be your mother" (birth mother) or "I don't want anything from you" (adopted person).

It might be better to say "I'm not sure what I want but as we get to know each other it will be clearer for me".

If you realise you are being defensive, acknowledge it and try to correct it. Acknowledging your feelings can help, for example "I feel very confused/defensive/unsure and I need to go slowly."

## **Expectations**

Often searchers do not have a clear picture of their expectations until they have actually met the person. The actual reunion forces people to confront their fantasies. The reality can be disappointing, as the person found will be an ordinary person with good and bad points.

Give yourself time, talk about your expectations and ask the other person about theirs. Often people discover that with time they can accept the good and the bad, and enjoy a satisfying relationship.

## **Importance of names**

Names are important. They are identifying and uniquely personal. It can be difficult for adopted people and birth parents to choose names for each other that are mutually meaningful yet take into account other people's feelings.

First names are most often used but ask the person what they wish to be called. Birth parents may take some time to get used to their child's new name. For many years they may have thought of the child by the name they gave them at birth.

## **A time of change and growth**

A reunion is generally a beginning time, leading to change and growth. Change is exciting and stimulating but can also be frightening.

Forming new relationships takes time and emotional work. A relationship is more likely to continue when the parties can acknowledge and respect each other's feelings.

Adoption does raise issues, which will not always be understood by your family and friends. Several adoption organisations conduct discussion groups where you can meet other people affected by adoption. Finally, all reunions will be different. Some people will go on to have satisfying relationships, others may meet only once or twice.

The vast majority of people who have had a reunion are happy that they did so and find it easier to get on with the rest of their life knowing they have found answers to important questions in their lives.

## **Developing an ongoing relationship after the first meeting**

The first meeting between the two parties often forces people to confront their fantasies. Sometimes the real person is disappointing compared to the fantasy. Try to develop a relationship, which is based on mutual respect, trust and honesty. It is important to work at a slow pace and build the relationship with thought and care. Just because you are biologically related does not mean you will instantly like one another or have a family like relationship.

Take some time to think about a relationship you have with a close family member or friend and how this relationship developed over a period of time. It did not just happen. All relationships require work to continue developing. You may meet your birth relative only occasionally or you may wish to continue to meet regularly. You may meet just once. There is no correct path to take and you and the other party will need to work out what is best for you.

### **What can I do to have a better reunion?**

Take time to get to know the person. Take the time to get to know yourself. Take time to discuss and work out roles and future expectations. Allow yourself the time to absorb and digest this information.

### **What about extended family members?**

Adoption reunions often involve other people as well. Try to be aware that the person you have found probably has to come to terms with explaining the reunion to other family members and friends. Added to this you may find that you now have a whole new family to deal with. This can take a great deal of patience, tolerance and understanding.

### **When the honeymoon is over**

Reunions are about real people. It is a time of great excitement and of growth and change. Some people have likened this phase to being like a honeymoon. That is, when you get home from your honeymoon the real work of marriage begins. Adoption reunions are often like this. Once the excitement of the search and reunion is over and the reality sets in, there may be a period of adjustment. These relationships can also be affected by lifestyle and personality.

### **Getting on with your life**

For a large majority, even those who find out distressing information, the not knowing of the past is over and they can now move on with their lives. Some people involved in adoption have likened adoption to holding their breath. Once the reunion is over and people have information about themselves they can breathe freely, which means getting on with their lives. This can be a liberating experience.

### **Further down the track**

For more information about adoption reunion, you may like to read some of the personal stories recorded in *Further Down the Track*, which can be purchased through the Post Adoption Resource Centre.

# You are not alone

There are many support groups in the ACT and NSW which can help you on your adoption journey

## **Mosaic**

A support group for any person affected by adoption.

Phone: 6231 1554

## **Adoption: Independent Voluntary Support Group**

A new support group (2008) for people affected by adoption - adoptees, birth parents and/or adoptive parents.

Phone: 6258 4420

## **Adoptive Families Association**

A support group for adoptive and permanent care families.

Address: PO Box 1030

Woden ACT 2606

Phone: 6291 4271

Website: [www.adoption.org.au](http://www.adoption.org.au)

## **Post Adoption Resource Centre**

The Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) is a service of The Benevolent Society. It provides information, counselling and a range of other services to anyone affected by adoption throughout NSW and the ACT.

Established in 1991, PARC has responded to more than 50,000 telephone counselling calls and is recognised as a leader in post-adoption work in Australia and overseas. It also has an extensive list of resources and an accessible library.

Address: Level 2

24a Ocean Street,

BONDI NSW 2026

Phone: (02) 9365 3444

Toll free: 1800 024 256

Website: [www.bensoc.asn.au/parc](http://www.bensoc.asn.au/parc)

# Glossary

## **Plan of Adoption**

This term is used to describe the process in which a birth parent or birth family considers the option of adoption for their child.

For those who choose adoption for their child, this is understood to be making a plan of adoption.

## **Post Adoption Resource Centre**

This organisation is also known as PARC. Some professionals and resources may refer to PARC, instead of using the full name.

## **Adoption Information Service**

This service is responsible for providing information, mediation and support to birth families, adoptive families and adoptees, where the adoptee is 18 years and above.

This service sits within the Adoption and Permanent Care Unit and is also known as the AIS. Some professionals and resources may refer to the AIS, instead of using the full name.

## **Post Order Support Service**

This service is responsible for providing information, mediation and support to birth families, adoptive families and adoptees, where the adoptee is under the age of 18 years.

This service sits within the Adoptions and Permanent Care Unit and is also known as POSS. Some professionals and resources may refer to POSS, instead of using the full name.

## Helpful reading

There have been numerous books and articles written about the adoption experience from all points of view. Below is a sample list. Look for others in libraries and bookshops. The Post Adoption Resource Centre also has an extensive library.

### ***Adoption and Recovery***

By Evelyn Robinson, *Clova Publications, 2004.*

### ***Coming Home to Self***

By Nancy Verrier, *Gateway Press, Baltimore, 2004.*

### ***Ever After – Fathers and the Impact of Adoption***

By Gary Coles, *Clova Publications, 2004.*

### ***The Adoption Reunion Handbook***

By Liz Trinder, Julia Feast & David Howe, *John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 2004.*

### ***Adoption Healing for mothers who lost children to Adoption***

By Joe Soll, *Gateway Press, Inc., 2003.*

### ***Further Down the Track***

Compiled by *The NSW Committee on Adoption & Permanent Care, 2001.*

### ***The Colour of Difference***

Compiled by Sarah Armstrong & Petrina Slaytor, *Federation Press for PARC, 2001.*

### ***The Many-Sided Triangle***

By Audrey Marshall & Margaret McDonald, *Melbourne University Press, 2001.*

### ***Adoption and Loss***

By Evelyn Robinson, *Clova Publications, 2000.*

### ***Adoption: The Common Thread***

By Parramatta Holroyd, *Family Support, Australian Print Group, Sydney, 2000.*

### ***Adoption Healing, a path to recovery***

By Joe Soll, *Gateway Press, Inc., 2000.*

### ***The Adoption Triangle***

By Julia Tugendhat, *London, Bloomsbury, 1992.*

### ***Search Aftermath***

By Patricia Sanders and Nancy Sitterly, *NSW Committee on Adoption, 1990.*

### ***Meetings: A New Beginning***

Edited by Alleyne, Jones & Slaytor., *NSW Committee on Adoption, 1987.*