



**ACT**

Government

Community Services

# SEARCHING FOR ADOPTION INFORMATION AND BIRTH RELATIVES

A GUIDE FROM THE FAMILY INFORMATION SERVICE FOR  
PEOPLE CONNECTED WITH ADOPTION IN THE ACT

June 2017



# THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

**The purpose of this guide is to help people in the ACT who are interested in finding information about past adoptions. It will also help those looking to locate and contact people connected to an adoption.**

Specifically, this guide will tell you about:

- > The Family Information Service and adoption registers.
- > Why different people decide to look for information and relatives.
- > What adoption information is available and who can access it.
- > What to consider when searching for information and contacting relatives.
- > How to approach contacting someone connected to your adoption.
- > Building ongoing relationships.
- > The different emotions you can experience through the process.

By providing this information we aim to help those separated through adoption, whether that is to connect with birth relatives or seek closure.

The information provided is intended as a guide only. We would like to thank the relevant government family and community services departments of Western Australia, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia for sharing their resources that assisted in the development of this guide.

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# ADOPTIONS TODAY

**Information and practices surrounding adoption have changed over time, so too have people's views about it.**

In the past, adoptions were shrouded in secrecy and information about the identities of those involved was not shared. Today, adoption practices are open and information about them is accessible from the day an adoption is finalised in court. This information can then be provided to certain people at certain times.

There are many different reasons why someone may want to learn about a past adoption, from wanting to understand their background, seeking to cement their identity, medical reasons and of course to reconnect. Learning about past adoptions, and reconnecting with birth relatives is an emotional and sensitive matter. Each person touched by adoption has a unique story and how they decide to share (or not share) their story and live their life needs to be respected.

In the ACT, Child and Youth Protection Services, within the Community Services Directorate, is responsible for providing adoption services in accordance with the *Adoption Act 1993*. One of these services is the Family Information Service. This service focuses on helping people connected with adoption to access information specific to their situation and to potentially reunite with relatives they have been separated from.

**Adoptions in the ACT are open. This means information about them can be accessed by certain people at certain times.**

# ABOUT THE FAMILY INFORMATION SERVICE

## WHO ARE WE?

The Family Information Service employs professionally qualified specialists who recognise and understand the emotional complexity of adoption. We provide support services to people and their families who have been involved in local, step-parent or intercountry (overseas) adoptions. We are a team within Child and Youth Protection Services.

## WHAT DO WE DO?

Specifically, we can help people connected with adoption to:

- > access identifying and non-identifying information about ACT adoptions
- > register their details on the Reunion Contact and Information Register, which can assist in reuniting people separated through adoption
- > access counselling in relation to adoption issues, as well as referrals to further support services
- > utilise mediation to make contact with another person connected to their adoption
- > access post-adoption support.

The Family Information Service is a free service and can be contacted by:

- > Phone: 6207 1466
- > Email: [adoption@act.gov.au](mailto:adoption@act.gov.au)
- > In person: 11 Moore Street, Canberra City
- > Post: GPO Box 158, Canberra ACT 2601



# MYTHS ABOUT ADOPTION

The stigma that surrounded adoption in the past unfortunately still exists today for some people. Society also perpetuates a number of adoption myths that can cause distress for those connected with adoption.

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## MYTHS ABOUT BIRTH PARENTS

- > Birth mothers can simply forget about the child they placed for adoption and get on with their lives.
- > Birth mothers and fathers did not want or love the child.
- > Birth mothers are morally bad.
- > Birth mothers would not find a suitable husband if people knew they had placed a child for adoption.
- > Birth mothers and fathers would be rejected by the child they placed for adoption if the child were to find out about it.
- > Birth mothers and fathers should leave the past in the past.

## MYTHS ABOUT ADOPTED PEOPLE

- > Adopted people who search for their birth parents do not care about their adoptive parents.
- > Adopted people search for their birth family because their relationship with their adoptive family has broken down.
- > Once adopted people have contact with their birth parents, their relationship with their adoptive parents will be less important.
- > Adopted people who do not search for their birth family are not curious about where they come from.
- > If adopted people have a good adoptive family they will not have concerns about their identity or where they come from.

## 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 raising children.
- > Blood is thicker than water and the relationship between adoptive parents and their adopted child will fade if contact with birth parents happens.
- > Adoptive parents have failed if their adopted child considers searching for their birth family.

These myths do not hold true and the open nature of adoptions today supports this. There are many benefits for those connected to adoptions to know about the other people related to their adoption and the sharing of information about each person provides for these benefits to be realised.



# WHY DO PEOPLE WANT TO FIND OUT ABOUT PAST ADOPTIONS?

There are many reasons why someone may want to learn about a past adoption. For an adopted person, it might be to understand where they come from and their cultural and family heritage. For an adoptive parent, it might be to seek medical information that may relate to their adopted child. For a birth parent, it might be to learn if their child is happy. For all, it might be to connect.

Learning about past adoptions, and connecting with past relatives is an emotional and sensitive matter and each person will come to it differently.

## ADOPTED PEOPLE

Most adopted people have grown up in secure and loving families and are not trying to replace these loved ones by seeking information about their birth families. Often it is because they have a deep desire to know more about where they come from to better understand who they are.

Common reasons why adopted people might seek information include to:

- > learn about their family background, culture and ethnicity
- > find out why they were placed for adoption
- > discover why they look like they do
- > learn about medical conditions and family health problems
- > help understand themselves better
- > link the past with their present and future to form a complete sense of identity, continuity and belonging
- > reunite with relatives.

It is also common for adopted people to want to learn more about their birth family at certain stages in their life, including:

- > late adolescence – all children tend to have strong feelings about their identity and place in the world when they are teenagers, and this can be even stronger for adopted teenagers
- > marriage – marking a new beginning in a person's life, marriage can create thoughts about an unknown earlier life
- > pregnancy – another new beginning, pregnancy often makes adopted people concerned about unknown medical conditions. The arrival of a

new baby can also bring up thoughts of having been relinquished as a baby themselves.

- > onset of a medical condition – doctors often ask patients for a medical history to assist in diagnosis and treatment decisions
- > death of an adoptive parent – the loss of a loved one can create feelings of abandonment or loss linked to having been left as a child by their birth parents
- > middle age – spark concern that birth parents may not live for much longer.

There are also reasons for why some adopted people choose *not* to seek information about their birth family. Often this is because they fear being rejected by their birth parents, or because they do not want to hurt their adoptive parents or seem disloyal.

## BIRTH MOTHERS

For many women in the past, financial hardship, social judgement and lack of support services made raising a child alone a difficult choice. Children born out of marriage and single parenthood were not seen as socially acceptable situations, and a single mother keeping her child was considered selfish. Many of these mothers wanted to keep their children but were pressured by society that adoption was the best thing for their child.

Today, it is understood many birth mothers feel a sense of loss for the child they placed for adoption and can find it difficult to live with no knowledge of how their child's life has turned out.

Common reasons why birth mothers might seek information include to:

- > learn how their child has fared in life and if they are happy

- > explain why they could not raise the child
- > reunite with their child.

Just like adopted people, some birth mothers may be reluctant or anxious to look for their child. This can be from fear of rejection or anger from their child, because they feel guilty and therefore have no right, or because they do not want to hurt or undermine their child's relationship with their adoptive family.

## BIRTH FATHERS

Birth fathers can feel the loss of their child in the same way as birth mothers. For some men, they feel they were left out of the decision and adoption processes, and for some it is also because they were never told a child was born. The number of birth fathers seeking information about their child's adoption has increased as legislation has made adoptions more open.

Common reasons why birth fathers might seek information include to:

- > learn how their child has fared in life and if they are happy
- > reunite with their child.

## BIRTH RELATIVES

In addition to birth parents, there can be other birth family members who decide to seek adoption information. Adoption involves a separation not just from birth parents but also from extended families, and relatives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and even siblings can have a deep desire to learn about or connect with adopted relatives for similar reasons to birth parents.

## ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Adoptive parents can have many reasons for wanting to access information about their child's birth parents and families, including to:

- > help their child further develop their identity by learning about their birth family background and culture
- > answer their child's questions like 'Why was I adopted?' or 'Why do I have red hair'
- > learn about medical conditions and birth family health problems that may impact their child
- > give peace of mind to their child, especially if their child is angry or distressed about their adoption
- > help their child reunite with their birth family
- > share information with the birth parents (this can be particularly important if the child is unwell or has died and they want to let the birth parents know).

Adoptive parents can also be anxious about looking into their child's adoption for fear of losing the bond they have with their child, or because they are worried how their child will cope with the information.

There are many reasons why people decide to look into adoptions, and there are many reasons why some people don't. Regardless of the reason, legislation provides for people connected to an adoption to access certain information and outlines how and when this can happen.



# WHAT INFORMATION IS ACCESSIBLE, AND WHEN AND WHO CAN ACCESS IT?

The *Adoption Act 1993* allows certain people to access information about past adoptions at certain times. The information made available depends on the current age of the adopted person and when they were adopted.

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## WHEN CAN INFORMATION BE ACCESSED?

Information can be accessed at any time, but only information that identifies *who* a person is can be provided when the adopted person is 18 years or older. Until then, only non-identifying information is available.

In some circumstances identifying information can be provided when the adopted person is under 18; however this requires everyone involved to give their permission in writing for their information to be released. The Family Information Service may be able to assist with obtaining these permissions so please contact us to discuss.

## WHO CAN ACCESS INFORMATION?

You can apply for identifying information about an ACT Adoption if you are:

- > the adopted person and are 18 or older
- > the adopted person under 18 years old and have parental permission from your adoptive parents
- > an adoptive parent of the adopted person
- > a birth parent or relative of the adopted person
- > a child or other descendant of the adopted person.

## WHAT INFORMATION WILL BE SHARED?

There are two types of information that can be provided:

- > **Identifying information:** name, age, physical characteristics, general information, education, occupation and relevant medical history. This information can only be shared once the adopted person is 18 years or older.
- > **Non-identifying information:** can be similar to identifying information, such as general background and relevant medical history, but where the person cannot be identified. This information can be shared when the adopted person is under 18 years.

The amount of information provided will vary depending on when the adoption happened. Prior to 1966, the ACT did not keep adoption records and the information for that time is limited. Often only a Memorandum of Adoption is available that states the birth mother's full name at the time of the adoption (rarely are the names of birth fathers included). Since 1966, the amount of information available has increased.

Generally, if the adoption happened after 1966, the Family Information Service can provide:

### **adopted people (and adoptive families)**

with information about their:

- > birth mother and her family\*
- > birth father and his family\*
- > birth name
- > birth details
- > adoption details<sup>†</sup>
- > birth parents' reason for adoption.

**birth parents (and birth families)** with information about the adopted person's:

- > adopted name
- > birth details
- > adoption details
- > adoptive family#.

In most cases we can also provide copies of:

- > medical reports compiled after the adopted person's birth
- > social and medical history forms completed around the time of birth
- > the 'My Story' document given to adoptive families at the time of the adoption, which outlines the history of the birth family
- > the Memorandum of Adoption
- > authorisation to apply for original or amended birth certificates.

*\* Can include name, age, physical characteristics, education, occupation and medical history, if provided at the time of adoption.*

*^ Can include date of adoption, and personal circumstances and reason for adoption.*

*# Can include name, age, existing children, occupation and reason for adopting.*

## CAN INFORMATION BE RESTRICTED?

Yes and no. Information can be accessed by anyone associated with a particular adoption. However, if the adoption occurred prior to 2010 those involved can restrict others from making contact with them after they have received identifying information. If you do not want to be contacted by someone connected to your adoption, and the adoption occurred prior to 2010, you can register a 'contact veto'. See section 'What is the Contact Veto Register?'

## HOW DO I APPLY FOR INFORMATION?

To apply for information, you need to complete an 'Application for Identifying Information' form and supply three types of identification, such as your birth certificate, marriage certificate, driver's licence or Medicare card. If you are providing copies of these documents, they must be certified by a Justice of the Peace. Forms are available from the Family Information Service.

Where possible, we encourage you to contact us at the Family Information Service to organise a time to submit your application in person. This is so we can talk with you about your expectations around the information you will receive, your desire to place your name on the Reunion Contact and Information Register, and your support networks.

## HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO RECEIVE THE INFORMATION?

Usually, it takes around 12 to 16 weeks for us to compile your information. We will contact you when the information is ready and arrange for it to be mailed to you or you can collect it in person.

## IS THERE A COST FOR THE INFORMATION?

No. The Family Information Service is a free service. There is no cost for requesting or receiving information. However, if you choose to receive birth, marriage or death certificates, you will need to pay the cost set by the ACT Registry for Births, Deaths and Marriages.



# WHAT IS THE REUNION CONTACT AND INFORMATION REGISTER?

**The Reunion Contact and Information Register helps people who have been separated by an adoption to make contact with one another. This is a free service.**

## WHO CAN REGISTER?

Adopted people, birth parents, adoptive parents, and birth and adoptive relatives can place their name on the register and even leave a message. This can be done without applying for access to information. Adopted people under 18 can also register if their adoptive parents agree.

In some circumstances, the Family Information Service is allowed to include the names of certain other people on the register. Please contact us if you wish to discuss.

## CAN I LEAVE A MESSAGE?

Yes. Anyone who registers their details can leave a message for another person should a match be made. If you decide to leave a message this will be held by us at the Family Information Service and passed on should the other person also register their details.

Messages can be sealed or unsealed. We will not open any sealed message except at your request or on the request of the other person.

## HOW WILL I KNOW IF SOMEONE IS LOOKING FOR ME?

Once your details are registered, the Family Information Service will conduct a search to see if any match to your information exists on the register. If a match is found, we will contact you and offer help for you to connect with the other person. If the other person has left a message for you on the register, we will let you know at that time.

If a match is made, it is not always possible for contact to happen; the other person may have registered their wishes to *not* be contacted (see 'What is the Contact Veto Register?'). We will always respect the personal wishes and privacy of each person involved, however we may pass on last known names if you are entitled to receive this information under the *Adoption Act 1993*.

## IS THERE A COST INVOLVED?

No. This is a free service and there are no costs involved.

## CAN I UPDATE OR REMOVE MY DETAILS?

Yes. It is your responsibility to keep your registration up to date. If your contact details change, contact us in writing with your new details and we will make the change.

If you would like to add a message or change your wishes for contact please get in touch with us so we can talk with you about sealed and unsealed messages and ensure your privacy is maintained.

Your details will remain on the register unless you specifically request, in writing, for them to be removed.

## HOW DO I REGISTER MY DETAILS?

To be added to the register you need to complete an 'Application for Reunion Contact and Information Register' form and send to:

- > Email: [adoptions@act.gov.au](mailto:adoptions@act.gov.au)
- > Post: GPO Box 158, Canberra ACT 2601

Forms are available from the Family Information Service using the contact details above.



# WHAT IS THE CONTACT VETO REGISTER?

**While today adoption information is more readily accessible, there are generations of people who always believed their adoption would remain secret. Prior to 2010, people connected to an adoption could register a 'contact veto' to protect their privacy and these are still enforceable today.**

## WHAT IS A CONTACT VETO?

A contact veto outlines your wishes *not* to be contacted by another person connected to your adoption. It can be applied to all connected people or a selection. It can also be indefinite or for a specified time. In making a contact veto, you can include a message outlining the reasons for not wanting to be contacted. This message is provided when someone requests information about you.

A contact veto does not stop people from receiving information about you, but does stop them from being allowed to make contact.

Anyone who requests information about you is required to attend a counselling session and sign a legally binding declaration stating they will not attempt contact. Only after these things have happened will your identifying information be provided to them. If any person does try to make contact, legal action can be taken.

In most cases contact vetos are respected, particularly if you leave a message explaining your reasons for not wanting to be contacted, along with some information about your present circumstances.

Contact vetos only apply to adoptions that occurred prior to 22 April 2010.

## WHO CAN REGISTER A CONTACT VETO?

You can register a contact veto if the adoption happened before 22 April 2010 and 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.

A parent can also register a veto for a child if they are under 18 years old. When the child turns 18, they will need to register a new veto on their own behalf.

## HOW LONG DOES A CONTACT VETO LAST?

If you register a contact veto it will remain in place until you request in writing for it to be removed. Requests are to be made to the Family Information Service.

## HOW DO I KNOW IF SOMEONE HAS REGISTERED A CONTACT VETO?

If you request information about someone who has registered a contact veto that applies to you, we will contact you to let you know and discuss what you can do.

The contact veto will not stop you from receiving information about the other person; it will only stop you from being allowed to make contact with them.

Before information that identifies the person is given to you, you will need to attend a counselling session and sign a legally binding declaration stating you will not attempt contact. If you breach the contact veto, legal action can be taken.

## CAN SOMEONE ELSE MAKE CONTACT ON MY BEHALF?

No. The veto means you cannot make contact in any way, including getting someone else to make, or attempt to make, contact with the person who registered the veto.

## HOW DO I REGISTER A CONTACT VETO?

To register a contact veto you need to complete an 'Application for contact veto' form and supply three types of identification such as birth certificate, marriage certificate, driver's licence or Medicare card. If you are providing copies of these documents, they must be certified by a Justice of the Peace.

Completed forms are to be sent to:

- > Email: [adoptions@act.gov.au](mailto:adoptions@act.gov.au)
- > Post: GPO Box 158, Canberra ACT 2601

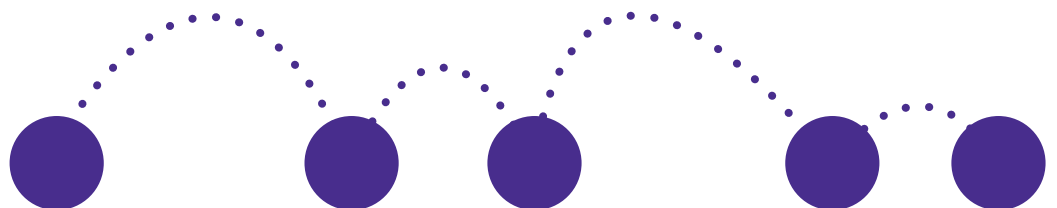
Forms are available from the Family Information Service using the contact details above.

## I'VE DECIDED TO START LOOKING. WHERE DO I START? WHAT DO I DO?

If you have decided to look for information about a past adoption there are a number of things you can do to help this process.

### BASIC STEPS

- 1.** Contact us at the Family and Information Service to apply for identifying information we have on file and discuss the process in more detail. Remember, the amount and type of information available will depend on when the adoption happened.
- 2.** Consider registering your details on the Reunion Contact and Information Register.
- 3.** Apply to receive relevant certificates (such as birth certificates) from the ACT Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. These can provide information such as birth names, ages, occupations, birthplaces and addresses at a particular time. To apply, you will need to get 'authorisation' from the Family Information Service first. Speak to us about this when you apply for identifying information. If the adopted person was not born in the ACT you will need to contact the relevant state registry (see Appendix 1 for more information).
- 4.** Use the information you received from us and any relevant certificates and search public records to find more information and locate contact details. This can include electoral rolls, contact directories and ancestry websites (see 'Conduct your own search').
- 5.** Throughout the process consider what support you will need and how you will get it. Also consider if you will tell your family and friends about your decision to search (see 'Telling others about your decision to search').



## CONDUCT YOUR OWN SEARCH

Searching public records can lead you to finding contact details for the person you are looking for. Some places to search include:

- > federal electoral rolls – these are updated every six months and are held by the Electoral Commission Office. Older rolls are available from the National Library of Australia
- > telephone directories – current and old directories are held at post offices and public libraries
- > ancestry websites – there are various online services that can help trace your family history
- > social media – easily accessible social media can help you locate someone, however social media is not recommended to then make your first contact (see ‘How to make contact’).
- > trade, professional and union directories – these can be helpful if you know the occupation of the person you are looking for
- > baptismal records – usually held in parish records, you will need to speak with the religious denomination concerned.

Some people also have success searching old birth notices, newspapers, school magazines, or engaging private detectives or historical societies for help.

## TELLING OTHERS ABOUT YOUR DECISION TO SEARCH

Deciding to look for birth relatives can be a hard thing. So too can telling your loved ones about it. Only you can make the decision whether to let others know about your search or not, and it is something to think carefully about.

Sometimes people think telling their families about their decision to look for birth relatives may hurt them because they may see the search as there being a problem in their own relationship. Or they may be afraid loved ones will be angry or not understand, particularly if they did not already know about the adoption.

Family and friends can provide emotional support and even help you search. It is also likely you will experience many different emotions during your search, both good and bad. Being able to talk through these emotions or have others understand why you are feeling the way you do is important. Having support around you through the process can be very helpful.

If telling loved ones about your search is difficult for you, the Family Information Service can work with you and provide counselling services to assist.

## ADOPTION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN

In the past many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were placed with non-Aboriginal families as a result of government policies separating them from their families and communities. These policies and practices have caused considerable distress to many Aboriginal people. Also, accurate record keeping of such ‘adoptions’ is often limited, making the process of finding birth relatives difficult.

If you are searching for an Aboriginal birth relative, we recommend contacting Link-Up NSW ([www.linkupnsw.org.au](http://www.linkupnsw.org.au) or free call 1800 624 332) who can support and assist with family reunions. If through your search you find contact details for an Aboriginal relative, we also recommend using an Aboriginal mediator if you decide to make contact.

It is also possible during your search to discover you have Aboriginal ancestry. If this is the case, there are Aboriginal counsellors available to help you explore this.

## ADOPTION OF CHILDREN BORN OVERSEAS

Since the early 1970s, many Australian families have adopted children from other countries. In the ACT, people adopted from overseas have the same rights to access their adoption records.

If you are connected with an overseas adoption, we can help put you in touch with the relevant overseas authority. The process of searching for birth relatives will however be affected by the adoption laws of the specific country involved. Some countries have closed adoption records while others are more open. The majority of overseas authorities provide assistance with searching, contact and reunions, and welcome enquiries from people adopted from that country. It is strongly recommended that you seek advice from the overseas authority before attempting to make contact with any birth relative you find.

The Family Information Service can also provide you with a searching booklet relevant to your specific country. You might also like to contact the Australia for Children Society who can provide help and support.

## TIPS: THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU SEARCH

The process of searching can be both exciting and scary at the same time. It can also be a long process. Being as prepared as you can for what the outcomes of your search may be is important. So, before you start searching take some time to think about these questions:

- > What do you want to achieve? A reunion? Identifying information only? Satisfying your curiosity? Addressing other factors in your life?
- > What are your hopes and fears?
- > Have you thought about what the other person's experience of adoption may have been like?

- > Have you considered all the possible outcomes – the good and bad?
- > Are you prepared for the discovery that the person you are looking for has died, and how you might cope with that?
- > Are you prepared to be sensitive to the other person's feelings, to try to understand them and respect their wishes and situation?
- > Will you tell your family and loved ones? What might be the implications for you and them?
- > Do you have a support network to help you or have you considered professional help?



## MAKING CONTACT FOR THE FIRST TIME

Once you have completed your search and found contact details for the birth relative you are looking for it is time to think about how you might contact them for the first time. Such a conversation is likely to be unexpected for the other person so it is important to approach it sensitively.

### OPTIONS FOR MAKING FIRST CONTACT

There are three options for making first contact:

- > ask the Family Information Service to make the contact
- > use a professional mediator
- > make the contact yourself.

The **Family Information Service** can contact the other person on your behalf. We have expert knowledge of adoption issues and will be able to support and guide you through the process. Asking us to make contact is free and confidential.

You can also use a **professional mediator** to make contact on your behalf. You can choose to exchange letters and/or photos with each other via the mediator before exchanging your personal contact details.

You can also decide to **make contact yourself**. If you do decide to do this, it is important to think about how the other person may react and what you can do to ease the situation. Put yourself in their place and consider what would help you.

It is also important, wherever possible, for contact to be made directly with the birth parent or adopted person. Those around them may not know about the adoption and their confidentiality should be respected. If you are unsure if the person you intend to contact is in fact the person you are looking for, tread lightly and consider saying something like 'I am tracing my family history and would like some information to see if our families are connected somehow'. It is recommended that you don't use a friend or other relative to make contact as they may not understand all the issues involved and give adequate opportunity for the other person to make a considered decision about contact with you.



## ADVANTAGES OF USING A PROFESSIONAL INTERMEDIARY

Contacting someone involved in your adoption is an extremely delicate matter. Using a professional intermediary, like the Family Information Service or a mediator, to make the first contact on your behalf can be helpful, especially if you:

- > are unsure about the other person's views about being contacted
- > are unsure if the person you found is actually the birth relative you are looking for
- > feel too nervous to effectively explain who you are and why you want to make contact
- > are concerned about being rejected and how you might cope with being told directly that your contact is not welcome
- > want to maintain anonymity and make discreet inquiries before committing to contact
- > want professional support to discuss your situation and for the other person to have the same opportunity.

## HOW TO MAKE CONTACT

While there are many ways we can communicate today – in person, over the phone, through email and letters, SMS, social media and more – we recommend writing a letter to make your first contact.

A **letter** is less threatening to the other person and gives them time to think about how they want to respond and to work through their own feelings. Being put on the spot over the phone or in person can be a shock, even if they too have been searching, and their immediate reaction may not be a true reflection of their real feelings about you. Likewise using social media can be problematic as privacy can be more challenging.

In writing a letter you won't receive an immediate response so you do need to be patient. Try to wait a month before writing another letter and consider sending it by registered mail to give you peace of mind that it has been received.

The Family Information Service is here to help and can give you advice on making your first contact. We can also help you prepare a non-identifying letter if you are unsure whether you have the correct person and address. The Post Adoption Support Centre NSW website also has an example of a letter you could use as a starting point – simply follow the links through 'Search and Reunion' (see You are not alone: Support is available).

## DELIVERING UPSETTING INFORMATION

Sadly, you might be searching for someone because you have upsetting information you want to share with them. For example, an adoptive parent may search for a birth parent to tell them their child has died or is suffering a serious illness.

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

It may be helpful to talk to a social worker in the Family Information Service or another support service before making contact. It is often beneficial to use an experienced adoption intermediary who can provide the information and support to everyone involved.

It is also important to realise that in looking for a birth relative you could be the recipient of upsetting information. This is another reason why having support around you can be invaluable throughout the process.

## TIPS: THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE MAKING CONTACT

For many people connected to an adoption, having an unknown relative come into their life suddenly can be a shock. Before making contact for the first time here are a few things to keep in mind that could help you achieve a more positive outcome:

- > Keep an open mind and be prepared for the unexpected. You may need to compromise, accept difference or deal with a reality you did not imagine.
- > Contact should be discreet, tactful and confidential, and wherever possible made directly with the adopted person or birth parent.
- > Mutual respect, agreement and acceptance is vital.
- > While you may have been thinking about making contact for some time, the other person may not have, so contact should proceed at their pace.
- > Be sensitive to the other person's situation and feelings. They may have kept your adoption secret, or not even know about it.
- > Contact can be a rollercoaster of emotions. Do you have a support network to help you or have you considered professional help?

# ONGOING CONTACT

Once you have made initial contact with the other person and you both want to go ahead with future contact, it is up to each of you to decide how that happens. Some people exchange letters and photos first, while others are happy to meet in person.

Contact should happen at a pace everyone is comfortable with. Remember, you may have been searching – or thinking about it – for months or years and feel ready to jump straight in. However, for the other person contact may come as a shock and they may need to proceed a little slower.

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



## IDEAS FOR BUILDING CONTACT

### LETTERS AND PHOTOS

Many people exchange letters and photos to begin contact and may do this for some time before meeting in person. This can be a good way for you to get to know one another in a less threatening way, while at the same time gaining important information about each other as well as a sense of expectations regarding contact.

This is also a good way for you to give your birth relative time to gather their thoughts and feelings and to tell other members of their family about you before deciding to meet.

At the Family Information Service, we can mediate the exchange of letters and photos until you are both comfortable about exchanging your personal addresses or phone numbers.

### PHONE CALLS

Some people have difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings in a letter and 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 still in the process of getting to know one another.

Phone conversations provide you a more immediate response to letters and allows you to more quickly learn about each other and how you both feel 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 exchanging letters and photos instead.

### EMAIL

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

Email also allows you to learn more about each

other and exchange photos while maintaining some level of privacy until you are ready to exchange your personal addresses and phone numbers.

The Family Information Service can also mediate emails for you. You can choose to send your email to us first for feedback, or to copy us in to your emails until both you and your birth relative feel ready to email directly and without support from us.

## MEETING IN PERSON FOR THE FIRST TIME

Meeting someone connected to your adoption can be a major event in your life. You may have exchanged letters or emails, talked on the phone, communicated once or sometimes for years, and now you both decide it's time to meet. So, what do you need to consider when deciding about your first meeting?

### WHERE WILL THE MEETING HAPPEN?

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 you both 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 AT THE FIRST MEETING?

While having a support person may seem like a good idea, often it is best to meet alone. This meeting has been long awaited and should be enjoyed by you and your birth relative alone.

Your first meeting can often be overwhelming, and even more so if there are too many people, so you might like to think about meeting other family members later on. You might also want someone to drive you to the meeting and pick you up so you can de-brief afterwards and let your adrenalin subside.

### 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. This will give you both enough time to manage your initial emotions and start to feel comfortable with each other. Extra long first meetings tend to be more emotionally draining and often people say they do not remember a lot of what was said.

## HOW WILL 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. Everyone is different and it is important to acknowledge how you are feeling and to be clear with the other person about your wishes for future contact. Misunderstandings can easily happen at this point as it will be an emotionally charged time for you both.

After your first meeting you may feel:

- > happiness and joy at the outcome of the meeting
- > an instant connection to the other person and be able to get along easily with them
- > a limited connection or a feeling of rejection. It may be because the other person is not well prepared to meet you, or they may have spent years trying to forget the adoption that they are unable to deal with the meeting. Others still may feel settled in their current lives and do not want to put that at risk. You may discover you have little in common apart from your adoption.
- > shocked, unsure or confused, about information you learn during the meeting
- > surprised by finding someone you look like, or expected to look like – often during the first meeting you will compare yourselves with one another
- > a strong desire to touch, talk, share and spend a lot of time together.

## BUILDING AN ONGOING RELATIONSHIP

The first meeting you have will often force you to confront any fantasy you have about the other person and what it would be like to meet them. Sometimes the real person is not what you imagined, or even disappointing.

Good relationships are based on mutual respect, trust and honesty and take time to build. Just because you are biologically related does not mean you will instantly like one another or have a family-like relationship. All relationships require work to continue to develop.

It may be that you decide to meet your birth relative only occasionally or you might meet regularly. You might meet just once and decide future contact is not right for you. There is no correct path to take and you and your birth relative must decide what works best for you both.

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO HAVE A BETTER REUNION?**

Take time to get to know the other person, and yourself. Discuss and work out roles and future expectations, and give yourself the time to absorb and digest this information.

## **WHAT ABOUT EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS?**

Adoption reunions often involve other people as well. Remember the person you find will likely need to explain your reunion to other family members and friends, and this may not be easy for them.

You may also find you now have a whole new family to have in your life. This can be exciting, but can also require 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 think of reunions like being 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 reality sets in, there may be a period of adjustment as personalities and lifestyles become more prominent. Remember all relationships require constant work.

For more information about adoption reunions, 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 (see 'Further reading').

## **WHAT IF ONGOING CONTACT ISN'T POSSIBLE?**

It is not possible to know how a birth relative may respond to you contacting them. The hope is that a positive reunion is possible, but this is not always the case.

For most people, even those who find out distressing information, the not knowing of their past is over and they can now move on and focus on their future. Some people describe it as having held their breath for so long and now, after finding information about themselves, can breathe freely. Regardless of the outcome of your search or contact, this can be a liberating experience.

# FEELINGS AND REACTIONS YOU MAY EXPERIENCE DURING YOUR SEARCH

Searching for birth relatives and potentially meeting them involves a rollercoaster of emotions. These can be felt by you, the person you are looking for, as well as extended families and friends. While it is easy to hope your journey will only involve positive emotions such as excitement, happiness and joy, it is likely it will also involve other emotions and reactions that can be more confronting.

Some of the emotions and reactions you may face include:

- > **Rejection:** this can happen if the person you want to connect with doesn't want to have contact, denies they are the person you are looking for, or even because your information is wrong and they are in fact not the correct person. If this happens try to leave your contact details with them should they change their mind, or let them know you can be contacted through the Family Information Service (make sure your details remain up-to-date with us). Rejection can also be felt by extended family if they feel their relationship with you suffers because of your new relationship with your birth relative.
- > **Expectations:** It can be common not to have a clear picture of your expectations until you actually meet the other person. The actual meeting forces you to confront your fantasies and discover the reality of the person you have been imagining. Like you, they will have good and bad points and it can take time to accept these to then enjoy a satisfying relationship.
- > **Pretending:** A reunion does not have to be perfect – it must be real. If you pretend you are someone you 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 an area of your life than to pretend or create a false image.
- > **Caution:** When reuniting with a birth relative you might hold back in fear of saying the wrong thing or not being accepted by them. This is normal. Acknowledge how you feel and let them know you need time to feel comfortable and open-up.
- > **Disappointment or frustration:** Once the initial excitement of meeting a new family member eases, you may experience disappointment or frustration as you learn more about each other as you may



have different lifestyles, values, likes and habits. It is not unusual for it to take several years to form a comfortable relationship. Honesty, patience and flexibility can prevent misunderstandings and enhance relationships.

- > **Attraction:** You may develop a strong attachment to your birth relative. This is normal and natural. Wanting to look at and touch someone, especially someone you are related to by blood who you did not have the opportunity to know as a child, is healthy. Attraction does not necessarily equal a sexual attraction or desire; however, this can also happen. Counsellors are available to help work through such feelings.
- > **Importance of names:** Names are important. They are identifying and uniquely personal. It is possible that the name you knew your relative by is not what they now use. It is best to be open and to ask each other how you want to be referred to.

- > **Shock, disgust, embarrassment:** While not common, it is possible to discover distressing family circumstances, such as incest, sexual assault, mental health issues, suicide, murder, criminal offences, or physical or intellectual disabilities. People can react differently ranging from shock and disgust to embarrassment. Even when the truth is distressing people generally agree it was important to find out.
- > **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. Adoption does raise issues, which will not always be understood by your family and friends, and both new and existing relationships will require work. Every adoption is unique and so too are the reunions. You may develop a long-term, satisfying relationship, or you might meet only once or twice. Regardless, most people who have a reunion are happy that they did so and find it easier to move on with their life knowing they have found answers to important questions about themselves.

Remember, searching and contact affects not just you and your birth relative, but also your extended families and friends. Through your search you may discover spouses, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. You also have your own family and friends who will be affected. Each of these people will have their own views and fears as your journey progresses and at times their feelings may be different to yours.

Throughout the process, there are professional services and counselling that can help you and others involved to understand and manage the emotions being experienced.



# YOU ARE NOT ALONE. SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

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## SUPPORT SERVICES

There are many support groups that can help you on your adoption journey.

### **FAMILY INFORMATION SERVICE**

We are a free service here to help you with accessing information about past adoptions and reuniting with relatives.

- > P: 02 6207 1466
- > E: [adoptions@act.gov.au](mailto:adoptions@act.gov.au)
- > W: [www.communityservices.act.gov.au/adoptions](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/adoptions)

### **ADOPTIVE FAMILIES ASSOCIATION (ACT)**

A supportive community of adoptive parents and children providing friendship, information, advice and informal education on all aspects of adoption and adoptive parenting. There are also some country-specific support groups who organise culturally specific events.

- > E: [info@adoption.org.au](mailto:info@adoption.org.au)
- > W: [www.adoption.org.au](http://www.adoption.org.au)

### **POST ADOPTION RESOURCE CENTRE**

A service of The Benevolent Society, it provides information, counselling and a range of services to anyone affected by adoption throughout NSW and the ACT. It is recognised as a leader in post-adoption work in Australia and overseas and has an extensive list of accessible resources.

- > P: 1800 024 256
- > E: [parc@bensoc.org.au](mailto:parc@bensoc.org.au)
- > W: [www.bensoc.asn.au/parc](http://www.bensoc.asn.au/parc)

### **LINK-UP NSW**

Supports all Aboriginal people directly affected by past forced removals from family and culture, including services such as reunification.

- > P: 1800 624 332
- > E: [linkup@nsw.link-up.org.au](mailto:linkup@nsw.link-up.org.au)
- > W: [linkupnsw.org.au](http://linkupnsw.org.au)

### **RELATIONSHIPS AUSTRALIA – FORCED ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICE**

A free, national service offering people advice and support on issues relating to forced adoption, including record tracing and connecting people with local networks.

- > P: 1800 21 03 13
- > W: [www.relationshipsnsw.org.au](http://www.relationshipsnsw.org.au)

### **INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE AUSTRALIA**

Provides social work, legal and mediation services to families and children across international borders, including family tracing and reunification.

- > P: 1300 657 843
- > E: [iss@iss.org.au](mailto:iss@iss.org.au)
- > W: [www.iss.org.au](http://www.iss.org.au)



## FURTHER 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*, Evelyn Robinson, Clova Publications, 2004.
- > *Coming Home to Self*, by Nancy Verrier, Gateway Press, Baltimore. 2004.
- > *Ever After – Fathers and the Impact of Adoption*, Gary Coles, Clova Publications, 2004.
- > *The Adoption Reunion Handbook*, Liz Trinder, Julia Feast & David Howe, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 2004.
- > *Adoption Healing for mothers who lost children to Adoption*, Joe Soll, Gateway Press, Inc., 2003.
- > *Further Down the Track*, The NSW Committee on Adoption & Permanent Care, 2001.
- > *The Colour of Difference*, Sarah Armstrong & Petrina Slaytor, Federation Press for PARC, 2001.
- > *The Many-Sided Triangle*, Audrey Marshall & Margaret McDonald, Melbourne University Press, 2001.
- > *Adoption and Loss*, Evelyn Robinson, Clova Publications, 2000.
- > *Adoption: The Common Thread*, Parramatta Holroyd, Family Support, Australian Print Group, Sydney, 2000.
- > *Adoption Healing, a path to recovery*, Joe Soll, Gateway Press, Inc., 2000.
- > *The Adoption Triangle*, Julia Tugendhat, London, Bloomsbury, 1992.
- > *Search Aftermath*, Patricia Sanders and Nancy Sitterly, NSW Committee on Adoption, 1990.
- > *Meetings: A New Beginning*, Alleyne, Jones & Slaytor, NSW Committee on Adoption, 1987.

# APPENDIX 1: STATE REGISTRY CONTACT DETAILS

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Access to birth, death or marriage certificates vary across Australian states and territories, so too do adoption laws. You will need to contact the relevant registry specific to where the event happened, for example where the adopted person was born, or where the birth parent was married.

To access ACT birth certificates, you **first** need authorisation from the Family Information Service. If the person you are looking for was not born in the ACT you will need to contact the relevant state registry to check if the ACT authority will be sufficient.

## **Australian Capital Territory**

Family Information Service:

- > (02) 6207 1466
- > [www.communityservices.act.gov.au/adoptions](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/adoptions)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > (02) 6207 0460
- > [www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au](http://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au)

## **New South Wales**

Adoption Information Service:

- > 1300 799 023
- > [www.community.nsw.gov.au](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > 1300 655 236
- > [www.bdm.nsw.gov.au](http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au)

## **Northern Territory**

Family and Children's Services Darwin:

- > (08) 8922 7460
- > [www.nt.gov.au/health/comm\\_svs/facs/adoptions](http://www.nt.gov.au/health/comm_svs/facs/adoptions)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > (08) 8999 6119
- > [www.nt.gov.au/justice/bdm](http://www.nt.gov.au/justice/bdm)

## **Queensland**

Adoption Services:

- > 1800 647 983
- > [www.childsaftey.qld.gov.au/adoption](http://www.childsaftey.qld.gov.au/adoption)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > (07) 3247 9203
- > [www.justice.qld.gov.au/16.tm](http://www.justice.qld.gov.au/16.tm)

## **South Australia**

Adoption and Family Information Service:

- > (08) 8207 0060
- > [www.adoptions.sa.gov.au](http://www.adoptions.sa.gov.au)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > (08) 8204 9599
- > [www.ocba.sa.gov.au/bdm](http://www.ocba.sa.gov.au/bdm)

## **Tasmania**

Adoption and Information Service:

- > (03) 6222 7373
- > [www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/adoption](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/adoption)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > (03) 6233 3795
- > [www.justice.tas.gov.au/bdm](http://www.justice.tas.gov.au/bdm)

## **Victoria**

Family Records Service:

- > 1300 769 923
- > [www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au](http://www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > 1300 369 367
- > [www.justice.vic.gov.au](http://www.justice.vic.gov.au)

## **Western Australia**

Adoption Service:

- > [www.community.wa.gov.au](http://www.community.wa.gov.au)

Births, Deaths and Marriages:

- > (08) 9264 1555
- > [www.justice.wa.gov.au](http://www.justice.wa.gov.au)

## APPENDIX 2: COMMON QUESTIONS

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### SHOULD I CONTACT THE ADOPTIVE PARENTS FIRST TO GAIN THEIR PERMISSION TO CONTACT THE ADOPTED PERSON?

The adopted person is now an adult and should be given the opportunity to decide for themselves if they wish to have contact with you.

If you have concerns that they may not know they are adopted contact the Family Information Service and we can make an approach on your behalf.

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

### I FOUND A PHONE NUMBER. SHOULD I PHONE THEM?

A phone 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 phone 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.

### I FOUND THEM ON SOCIAL MEDIA. SHOULD I MESSAGE THEM?

While using social media may give an immediate response, we do not recommend using it to make initial contact. This is because it is important to be mindful and respectful of people's privacy. The change in adoption practices could mean relatives of the person you intend to contact do not know adoption is part of their history. This is why we need to approach any contact carefully and thoughtfully.

We strongly encourage writing a letter to make your first contact, as this is less threatening and gives people time to think about their response and to work through their own feelings

Once communication has been established the use of social media may be part of naturally building your relationship, but again consider the privacy of others and whether a private message would be more appropriate.

