

Searching for Birth Relatives: Adoption Packet 3

This packet is provided for birth parents, adopted persons, and others interested in learning more about the process of searching for birth relatives. Contents include:

- Searching for Birth Relatives
- The Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons
- The Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents
- The Impact of Adoption on Adoptive Parents

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Searching for Birth Relatives



Changes in recent years have influenced the field of adoption and the way adopted people, birth parents (also called first parents), adoptive parents searching on behalf of their children, and other birth relatives search for one another. New legislation in some States permits more access to birth information, and efforts to open adoption records are in process in many others.

What's Inside:

- The Decision to Search
- Steps in the Search Process
- Hiring a Professional Searcher
- International Searching
- Social Media and Searching
- Reunion Issues
- Conclusion
- Additional Resources

The vast body of information available through the Internet can make accessing public records easier, which can make some aspects of the search process faster. With the advent of social networking, people are connecting in new ways, and this is impacting the way searchers are finding and reuniting with one another. Although statistics are not yet available to document the number of adopted people, adoptive parents, and birth parents who find each other through these sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is a growing trend, with the potential to lead to more openness in adoption in the future.

The purpose of this factsheet is to provide some guidance on the adoption search process and information access, as well as resources for further help in conducting a successful birth family search and, if desired, reunion. This factsheet is designed to address the concerns of both adult adopted people who are searching for birth parents, siblings, or other birth relatives, as well as birth parents (both mothers and fathers) who want to locate a child who was adopted. It can also help adoptive parents who wish to locate information on the birth family of their child or adolescent. While not a complete “how to” guide to searching, this factsheet provides information on:

- The decision to search
- Steps in the search process
- Hiring a professional searcher (versus doing it yourself or using a grassroots group)
- International searching
- Social media and searching

- Reunion issues
- Conclusion
- Additional resources

The Decision to Search

Adults who were adopted as infants or young children are the most common group of people searching for adoption information and birth relatives. This group most often searches for birth mothers first (Muller & Perry, 2001) but may later seek out birth fathers, siblings, or other birth relatives. An event in the life of an adopted person, for instance, the birth of a child or death of an adoptive parent, may trigger the actual search (American Adoption Congress, 2007).

Other groups that search include birth parents searching for children placed for adoption years earlier and a growing number of adoptive parents who search in order to know more about their adoptive children’s background or medical history (Freundlich, 2001). Additionally, siblings separated by adoption may have a strong desire to find each other and reconnect.

The question of why an adopted person, birth parent, or adoptive parent searches for birth relatives has as many answers as there are searchers. Some of the more common reasons include the following:

- **General family information.** Searchers may want to know the names of their birth relatives, where they live, whether they have birth siblings, and what they are like. Birth parents may want to know

whether their birth children are alive and have been happy and well treated.

- **Family traits and personalities.** Many adopted people and birth parents want to know how their birth relatives look and act and whether they share similar traits.
- **Medical history information.** Information on genetic diseases and conditions can be crucial for safeguarding an adopted person's own health and the health of his or her biological children.¹
- **Circumstances of the adoption.** Often, adopted people feel a need to know why they were placed for adoption or why the rights of the birth parent were terminated and how that decision was made. Birth parents may want the opportunity to explain the circumstances to their child.
- **Establish connections for adopted children.** Some adoptive parents wish to find and reunite with their child's birth family to preserve these connections for their children until they are old enough to maintain a relationship on their own, if desired. Adoptive parents may also contact birth relatives to help their children with specific issues of grief and loss and to reassure birth relatives that their child is doing well.

Understanding the Difference Between Search and Reunion

It is often assumed that birth family searches automatically involve a reunion. In fact, ambivalence about a possible reunion has

¹ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services launched the Surgeon General's Family Health History initiative to encourage all Americans to learn more about their family health history: <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory>

sometimes deterred people from searching. Many professionals believe that it is a basic human right to search and learn about oneself. The reunion however, is not a right, but a privilege. All people have a right to their own boundaries and to decline if they do not want to have a relationship or even a reunion.

Steps in the Search Process¹

Every search is unique in its unfolding, but there are a number of steps and resources common to most searches. This section of the factsheet addresses the steps in the search process, including:

1. Emotional preparation
 2. Assembling known information
 3. Researching relevant State laws
 4. Registering with reunion registries
 5. Obtaining missing documents
 6. Filing court petitions
- 1. Emotional preparation.** Preparing emotionally and psychologically for the search process is an important first step for both adopted people and birth parents. Such preparation may include reading about other adopted people's or birth parents' search and reunion experiences and talking to others who are going through or have gone through the same process. Support groups for adopted people or for birth parents or adoptive parents who are searching can be extremely helpful, not only in providing

emotional support, but also in sharing practical information.

For a State-by-State listing of search support groups, see Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>

Gathering emotional support from family and friends also can be helpful. Adopted people may be reluctant to share their decision to search with their adoptive parents for fear of hurting their feelings. However, in many cases adoptive parents can be an enormous source of support, as well as a source of information. Adoptive parents may take some comfort from knowing that an adopted person's decision to search usually has nothing to do with dissatisfaction with the adoptive parents (Grand & Bryne, 2009). Understanding that the decision to search is generally not about the adoptive parents may offer reassurance to concerned adoptive family members.

The search process may trigger a number of different emotions at different stages for the searcher. At certain stages, some searchers may feel that they need more emotional or moral support than they are receiving from family, friends, and support groups. In these situations, they may want to talk to a professional counselor. Searchers who seek professional counseling will want to ensure that the counselor is familiar with adoption issues and competent to support all parties in the search process.

(See Information Gateway's *Selecting and Working With an Adoption Therapist*: http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm)

- 2. Assembling known information.** Once a decision has been made to search, the first step involves gathering all known and easily obtainable information. For adopted people, this may mean talking to adoptive parents to find out the name of the adoption agency, attorney, or facilitator involved in the adoption. It also means pulling together all readily available documents, such as the amended birth certificate, hospital records, and any other information, no matter how unimportant it may seem at the time.

Issued after an adoption is finalized, an amended birth certificate lists the names of the adoptive parents as if the adopted person had been born to them.

Birth, death, marriage, divorce, school, church, genealogy, health, military, motor vehicle, and property records related to the birth kin all have potential usefulness for leading to a name and location of a birth parent or birth child. It may be helpful to organize and record all information in a central place for easy reference.

- 3. Researching relevant State laws.** Searchers may want to become informed about State laws regarding adoption and records access in the State(s) in which they were born and adopted, keeping in

mind that some State laws vary according to the applicable years.

Access to information about State laws as well as which States offer reunion registries can be found in *Access to Adoption Records* on Information Gateway's website: http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm

4. Registering with reunion registries.

A number of States, as well as private organizations, offer reunion registries that allow adopted people and birth parents to register the fact that they are searching for each other. Most of these reunion registries are “passive,” meaning that both parties (e.g., the adopted person and the birth mother) must independently register in order for a match to be made. When both parties register at the same passive registry (also called mutual consent registries) and a match is made, registry officials share the mutual information and help to arrange for contact. Passive registries do not actively search for the other party.

The largest passive registry is the International Soundex Reunion Registry (<http://www.isrr.org>). This free service is open to all adopted adults over 18 years of age, all birth parents, and all adoptive parents of adopted children under 18 years of age. Because this useful resource is not widely advertised, people may not know about the service it provides, but registering with the ISRR is generally

recognized as a good place to start a birth relative search.

There is also a number of “active” registries that charge fees to actually go out and search for the birth relative. Some of these are State registries that will initiate a search for a fee. Others are maintained by private search and support groups.

There are few reliable statistics on the success rate of these registries; however, as expected, passive registries tend to show a much lower match rate than active registries. One study of passive State registries found an average success rate of less than 5 percent in 1998, with only two States showing double-digit success rates (Mitchell, Nast, Busharis, & Hasegawa, 1999). Recent data provided by Illinois's passive registry reveals a match rate of 7 percent (Illinois Department of Public Health, 2010).

5. **Obtaining missing documents.** The searcher may want to attempt to acquire some of the missing documents that could help with the search. There are many types of documents that may lead to locating a birth parent or child or provide a breakthrough to this information. *Shea's Search Series* includes two articles with specific advice for compiling documents: *Initiating a Search* (<http://www.bastards.org/search/init.html>) and *Documents: What They Are, Where They Are, What They Mean, and How To Get Them* (<http://www.bastards.org/search/docu.html>).

The following is a list of potentially helpful documents:

- **Adoption agency records**—If the name of the adoption agency is known, the searcher can request nonidentifying information or even records. Experts recommend that the searcher supply a waiver of confidentiality to the agency, so that information about the searcher can be provided to the birth child or birth parent, if that individual also contacts the agency.
- **Birth records**—Most adopted people will not have their original birth certificate but will have, instead, an amended document listing their adoptive parents' names as their parents by birth. However, there are a few States that allow adopted adults to have access to their original birth certificate, which provides the names of the adopted person's birth parent(s). In other States, the original birth certificate may be available if the adopted person petitions the court. (See Information Gateway's *Access to Adoption Records* for State-specific information regarding obtaining an original birth certificate: http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm)
- **Hospital records**—Hospital records, when they can be obtained, may provide information on the birth mother, birth father, attending physician, and incidental health information. Adopted people generally need to know their birth name, as well as the hospital's name and location. If

the searcher has difficulty obtaining these records, a request made by a doctor may have a better chance for success.

- **Court adoption file**—The court adoption records consist of a number of documents, including the:
 - Original, unaltered birth certificate
 - Petition to adopt
 - Finalization papers or final decree
 - Consent to adopt from birth parent(s)
 - Relinquishment papers, or orders terminating parental rights
 - Any agency or attorney papers, including information about birth parents

Many of these documents may also be available elsewhere. For instance, the attorney or law firm that handled the adoption may be able to supply a copy of the final court order. A request may also be made to the court. Often, identifying information will be blacked out of the court-supplied document; however, there may be some remaining clues that are helpful. The final adoption papers should provide the name of the attorney, judge, and agency involved in the proceedings. This information may lead to discovering other useful clues.

- **Other court records**—While most or all of the court records may be officially sealed, in some cases a searcher may be able to view the court's Docket Appearance Book,

a daily record of who appeared in court and why on a particular day (Culligan, 1996). Some court dockets may be accessible through free, online public records database searches. Also, local newspapers from the time of the adoption may carry a notice of the filing of the Petition to Adopt in the classified section. This normally includes the name of the adoptive parent(s), as well as the birth name of the child/infant and the name of the social worker assigned to the case (Culligan, 1996).

- **Other types of records**—Other potentially useful records may include physician records, newspapers (for birth announcements), cemetery and mortuary records, probate records, Social Security information, records of military service, school records (including yearbooks), marriage licenses, divorce or annulment papers, records from religious institutions (e.g., baptismal certificates), motor vehicle documents, and death certificates.

There are many databases and websites that are available to the general public (both fee-based and free) on the Internet. Emergency Medical Search Locators provides an extensive list of these resources at <http://adoption-free-search.org/state.htm> (the left menu of the site provides links to many other helpful sites, including adoption-related links, State tax and property websites, and more).

6. **Filing a court petition.** If none of the above has been successful, adopted people may petition the court to have

the sealed adoption records opened. Whether this is successful may depend on the State, the particular judge, the reason given for the request, and any number of other factors. Petitioning the court does not require an attorney's services, but a petitioner may choose to hire an attorney.

Depending on State laws and the discretion of the judge, he or she may agree to release only nonidentifying information (which should be available by asking any agency) or a summary of information, or the judge may deny the petition completely. In some States, the judge may appoint an intermediary, such as the original adoption agency or a professional searcher, to locate the birth parents and determine whether or not they want to release information or be reunited with the adopted person. In other cases, the petitioner may be able to request the appointment of a confidential intermediary who will conduct a search (for a fee) and determine if the birth parents are willing to be contacted.

Following these steps may lead the searcher to enough identifying information to locate birth relatives. In cases in which the search seems to be leading nowhere, the searcher may want to review information or begin to research such things as alternative spellings of names or places. In some cases, information may have been falsified, making it difficult or impossible to continue the search without new information.

Additional resources to aid in the search process are provided in the Searching for Birth Relatives section of Information Gateway's website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search/searching.cfm>

Hiring a Professional Searcher

Adopted persons or birth parents searching for birth relatives have the option of hiring a professional searcher. Individuals who choose to hire a professional searcher should research the reputation of the searcher or company. Searchers may have a variety of backgrounds and training:

- Some searchers have a certification from Independent Search Consultants (<http://www.iscsearch.com>), a nonprofit organization that trains in adoption searching.
- Other searchers may be licensed as private investigators by a particular locality and may or may not have adoption search experience.
- Other professional searchers may be experts in a particular locality or a particular field but may not have a certification.

Support groups and online forums can be a ready source of information about professional searchers. Reputable professional searchers will always respect

the pacing and boundaries established by the person who has hired them. These professionals will not move beyond search into reunion unless this step is requested by the searching adopted person or birth relative.

In some cases, a court or agency may refuse to open sealed records or provide full information in response to a petition or request; however, the court or agency may appoint a professional searcher. In such cases, this professional searcher serves as an intermediary whose job is to locate and contact the birth parents (or birth child) and to find out whether they want to have their name and address revealed and whether they want to resume contact. The professional is given access to sealed records, but the petitioner (who generally receives no access to records) pays the fee of the professional searcher. If nothing is found, or if the found person refuses to release information or agree to contact, there is generally no recourse (except that the adopted person or birth parent can continue to search on his or her own).

In addition to these fee-based search services, there is a growing community of volunteers called "search angels" who will conduct adoption searches free of charge. Search angels are individuals with experience conducting searches for birth relatives, not private detectives or paid professional searchers. Adoption search blogs, social networking sites, search support groups, and other online forums are places where search angels or recommendations for such help can be found. See this article on search angels for more information: <http://reunion.adoption.com/adoption-records/search-angels.html>

International Searching

In the past, intercountry adoptions were almost exclusively closed, and it was believed that there was little to no possibility of locating and reuniting with birth parents. Although in many cases it is still quite difficult to locate birth relatives abroad, searching internationally has been more common since the 1990s. Many of the resources discussing international birth parent search are targeted toward adoptive parents searching for their child's birth relatives, but some of the tips for adoptive parents are also relevant to adult adopted people. Country-specific articles, blogs, and support groups may be the best sources of information for those interested in beginning an international search. An online search for information addressing the unique issues and tips relevant to the birth country may help point international searchers in the right direction to get started.

People who were adopted from outside the United States (through intercountry adoptions) face unique challenges in locating birth parents for a number of reasons:

- Each country has its own laws governing information access.
- Language barriers can complicate communication.
- Cultural attitudes and laws regarding unwed mothers, child abandonment, and other issues may influence the willingness and ability of birth family members to

reunite or maintain a relationship with people who have been adopted.

- Record-keeping practices vary greatly across countries and cultures. In many cases, searchers will find that no information was ever recorded, that records were misplaced, or that cultural practices placed little emphasis on accurate record-keeping.

In a very few cases, it may actually be easier to gain access to an original birth certificate in a foreign country than in the United States, since some countries do not seal their vital records.

The child-placing agency may be the best beginning point for an international search. The U.S. agency should be able to share the name and location of the agency or orphanage abroad and, perhaps, the names of caregivers, attorneys, or others involved in the placement or adoption. The agency, or its counterpart abroad, may be able to provide specific information on names, dates, and places. It also may be able to offer some medical history, biographical information on parents, and circumstances regarding the adoption. Some agencies provide search services abroad, in partnership with overseas child placing agencies. After getting in touch with the agency, cultivating a relationship with a contact in the birth country is often the next step for international searchers. Building relationships can take time, but can be the best link to finding the crucial pieces of information necessary to move forward with a successful search.

In some countries, those searching for birth relatives report meeting some success with hiring a professional searcher in

that country to conduct the search. It is important that professionals helping with the search are knowledgeable and sensitive and kind when contacting birth relatives. Translators should also be schooled in the complexity of adoption and should be caring in their translations for both sides. Checking references and investigating the background of any potential candidates before making payments or providing any personal information is vital to ensuring the searcher is a reputable professional.

Some other resources for international searchers include the following:

- Adopted people seeking documents (such as a birth certificate) that the U.S. or foreign child-placing agency is not able to provide may want to apply to government agencies in the birth country. Mailing addresses of offices of vital records in foreign countries can be found on the U.S. State Department website: http://travel.state.gov/visa/fees/fees_3272.html
- Searchers adopted from another country can submit a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (<http://uscis.gov/graphics/index.htm>) to receive copies of their immigration records (Click on About Us, then select Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIA) in the left menu to find instructions for how to submit a FOIA request).
- An international agency that may offer help is International Social Services, which provides a broad range of social work services, including helping those who were adopted find birth families abroad. See the Tracings section of the

U.S. branch website: <http://www.iss-usa.org/site.asp?PageId=3&SubId=9>

- Support groups for adopted persons from particular countries may be able to offer help and information on searching. Countries that have placed a large number of children with families in the United States, such as Korea, have support groups and organizations with websites and search information. (See the Additional Resources on page 15 of this factsheet.)
- Blogs by adopted people and adoptive parents who have conducted successful birth parent searches can be a source of country-specific information and ideas.

In general, searching overseas is more difficult than searching in the United States. In cases in which the search for the birth parent is unsuccessful, some adopted people may derive some satisfaction from visiting their birth country and experiencing their birth culture. Some agencies and support groups organize homeland tours for adopted people and adoptive families. These tours generally provide an introduction to the country and culture. Visiting the birth country for the first time as part of such a group may provide searchers with some emotional security because the people in the tour group are often looking for answers to similar questions. (The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory lists groups that offer homeland tours: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>)

Social Media and Searching

“Social media” refers to forms of communication that use the Internet, including social networking sites, text messaging, blogs, podcasts, and RSS feeds. As of March 2011, there were over 200 active social media sites (Fitch, 2011), and this number will likely continue to grow. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace allow people to connect to each other by inviting others to join their network or become their “friend,” making it easier to find people and reconnect. With over 500 million active users on Facebook alone (Facebook, 2011), social networking sites can be useful tools to those involved in a birth relative search. Although there is no research documenting the number of adopted people, birth parents, and birth relatives who have reunited through social networking sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that birth family members who have been separated by adoption are finding each other through Facebook and other social media channels. This section addresses the benefits and considerations of using social media when searching.²

² The considerations and tips provided in this factsheet are designed for adults (age 18 and older) who are searching for other adults. Considerations for adoptive parents of children under 18 are reviewed extensively in *Facing up to Facebook: A Survival Guide for Adoptive Families* by Eileen Fursland (2010). Birth parents are encouraged to discuss the implications of using social networking sites to search for and reunite with a child who is under 18 with a social worker, counselor, or other professional before proceeding with a search.

Benefits of Social Media in Search and Reunion

Social networking sites and other forms of social media can be powerful tools to bring people together. It can be beneficial to use social media in searching because:

- It is free to join sites like Facebook, so searching for birth relatives through these channels can be done free of charge and without the intervention of a professional intermediary.
- If the person being sought is a member of a social networking site and uses their real name on the site (rather than a pseudonym or alternate spelling), it can be possible to find birth relatives very quickly. Sometimes searching social networking sites can end in a successful connection when other methods have failed. Facebook answers some general questions about using its search feature to find people at <https://www.facebook.com/help/?page=762#!/help/?page=762#!/help/?faq=13320&tq>
- Social networking sites offer a way to bridge distances and maintain a relationship without the need for travel and expense. Many of these sites are international.
- Depending on privacy settings, it can be possible to view and access another person’s entire network of connections or “friends.” Through this network, it can be possible to connect with multiple birth family members. Some searchers have been reunited with birth fathers, siblings, and others through social networking sites.

- Some people may prefer the relative distance that is afforded through online interaction to the intensity of face-to-face contact.

Considerations When Using Social Media for Searching

Due to the complex nature of adoption, some professionals suggest that part of the preparation process may include thinking through the implications of contacting a birth relative before using these tools to connect.

Considerations when using social media sites to search for and contact birth relatives include:

- **Pacing of contact.** Research suggests that reunions are more likely to be successful in the long term when initial contact is made gradually (Affleck & Steed, 2001). The nature of communication through social media sites and online tools like instant messaging create situations where contact proceeds very quickly and can evolve into an intense relationship before all parties are ready (Fursland, 2010).
- **Making contact.** Instant conversations initiated through social media sites and other online tools can bring up issues that either party is not prepared to face right away (Fursland, 2010). Reuniting with birth relatives can bring new information that requires time to process before responding. Instant messaging does not allow time for well-thought-out responses. See Making Contact (http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/making_contact.pdf) for guidance on what to say when reaching out for the first time.
- **Privacy.** Privacy can be a concern, particularly when using social media sites with ever-changing privacy policies. Do not assume that any communication on social networking sites is private. Comments made on someone's Facebook page on their "wall" may be visible to their entire network—or yours—depending on privacy settings. Even with high privacy settings, communications can be forwarded to others and shared in other ways. Facebook profiles also appear in search results on Google and other search engines. There are many sources that address protecting privacy while online. See the articles included in the Additional Resources section on page 15 for more information.
- **Safety.** As with any online activity, keep safety in mind. People are not always honest on the Internet. Be aware that sometimes people are not who they say they are.
- **Posting pictures.** Photos of birth relatives can hold special significance to adopted people who may not have had a previous connection with a relative who looks like them. Before posting photos on the Internet, educate yourself about geotagging. Some photos taken with smartphones may be embedded with a geotag that reveals the latitude and longitude of the location where the photo was taken. This geotag can be accessible to the public when the photo is posted online. More information about geotagging and the steps to disable this feature on smartphones is available in About Geotagging: <http://icanstalku.com/how.php#geotagging>

See the Additional Resources section on page 15 for specific sites that can assist in the search process.

Reunion Issues

Some, but not all, successful searches will end in a reunion between the adopted person and birth relative. Reunions of long-lost birth family members have been the subject of books, articles, and television shows. Two important themes emerge from these accounts:

1. Emotional preparation before the reunion experience is beneficial.

Adopted people and birth parents may carry a picture in their mind of the perfect family, but the reunion experience may not live up to that ideal. In preparing for contact and reunion, adopted people (and birth parents) should prepare for a whole range of realities, including rejection. Although most birth parents are agreeable to further contact, research indicates that a minority, around 7 percent in one recent study, reject any contact (Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005). Additionally, a recent analysis of data from four States that have implemented legislation allowing adopted adults access to their original birth certificate revealed a very low rate of birth parents requesting no contact (.05 percent) (New Jersey Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education, 2009).

2. Pacing the contact can be key to having a successful reunion and relationship.

In a small study of adopted women who experienced reunions with

birth kin (Affleck & Steed, 2001), it was found that successful reunion experiences were associated with (1) preparation with a support group and (2) a slower pace between initial contact and actual meeting, involving letters and phone calls. This interval between contact and meeting allowed information to be exchanged and gave the “found” relatives some time to become accustomed to the idea. Such an interval can also give the found relatives time to share the news with spouses and children in their family, if they desire. Some reunited birth relatives suggest letting the person who did not search lead the pace of contact. This may help establish boundaries as the found person processes the experience of reuniting.

Some factors that may increase the possibility of a successful longer term relationship include (Muller & Perry, 2001):

- The establishment of limits regarding each others’ lives
- Support from adoptive parents
- Minimal expectations
- Similar lifestyles and temperaments
- Acceptance by other family members

In many cases, a successful reunion with a birth mother may prompt the adopted adult to continue the search process for the birth father. Meeting with birth siblings also may occur, and each reunion experience requires preparation and time to evolve.

Conclusion

Each search for a birth relative is guided by a unique set of circumstances. The outcome is uncertain and, even when the birth relative is located, the reunion experience does not always turn out as expected. Nonetheless, many adopted people and birth parents have conducted successful searches and built successful relationships with their

new-found relatives. For those who are just beginning the search, the best preparation may be finding out about the search experiences of others. To that end, a list of resources has been included on page 15.

Suggested Citation:

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Additional Resources

Books and Articles

- Askin, J. (1998). *Search: A handbook for adoptees and birthparents, 3rd edition*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Ayers-Lopez, S. J., Henney, S. M., McRoy, R. G., Hanna, M. D., & Grotevant, H. D. (2008). Openness in adoption and the impact on birth mother plans for search and reunion. *Families in Society*, 89(4), 551-561.
- Bailey, J. J., & Giddens, L. N. (2001). *The adoption reunion survival guide: Preparing yourself for the search, reunion, and beyond*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- Byrne, M. (2000-2001). Search and reunion etiquette: The guide Miss Manners never wrote. *American Adoption Congress* (Winter/Spring), 11-13. Retrieved from http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/search_byrne_article.php

- Cox, S. S.-K. (2001). *Considerations for international search*. Retrieved from <http://www.holtintl.org/reunionsearcharticle.html>
- Howard, J., Smith, S., & Deoudes, G. (2010). *For the records II: An examination of the history and impact of adult adoptee access to original birth certificates*. New York, NY: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Retrieved from http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/7_14_2010_ForTheRecordsII.pdf
- Jacobs, D., Ponte, I. C., & Wang, L. K. (Eds.). (2011). *From home to homeland: What adoptive families need to know before making a return trip to China*. St. Paul, MN: Yeong and Yeong Book Company.
- Liedtke, J. (2010). Finding birth parents. *Adoption Today*, 13(2), 18-19.
- Lifton, B. J. (2009). *Lost and found: The adoption experience, 3rd edition*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Pavao, J. (2011). Facing Facebook. *Fostering Families Today*, (March/April).
- Schooler, J., & Norris, B. (2002). *Journeys after adoption: Understanding lifelong issues*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Strauss, J. A. (1994). *Birthright: The guide to search and reunion for adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Websites

Resources for beginning the search:

- Adoptees Have Answers: Search and Reunion at <http://www.aha.mn/resources/search-reunion>
- The ALMA Society (Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association) at <http://www.almasociety.org>
- American Adoption Congress's Beginner's Search Checklist at http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/beginners_search_checklist.php
- International Soundex Reunion Registry at <http://www.isrr.org>
- Family Search Internet Genealogy Service (sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) at <http://www.familysearch.org>
- Online Guide to Adoption Search and Reunion at <http://reunion.adoption.com/adoption-records/search-reunion-ebook.html>

Resources for international searches:

- Adopted Vietnamese International Search Guide at <http://www.adoptedvietnamese.org/searching/roots-tracing-guide>
- Columbian Adoptees Search and Support at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ColombianAdopteeSearchandSupport>
- International Social Services at <http://www.iss-usa.org>
- Korean Adoptee Adoptive Family Network at <http://www.kaanet.com>
- Find Families in Mexico at <http://www.FindFamiliesInMexico.com>
- Searching for Birth Parents—How It Can Be Done at <http://research-china.blogspot.com/2007/12/searching-for-birthparents-how-can-it.html>

Resources for social media and search:

- Facebook's Data Use Policy at <http://www.facebook.com/about/privacy>
- Facebook Security Best Practices at <http://www.sophos.com/en-us/security-news-trends/best-practices/facebook.aspx>
- Get Safe Online at http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=1132
- How to Disable Photo Tagging in Facebook at <http://internet-safety.yoursphere.com/2011/04/how-to-disable-photo-tagging-in-facebook.html#tp>
- List of social networking websites at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites
- Risk Reduction Strategies on Facebook at <http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2010/11/08/risk-reduction-strategies-on-facebook.html>
- Social Networking Privacy at <http://epic.org/privacy/socialnet>
- Social Networking Website Reviews at <http://social-networking-websites-review.toptenreviews.com>

Resources on reunion:

- Planning and Approaching a Reunion at <http://www.adoptionmattersnw.org/pdf/Planning%20and%20Approaching%20a%20Reunion.pdf>
- Writing to a Birth Mother at <http://www.bensoc.org.au/uploads/documents/writing-to-birthmother-nov20061.pdf>

Resources on State adoption laws:

- Adoption & Child Welfare Lawsite at <http://www.adoptionchildwelfarelaw.org>
- American Adoption Congress at <http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/state.php>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway at http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/adoption
- State Adoption Disclosure Laws at a Glance at <http://www.bastards.org/activism/access.htm>



Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

FACTSHEET
FOR FAMILIES

September 2004

Disponible en español
[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/
impactoadoptadas.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactoadoptadas.cfm)

Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons



As discussion of the adoption process becomes more open and accepted in American society, and as more Americans have experience with adoption, there is also more attention focused on those involved in adoption—the adopted person, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents (often referred to as the adoption triad or, more recently, the adoption constellation). People who have experienced adoption firsthand are coming forward

What's Inside:

- Adoption issues
- Managing adoption issues
- Resources

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Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



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to talk or write about their experiences, and researchers are conducting scientific studies to find out about the impact of adoption on all members of the adoption triad.

This factsheet examines the impact of adoption on adopted persons who have reached adulthood. While it is difficult to make sweeping statements about such a large and diverse group as adopted persons, it can be said that adopted persons generally lead lives that are no different from the lives of nonadopted persons; however, they have experiences that are unique to being adopted, and these experiences may have an impact on their lives at various times.

There are several themes that emerge from both the personal accounts of adopted persons and from the studies of academic researchers. This factsheet addresses these themes, which include loss, the development of identity and self-esteem, interest in genetic information, and managing adoption issues.

- The **Adoption Issues** section looks at some of the issues that adopted persons may face, including developmental and emotional issues and the need for genetic or medical information.
- **Managing Adoption Issues** reviews some of the ways that adopted persons handle adoption-related issues.
- **Resources** for adopted persons includes books, articles, websites, and more.

Adoption Issues

Loss and Grief

The loss of the birth parents as a result of adoption sets the stage for the feelings of loss and abandonment that many adopted persons may experience at some point in their lives. Even those who are adopted as newborns at times experience a loss of the early bond to the mother, although this loss may not become apparent until the child is older and able to understand the consequences. In the book *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, authors Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Marantz (1992) suggest that dealing with the loss of the birth parents, coupled with a search for self, are two processes that can contribute to shaping the psychological development of adopted persons. These authors outline developmental tasks that an adopted person should address at each stage of life in order to make a healthy adaptation and to cope with the feelings of loss and the search for self.

Loss, as well as feelings of rejection and abandonment by the birth parents, are frequent themes throughout the books and articles written by adopted persons about their experiences. Adopted persons, as children and as adults, may wonder why they were placed for adoption or what was “wrong” with them that caused their birth parents to give them up. Grief is a common reaction to the loss of the birth parents, and grieving may begin when the child is old enough to understand what being adopted means. Young children who are able to comprehend that they have gained adoptive

parents are also able to understand that they have lost birth parents, and comprehension of this loss may trigger grief. The adopted child or adult may have a difficult time finding an outlet for this grief, since grieving for birth parents is not a reaction that society acknowledges. If the adoptive family is a generally happy one, the adopted child or adult may even feel guilty for grieving.

Along with grief and guilt, the adopted person may react to the loss through the normal feelings of anger, numbness, depression, anxiety, or fear. These feelings may occur during childhood and adolescence, as well as during later points in life, especially during emotionally charged milestones, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a parent. In addition, new losses may trigger memories of the loss of the birth parents. For instance, some adopted persons who face divorce or death of a spouse may find the experience especially difficult, because this new loss reawakens the old fears of abandonment and loss. Adopted persons who experience feelings of loss or abandonment during adulthood may or may not recognize a connection between their current feelings and their old feelings about the initial loss of the birth parents.

Adopted persons may also suffer secondary losses. For instance, along with the loss of birth mother and birth father, the adopted person may experience the loss of brothers and sisters, as well as grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. There may be a loss of cultural connection or language (in cases of intercountry or transracial adoption). For those who were adopted as older children, there may be a loss of siblings, friends, pets, foster families, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings. All of these losses

may trigger grief and may require some outlet or some form of resolution.

Identity Development and Self-Esteem

Adopted persons' questions about identity often occur first during adolescence. The task of identity development during adolescence is often more difficult for the adopted teenager because of the additional adoption issues. The adopted adolescent's identity development includes questions about the biological family, why he or she was placed for adoption, what became of the birth parents, whether the adolescent resembles the birth parents in looks or in other characteristics, and where the adolescent "belongs" in terms of education, social class, culture, peer group, and more. The question of the influence of nature (inherited traits) versus nurture (acquired traits) may become very real to the adopted adolescent, who is trying to determine the impact of all of these influences on his or her own identity.

Identity issues may continue into adulthood. The birth of a child to an adopted person may bring up some of these issues, as the new parent may experience a biological connection to a family member for the first time. For this person, there is now someone who "looks like me." This new connection may cause the adopted adult to revisit earlier issues of identity. The new parent may also be prompted to think about what his or her birth mother experienced in giving birth and what the birth mother and father may have experienced in making the decision to place the child for adoption. Adopted adults who become new parents may be sympathetic to the difficulties of their birth parents, or they may wonder

how their birth parents could ever have placed them for adoption.

Accompanying these issues of identity are issues of self-esteem—that is, how the adopted person feels about him or herself. A number of studies have found that, while adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in most ways, they often score lower on measures of self-esteem and self-confidence (Borders, Penny & Portnoy, 2000; Sharma, McGue & Benson, 1996). This result may reflect the fact that some adopted persons may view themselves as different, out-of-place, unwelcome, or rejected. Some of these feelings may result from the initial loss of birth parents and from growing up away from birth parents, siblings, and extended family members; some may also result from an ongoing feeling of being different from nonadopted people who do know about their genetic background and birth family and may be more secure about their own identity as a result.

Genetic Information

Adopted persons often lack genetic and medical history, as well as other family information. A routine visit to the doctor's office, where the adopted person is asked to supply medical history information, may make adopted persons acutely aware of how they differ from those who were not adopted. Those who find out only later in life that they were adopted as infants are sometimes put at risk by their long-held assumption of a family medical history that they later find is completely incorrect.

When an adopted person plans to get married or become a parent, the need for genetic information may become more

important. Adopted persons have different questions about the child they will produce, such as what the child will look like, and if the child will inherit any genetic disorders that were unknown to the adopted person.

In many cases, nonidentifying information, such as medical history, may be placed in the adoption file by the birth parents or agency at the time of the adoption. Adoption agencies or attorneys may allow adopted persons to have access to this nonidentifying information. In some States, adopted persons can petition a judge to have their adoption records opened, and some judges will agree to do so in order to provide urgently needed medical information. (See the Information Gateway legal factsheet *Access to Family Information by Adopted Persons* at www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm). However, obtaining access to information provided by the birth parents at the time of the adoption may not be sufficient to provide a full medical history. It is more useful if birth parents, over the years, have updated the file that is kept with the adoption agency or attorney. In that way, an adopted person may learn if a birth parent or grandparent later developed a genetic disease or condition.

Managing Adoption Issues

Research shows that most adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in their adult adjustment (see research papers by Kelly, Towner-Thyrum, Rigby, & Martin; Borders, Penny, & Portnoy; Feigelman; and

Smyer, Gatz, Simi, & Pedersen). However, there is also significant research, along with the personal accounts of adopted persons, that suggest that many adopted persons struggle with issues of loss, identity, and self-esteem. There are a number of ways that adopted persons manage these issues.

- **Support Groups.** Many adopted persons are helped by support groups where they can talk about their feelings with others who have similar experiences. The support group may provide a long-needed outlet for any lingering feelings of loss or grief. Adopted persons may also find support for new losses that occur during their adult years. In addition, support groups may provide help for the adopted person with the decision of whether to search for birth relatives or other issues. Listings of support groups by State may be found in Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.
- **Counseling.** Some adopted persons may need more help than they find from family and friends or through a support group. In these instances, adopted persons may seek professional counseling. It is important to identify a counselor who has experience with adoption issues. Sometimes, the original adoption agency may be able to provide a referral. Also, support groups may have experience with local counselors and be able to make a recommendation. The Information Gateway website carries a factsheet, *Tips on Selecting an Adoption Therapist*, that can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/r_tips.cfm.

- **Education.** For many adopted persons, reading about the experiences of others can be a helpful coping mechanism. Knowing that there are others who have gone through similar experiences can provide reassurance that these feelings and experiences are normal. A growing number of books and websites deal with adoption, and the adopted person who has the time to seek these out should be able to find stories and information about people with similar experiences. These may include information about persons adopted domestically as infants or as older children from foster care or persons adopted from another country.
- **Searching.** More and more adopted persons are acting on their desire to search for their birth families. This is reflected in the number of websites and books about searching and even in the change in some State laws that regulate access to adoption records. Reports of adoption reunions are mixed; some lead to happy new relationships, and some do not. Regardless of the result, most searchers report that they are content to have found the truth about themselves and that the truth has filled a void for them.

The searching process actually encompasses a number of steps, from making the decision to search for birth parents or other birth kin, to conducting the search, and, if successful, arranging the reunion and establishing a postreunion relationship with birth family members. The decision to initiate a search is a personal one, and many adopted persons never search. For those who do, the decision may be triggered by a life event, or it may be the culmination of many years of unanswered

questions. The search process itself can be stressful and time consuming; however, the rewards can be great when it results in a reunion that is desired by both parties. Adopted persons who are interested in searching should refer to the Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm).

- Searchers will find that there is no Federal law that governs whether an adopted person can access information about birth parents, the adoption, or an original birth certificate. Instead, access to adoption information is regulated completely by the laws of the State in which the adop-

tion took place, and these State laws vary dramatically. Information about access to birth family information and documents can be found in the Information Gateway legal factsheet *Access to Family Information by Adopted Persons* (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm); a search about access can be conducted on a State-by-State basis at the Information Gateway website at www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/search/index.cfm. Support groups for adopted persons may also be a good source of practical information about searching.

Resources

The following list of resources is designed to be a starting point for adopted adults who are interested in further information about the impact of adoption. The resources include books and articles by members of the adoption triad, studies by researchers, and websites. A brief description of each resource is included.

Books

Brodzinsky, D. M., & Schechter, M. D. (Eds.). (1990). *The psychology of adoption*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

The various chapters of this book are written by leading researchers in the field of adoption, and they cover such topics as theoretical perspectives on adoption adjustment, outcomes in adoption, identity formation, interracial adoption, family therapy, social policy, and open adoption.

Brodzinsky, M. Schechter, M. D., & Henig, R. M. (1992). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

This book outlines developmental tasks at each of seven stages throughout the life of an adopted person.

Eldridge, S. (2003). *Twenty life-transforming choices adoptees need to make*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press.

The author, a reunited adopted person, interviewed 70 adopted persons for this book, which addresses some of the hard questions that adopted persons face, and offers advice about taking control through making choices.

- Freundlich, M. (2001). *The impact of adoption on members of the triad. Volume 3 in the Adoption and Ethics Series*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
This volume examines impact on all members of the adoption triad; for adopted persons, the topics of adjustment and well-being for children and adolescents, identity formation, and search and reunion are addressed.
- Lifton, B. J. (1998). *Lost and found: The adoption experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
The author draws upon her experience as an adopted person and upon her work with all members of the adoption triad to explore the psychological issues faced by adopted people before, during, and after their search for their birth family.
- Pavao, J. M. (1998). *The family of adoption*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
The author, an adopted person and an adoption therapist, describes the developmental stages and challenges for adopted people, and includes real-life examples to illustrate these stages.
- Rosenberg, E. B. (1992). *The adoption life cycle: The children and their families through the years*. New York, NY: Free Press.
Written by a clinical professor in psychiatry, this book draws on case examples to show how the different members of the adoption triad influence each other and to describe developmental tasks for those in the adoption circle.
- Schaefer, C. (1991). *The other mother: A true story*. New York, NY: Soho Press, Inc.
The author tells her story of being a birth mother and of later searching for and finding her son.
- Schooler, J. (1995). *Searching for a past: The adopted adult's unique process of finding identity*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press.
This book was written by an adoption coordinator and discusses the emotional and psychological issues that adopted persons face in the different phases of searching for birth parents.

Articles

- Borders, L. D., Penny, J. M., & Portnoy, F. (2000). Adult adoptees and their friends: Current functioning and psychosocial well-being. *Family Relations*, 49, 407-418.
The authors of this study found more similarities than differences when they compared 100 middle-aged persons who had been adopted as adults with 70 nonadopted adults.
- Feigelman, W. (1997). Adopted adults: Comparisons with persons raised in conventional families. *Marriage and Family Review*, 25(3/4), 199-223.
This research article compared adult behavior patterns of 101 adopted persons with those of 3,949 adults raised in broken families and 6,258 adults raised with both biological parents. Results showed that adopted persons resembled nonadopted persons raised in intact families on most measures; however, adopted persons did have a higher incidence of adolescent identity crisis issues.

- Grotevant, H. D., Dunbar, N., Kohler, J. K., & Lash Esau, A. M. (2000). Adoptive identity: How contexts within and beyond the family shape developmental pathways. *Family Relations*, 49, 379-387.
This paper discusses the development of the adoptive identity in terms of the intrapsychic component, family environment, and contexts beyond the family; implications for practitioners are included.
- Kelly, M. M., Towner-Thyrum, E., Rigby, A., & Martin, B. (1998). Adjustment and identity formation in adopted and nonadopted young adults: Contributions of family environment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 68(3), 497-500.
Adopted college students were compared with nonadopted college students on measures of adjustment and identity formation, and the two groups were found to be largely similar.
- Lifton, B. J. (2001). Shared identity issues for adoptees. In V. Groza & K. F. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Clinical and practice issues in adoption: Bridging the gap between adoptees placed as infants and as older children*, (pp. 37-48). Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
The author discusses the identity issues common to children adopted as infants, those adopted as older children, and those adopted from a foreign country.
- Sharma, A. R., McGue, M. K., & Benson, P. L. (1996). The emotional and behavioral adjustment of United States adopted adolescents: Part I. An overview. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18(1/2), 83-100.
In a comparison of adjustment and family functioning in over 4,000 adopted adolescents and over 4,000 nonadopted adolescents, small but significant differences were found between the groups, with one finding showing lower self-confidence and optimism in adopted persons.
- Silverstein, D. N., & Kaplan, S. (1988). Lifelong issues in adoption. In L. Coleman, K. Tolbor, H. Hornby, & C. Boggis (Eds.), *Working with older adoptees* (pp. 45-53). Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine. Retrieved April 23, 2004, from http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong_issues_in_adoption.html
The authors describe seven issues that all members of the adoption triad must address.
- Smyer, M. A., Gatz, M., Simi, N. L., & Pedersen, N. L. (1998). Childhood adoption: Long-term effects in adulthood. *Psychiatry*, 61, 191-205.
Researchers studied adult outcome variables in 60 pairs of twins who had been separated as infants or children, so that one was raised in the biological family and one was raised in an adoptive family; results emphasize the impact of socioeconomic status on adult outcomes, such that adopted adults were better educated but also showed greater psychological distress.

Support Groups

Child Welfare Information Gateway compiles the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, which lists support groups on a State-by-State basis. Go to www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.

Websites and Other Resources

American Adoption Congress: www.americanadoptioncongress.org

The American Adoption Congress (AAC) is an international network of individuals and organizations committed to adoption reform. Through education and advocacy, they promote honesty, openness, and respect for family connections in adoption, foster care, and assisted reproduction. Membership is open to adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals, and all others who share a commitment to the AAC's goals.

Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov

Information Gateway offers information on all aspects of adoption for professionals, policymakers, and the general public. Information Gateway develops and maintains a computerized database of books, journal articles, and other materials on adoption and related topics, conducts database searches, publishes materials on adoption, and gives referrals to related services and experts in the field. Information Gateway also maintains a database of experts knowledgeable in various areas of adoption practice.

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: www.adoptioninstitute.org

The Adoption Institute seeks to improve the quality of information about adoption, to enhance the understanding and perceptions about adoption, and to advance adoption policy and practice.

Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network: <http://www.kaanet.com>

This organization links adopted persons, adoptive families, and other Korean-Americans, providing resources, a newsletter, and a conference.

Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project: <http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/>

This site provides research findings from this major study of variations in openness in adoption and the effect of openness on all members of the adoption triad.

National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning's packet on Searching:

http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/information_packets/birthright_adoptees_right_to_know.pdf

This packet for adopted persons includes a factsheet on searching, a list of references and websites, and a summary of the debate about searching.

Stars of David International, Inc.: <http://www.starsofdavid.org/>

This is a Jewish adoption information and support network for all members of the adoption triad.

Information on the issues facing birth parents can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents*, which can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_impact/index.cfm. The Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm. Information on open adoption can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Openness in Adoption*, which can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm.



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FACTSHEET
FOR FAMILIES

September 2004

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[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/
impactobio/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactobio/index.cfm)

Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents



This factsheet discusses some of the emotional issues that parents face after making the decision to place an infant for adoption, in surrendering the child, and in handling the feelings that often persist afterwards. In addition, it addresses some of the emotional issues of parents whose children are permanently removed from them and whose parental rights are terminated. This factsheet may be a helpful resource for birth parents, as well as

What's Inside:

- Responses to adoption placement
- Gaining control and resolution
- Resources

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family members, friends, and others who want to support birth parents. It may also provide some insight to adopted persons and adoptive parents who want to understand the struggles faced by birth parents.

It is difficult to generalize about the feelings or experiences of all birth parents. Each has faced a unique experience and coped in his or her own way. A number of birth parents have written personal accounts of their experiences in placing their children for adoption; there are also a few research studies of the experiences of birth parents and the emotions that often linger long after the adoption. Certain themes emerge in both types of literature, including themes of loss, guilt, and resolution. As a framework for this discussion, this factsheet explores the experiences of birth parents by exploring some of these themes:

- The **Responses to Adoption Placement** section looks at feelings and experiences that birth parents often describe, including grief over the loss, shame and guilt, identity issues, and long-term emotional issues.
- The **Gaining Control and Resolution** section explores ways of gaining control of these feelings that have been useful for some birth parents.
- The **Resources** section includes a list of resources to help birth parents find further information and to locate support groups of individuals with similar experiences.

Responses to Adoption Placement

Grieving the Loss of the Child

Placing a child for adoption can cause a sense of loss that is all-encompassing. This sense of loss begins with the pregnancy itself as the expectant parents come to accept the reality of the unplanned pregnancy and the loss of their own immediate life plans. Most struggle with the decision to place the child for adoption; those who decide to do so begin to plan for a great loss in their own lives with the hope that placing the child for adoption will result in a better life for their baby and for themselves.

The actual physical separation generally occurs soon after the birth. Many circumstances can have an impact on the birth parent's feelings at the time, including mixed feelings about the adoption placement, support from other family members and the other birth parent, and whether the planned adoption is open (i.e., allowing some later contact with the child). The actions of the agency personnel (if an agency is involved), as well as those of the adoption attorney, adoptive parents, hospital personnel, and physician can all affect the feelings of the birth mother and father as they proceed through the process of the adoption and the termination of their own parental rights.

The birth and the actual surrendering of the baby may prompt feelings of numbness, shock, and denial, as well as grief, in the birth parents. All of these feelings are normal reactions to loss. This particular type of loss is different from a loss through

death, however, because there is rarely a public acknowledgment, and friends and family of the birth parents may attempt to ignore the loss by pretending that nothing has happened. In some cases, the secrecy surrounding the pregnancy and adoption may make it difficult for birth parents to seek out and find support as they grieve their loss. In addition, the lack of formal rituals or ceremonies to mark this type of loss may make it more difficult to acknowledge the loss and therefore to acknowledge the grief as a normal process.

When birth parents first deal with their loss, the grief may be expressed as denial. The denial serves as a buffer to shield them from the pain of the loss. This may be followed by sorrow or depression as the loss becomes more real. Anger and guilt may follow, with anger sometimes being directed at those who helped with the adoption placement. The final phases, those of acceptance and resolution, refer not to eliminating the grief permanently but to integrating the loss into ongoing life.

Grieving Other Losses

Placing a child for adoption may also cause other (secondary) losses, which may add to the grief that birth parents feel. No one fantasizes about having a baby and then giving it up, so expectant parents who are planning to place the child for adoption may grieve for the loss of their parenting roles. They may grieve for the person their child might have become as their son or daughter. These feelings of loss may re-emerge in later years, for instance, on the child's birthday, or when the child is old enough to start school or to reach other developmental milestones.

Additional losses may occur as a result of the pregnancy and placement. In some cases, the birth mother loses her relationship with the birth father under the stress of the pregnancy, birth, and subsequent placement decision. The birth parents may also lose relationships with their own parents, whose disappointment or disapproval may be accompanied by a lack of support. In extreme cases, the birth mother may need to leave her parents and her home. The birth mother may lose her place in the educational system or in the workplace as a result of the pregnancy. Birth parents may also lose friends who are not supportive of either the pregnancy or the decision to place the child for adoption.

Guilt and Shame

Birth parents may experience guilt and shame for having placed their child for adoption, since societal values reflect a lack of understanding of the circumstances that might prompt birth parents to make an adoption plan for their child. At first, there may be shame associated with the unplanned pregnancy itself and with admitting the situation to parents, friends, co-workers, and others. Shame about the pregnancy may lead to feelings of unworthiness or incompetence about becoming a parent. Once the child is born, the decision to place the child for adoption may prompt new feelings of guilt about "rejecting" the child, no matter how thoughtful the decision or what the circumstances of the adoption.

The shame and guilt felt by birth parents is often supported by the secrecy surrounding the adoption process. Thus, keeping the pregnancy a secret, maintaining secrecy throughout the adoption proceedings, and

then treating the experience as unimportant may promote a feeling of shame in birth parents, since the pregnancy and adoption are not even discussed. Birth parents who can discuss their feelings with supportive friends, family members, or professional counselors may more easily come to terms with their decision over time and be able to integrate the experience into their lives.

Identity Issues

Placing a child for adoption may trigger identity issues in some birth parents. They may wonder, “Am I a parent?” Some birth parents may experience a sense of incompleteness, because they are parents without a child. Generally, their status as parents is not acknowledged among family and friends. If the birth parents go on to have other children whom they raise, this may also affect how the birth parents view their own identity, as well as that of all their children.

These questions about identity may also extend to the relationship with the child when the adoption is open. Birth parents who participate in open adoptions may initially wonder how they will fit into that new relationship with their child once the adoptive parents become the legal parents. However, this relationship with the child and adoptive family in an open adoption may evolve so that the birth parents maintain an agreed-upon role in the life of the child. Still, there are few role models for birth parents to help clarify this issue of identity. (For more information about open adoptions, see the Information Gateway factsheet *Openness in Adoption* at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm.)

Long-Term Issues

Many birth parents continue to mourn the loss of their child throughout their lifetime, but with varying intensity. For instance, birth parents may continue to track the milestones of their child’s life by imagining birthday parties, first days of school, graduation, and more. Some birth parents experience longstanding grief, that is, grief that lasts a very long time and may continue to actually interfere with a birth parent’s life many years later. Some of the factors that have been found to be associated with longstanding grief include:

- A birth parent’s feeling that she was pressured into placing her child for adoption against her will
- Feelings of guilt and shame regarding the placement
- Lack of opportunity to express feelings about the placement

The personal stories of some birth parents, as well as studies with birth parents in therapy, have indicated that some birth parents experience difficulties beyond longstanding grief (see, for example, Winkler & van Keppel, 1984). For instance, some birth parents may have trouble forming and maintaining relationships. This may be due to lingering feelings of loss and guilt, or it may be due to a fear of repeating the loss. Other birth parents may attempt to fill the loss quickly by establishing a new relationship, marrying, or giving birth again—without having dealt with the grief of the adoption placement. A few birth parents report being overprotective of their subsequent children, because they are afraid of

repeating the experience of separation and loss (Askren & Bloom, 1999).

For some birth parents, the ability to establish a successful marriage or long-term relationship may depend on the openness with which they can discuss their past experiences of birth and adoption placement. Some birth parents never tell their spouses or subsequent children of their earlier child. Others are comfortable enough with their decision to be able to share their past.

Gaining Control and Resolution

Acceptance of the loss and working through the grief does not mean that birth parents forget their birth child and never again feel sorrow or regret for the loss. Rather, it means that they are able to move forward with their lives and to integrate this loss into their ongoing lives. For those in an open adoption, this may mean developing a new relationship with the child and the adoptive parents. For birth parents whose child was adopted in a closed adoption, it may mean learning to live with uncertainty about whether the parent will ever see the child again.

A number of birth parents have written about their experiences (for example, see the books by Brenda Romanchik listed in the resource section at the end of this paper). These authors describe a number of different ways of dealing with loss and grief:

Entrustment ceremonies. Some birth parents describe a ritual or ceremony that took place when they entrusted their child

to the adoptive parents. In many cases, these entrustment ceremonies took place in the hospital. These ceremonies allowed the birth parents to say good-bye to their child and to maintain a sense of control over the placement. Such ceremonies may help with the later grieving process.

Ongoing rituals and traditions. Birth parents may find it helpful to create a tradition that honors the child and the decision that was made. For instance, planting a tree or writing a letter to the child (whether it is sent or not) are ways of acknowledging the loss. On special days, such as the child's birthday, birth parents may want to continue with that type of ceremony or tradition.

Taking time. Both birth parents and counselors advise that birth parents must allow themselves time to grieve and recover (Roles, 1989). There is no timetable that predicts when the grief will be resolved, and there may be occasions, even many years later, when the grief may resurface. Birth parents who allow themselves time to grieve and to accept the loss may be better able to move on.

Finding Support. Birth parents should seek out friends, support groups of other birth parents, or understanding counselors in order to have a safe place to communicate their feelings. Being able to openly share feelings can be helpful in moving through the stages of grief and achieving some resolution.

Education. There are a number of books and articles about adoption and the birth parent experience, as well as a growing number of websites that carry information on the topic. Many of these include

first-person accounts from birth parents, which can provide some context for what some other birth parents experience. These can be helpful to birth parents who may feel that they are essentially alone in their loss.

Writing. Birth parents may find it useful to keep a journal or diary of their experiences and feelings. This may serve as an outlet for grief or other emotions, and it can also serve to provide some perspective over time. Keeping a journal also allows birth parents to remember details that might otherwise be forgotten over the years.

Counseling. Birth parents may find that they need more support than family and friends can offer, or they may be unable to move forward in the grieving process. In such cases, professional counseling may help the birth parent make progress

in dealing with the grief or may reassure the parent that such feelings are normal. A counselor should be able to help a birth parent replace unrealistic fantasy with reality, to acknowledge what has happened, and to heal.

Birth parents should look for counselors who have significant experience with adoption and with bereavement. Referrals for counselors may come from friends, birth parent support groups, or from the adoption agency or attorney who helped with the adoption.

While the birth parent will never forget the child, it is important that the birth parent adapts to the new circumstances and comes to terms with any regret. When birth parents are able to integrate the loss into their lives and gain some feeling of control, they can then move on to deal with whatever else life presents to them.

Resources

Books

Clapton, G. (2003). *Birth fathers and their adoption experiences*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Interviews were conducted with 30 birth fathers to relay information about their reactions and emotions during the pregnancy and postadoption periods.

Foge, L., & Mosconi, G. (1999). *The third choice: A woman's guide to placing a child for adoption*. Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book Company.

Written by two adoption counselors, this book takes birth mothers through the periods of pregnancy, adoption planning and placement, and grief and recovery.

Gritter, J. L. (1997). *The spirit of open adoption*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

A pioneer in open adoption practice, the author gives a realistic look at the pain, joy, and beauty that open adoption holds for all members of the triad.

- Jones, M. B. (1993). *Birthmothers: Women who have relinquished babies for adoption tell their stories*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
The stories of a number of birth mothers are told throughout this book, which addresses all of the issues birth mothers encounter, including the pregnancy, placement, dealing with grief, marriage, later children, searching, and reunion.
- Mason, M. M. (1995). *Designing rituals of adoption for the religious and secular community*. Minneapolis, MN: Resources for Adoptive Parents.
This handbook describes religious and nonreligious ceremonies, such as entrustment ceremonies, that might be used in adoption.
- Mason, M. M. (1995). *Out of the shadows: Birthfathers' stories*. Edina, MN: O.J. Howard Publishing.
The stories of 17 birth fathers are told to highlight the situation of this often forgotten group.
- Pavao, J. M. (1998). *The family of adoption*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
The author, an adopted person and an adoption therapist, describes the developmental stages and challenges for adopted people, and includes real-life examples to illustrate these stages.
- Roles, P. (1989). *Saying goodbye to a baby. Volume I: The birthparent's guide to loss and grief in adoption*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.
Written by a social worker and birth mother, this book covers all of the issues faced by birth parents, including the pregnancy, adoption decision, loss, later issues, and reunion.
- Romanchik, B. (1999). *Being a birthparent: Finding our place*. Royal Oak, MI: R-Squared Press.
This handbook, written by a birth parent, discusses the role of the birth parent in an open adoption.
- Romanchik, B. (1999). *Birthparent grief*. Royal Oak, MI: R-Squared Press.
This handbook, written by a birth parent, discusses the different phases of grief, counseling, and dealing with difficult times.
- Romanchik, B. (1999). *Your rights and responsibilities: A guide for expectant parents considering adoption*. Royal Oak, MI: R-Squared Press.
This handbook, written by a birth parent, discusses the responsibilities and rights of birth parents at each phase of the adoption plan.
- Rosenberg, E. B. (1992). *The adoption life cycle: The children and their families through the years*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
Written by a clinical professor in psychiatry, this book draws on case examples to show how the different members of the adoption triad influence each other and to describe developmental tasks for those in the adoption circle.

Schaefer, C. (1991). *The other mother: A true story*. New York, NY: Soho Press, Inc.
The author tells her story of being a birth mother and of later searching for and finding her son.

Research Articles

Askren, H. A., & Bloom, K. C. (1999). Postadoptive reactions of the relinquishing mother: A review. *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing*, 28(4), 395-400.

The authors identified 12 studies with a total of 625 birth mothers, and they report the studies show that mothers are at long-term risk for repercussions; grief reactions, long-term effects, efforts to resolve, and influences on the relinquishment experience are discussed.

Connelly, M. (2002). *Given in love: For mothers who are choosing an adoption plan*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

This booklet describes some of the emotions that many birth mothers experience when making an adoption plan and addresses such topics as naming the baby, keeping mementos, writing letters, and spiritual grief.

De Simone, M. (1996). Birth mother loss: Contributing factors to unresolved grief. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 24(1), 65-76.

The authors surveyed 264 birth mothers an average of 25 years after placing their infants for adoption to solicit information on such topics as unresolved grief, extent of social support, moderating variables, and reunion experiences. Higher levels of grief were correlated with the mother's perception that she was coerced into the placement and with feelings of guilt and shame.

Deykin, E. Y., Patti, P., & Ryan, J. (1988). Fathers of adopted children: A study of the impact of child surrender on birthfathers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 58(2), 240-248.

Questionnaire data provided by 125 birth fathers indicated long-term unresolved issues related to the adoption.

Fravel, D. L., McRoy, R. G., & Grotevant, H. D. (2000). Birthmother perceptions of the psychologically present adopted child: Adoption openness and boundary ambiguity. *Family Relations*, 49, 425-433.

Interviews with 163 birth mothers in the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project show that the child placed for adoption remains psychologically present.

Portuesi, D. (1996). Silent voices heard: Impact of the birthmother's experience—then and now. *Adoption Therapist*, 7(1), 1-4.

The author, a birth mother and psychotherapist, describes some of the emotional reactions of the birth mother, as well as ways that therapists can aid in the healing process.

Silverstein, D. N., & Kaplan, S. (1988). Lifelong issues in adoption. In L. Coleman, K. Tolbor, H. Hornby, & C. Boggis (Eds.), *Working with older adoptees* (pp. 45-53). Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine. Retrieved April 23, 2004, from www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong_issues_in_adoption.html

The authors describe seven issues that all members of the adoption triad must address.

Winkler, R., & van Keppel, M. (1984). *Relinquishing mothers in adoption: Their long-term adjustment*. Melbourne, Australia: Institute of Family Studies.

The authors studied 213 birth mothers who had placed children up to 30 years earlier and found that many had continuing experiences of loss, which were often worse for women who lacked social support and opportunities to discuss their loss.

Support Groups

Child Welfare Information Gateway compiles the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, which lists support groups on a State-by-State basis. Go to www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.

One well-known national organization that also has some local chapters is Concerned United Birthparents (CUB). Their website can be found at www.cubirthparents.org.

Websites

American Academy of Adoption Attorneys: www.adoptionattorneys.org

AAAA is a national membership association of attorneys who practice, or have otherwise distinguished themselves, in the field of adoption law. AAAA works to promote the reform of adoption laws and to disseminate information on ethical adoption practices. Their Membership Directory, including members from the United States and Canada, lists attorneys who are well versed in the complexities of adoption law as well as interstate and international regulations regarding adoption.

American Adoption Congress: www.americanadoptioncongress.org

The American Adoption Congress (AAC) is an international network of individuals and organizations committed to adoption reform. Through education and advocacy, they promote honesty, openness, and respect for family connections in adoption, foster care, and assisted reproduction. Membership is open to adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals, and all others who share a commitment to the AAC's goals.

Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov

Information Gateway offers information on all aspects of adoption for professionals, policymakers, and the general public. Information Gateway develops and maintains a computerized database of books, journal articles, and other materials on adoption and related topics, conducts database searches, publishes materials on adoption, and gives referrals to related services and experts in the

field. Information Gateway also maintains a database of experts knowledgeable in various areas of adoption practice.

Concerned United Birthparents (CUB): www.cubirthparents.org

CUB's mission is to provide support to birth parents who have relinquished a child to adoption, to provide resources to help prevent unnecessary family separations, to educate the public about the life-long effects on all who are touched by adoption, and to advocate for fair and ethical adoption laws, policies, and practices.

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: www.adoptioninstitute.org

The Adoption Institute seeks to improve the quality of information about adoption, to enhance the understanding and perceptions about adoption, and to advance adoption policy and practice.

Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support: www.openadoptioninsight.org

This site provides resources for all parties interested in open adoption, including expectant parents, adopted persons, adoptive parents, and birth parents.

Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project: <http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/>

This site provides research findings from this major study of variations in openness in adoption and the effect of openness on all members of the adoption triad.

Information on the issues facing adopted persons can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons*, which can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adimpact.cfm. The Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm. Information on open adoption can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Openness in Adoption*, which can be accessed at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm.



Impact of Adoption on Adoptive Parents



Adoptive parenthood, like other types of parenthood, can bring tremendous joy—and a sizable amount of stress. This factsheet explores some of the emotional ups and downs that adoptive parents may experience as they approach the decision to adopt, during the adoptive process, and, most importantly, after the adoption.

What's Inside:

- Why adopt?
- Managing the adoption process
- Impact of (adoptive) parenting
- Resources

While every adoption is unique and every parent has different feelings and experiences, there are some general themes that emerge regarding adoptive parents' emotional responses. The purpose of the factsheet is to identify some of these themes, affirm the common feelings, and provide links to resources that may help adoptive parents manage emotional issues related to adoption.

- **Why Adopt?** looks at motivations that lead families or individuals to consider adoption and explores some of the questions prospective adopters may want to ask themselves.
- **Managing the Adoption Process** examines some of the feelings parents may encounter as they pursue adoption.
- **Impact of (Adoptive) Parenting** explores parents' feelings about the parenting role after the adoption is finalized. Also included are strategies that parents can use to work through adoption issues, ensuring the best outcomes for children and parents throughout their lifetimes.
- **Resources** links to websites, books, support groups, and other ways for adoptive parents to find more information and help.

Why Adopt?

Adoptive parents come to the adoption decision for many different reasons. Some adopt because of infertility, and adoption is their alternative way to grow their family; others adopt in order to add to their family, to help a specific child, or for social justice reasons.

This factsheet is a companion to two factsheets for other members of the adoption triad on the impact of adoption:

- *Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adimpact.cfm)
(Spanish version: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactoadoptadas.cfm)
- *Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_impact/index.cfm)
(Spanish version: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactobio/index.cfm)

Infertility Issues

Parents who adopt because of infertility have already experienced loss and disappointment because of the inability to have a biological child. In addition, they may have dealt with repeated miscarriages or intrusive fertility treatments. It is only natural for adults to respond with grief to these losses, and they may also experience feelings of inadequacy ("why me?") and lack of control.

Regardless of the exact circumstances, couples and individuals who turn to adoption because of infertility may have already weathered an emotional roller coaster. For those who need help working through the grief of infertility, there are support groups and counselors who specialize in helping infertile couples and individuals. It's important to remember that both partners in a couple may not resolve their grief at the same pace, and arriving

at the decision to adopt may come at a different time for each person.

Making the Decision

Families, couples, and individuals who decide to adopt should always go through a rigorous screening process that encourages self-reflection and consideration about their reasons for wanting to adopt as well as their expectations for the child and the parenthood experience. In approaching adoption, prospective adopters may want to consider their feelings about the following:

- How will a new child fit into the parents' lives and their relationship?
- How will a new child affect family dynamics—especially if the family already has children?
- What changes are the parents willing to make to ease the child's transition?
- How do the parents feel about “open” adoption, that is, contact with the child's birth family?
- How do the parents feel about welcoming a child from the foster care system or an orphanage who may have experienced abuse or neglect?
- In cases of transracial or transcultural adoption—how do the parents feel about accommodating, helping, and promoting the child's positive cultural and racial identity?
- How will the parents inform family members and friends, and how they will deal with questions from family, friends, and strangers about adoption?
- How will the parents answer their child's questions about adoption, the child's background and history, birth family, and the parents' reasons for adoption?
- How willing and able are they to seek help for themselves or their child when necessary?

For more information about making the decision to adopt and deciding what type of adoption to pursue, read Information Gateway's factsheets:

- *Adoption Options* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adoptoption.cfm)
- *Adoption: Where Do I Start?* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_start.cfm)
- *Foster Parents Considering Adoption* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_fospar.cfm)
- *“Special Needs” Adoption: What Does It Mean?* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/specialneeds/)

Managing the Adoption Process

The adoption process can seem intrusive and overly cumbersome to prospective parents. Each State has its own laws governing adoption. Intercountry adoptions are subject to additional regulations. For the most part, these laws are designed to protect the best interests of the child and the expectant parents before they

decide to place their child for adoption. So, it's normal for prospective adopters to feel vulnerable and powerless about the adoption process.

During the process, prospective parents will find themselves making life-changing decisions, which can be both exciting and stressful. Decisions need to be made about what type of adoption to pursue; whether to work with an adoption service provider and, if so, which one; how to answer the home study questions; and, finally, how to respond to a potential placement of a particular child or children. Prospective parents may also experience long waiting times and have to face uncertain outcomes. It's not unusual for them to feel anxious about the process and to find it difficult to go about their regular routine when so much is at stake.

A good agency and social worker can help prospective parents manage the adoptive process and provide guidance for the decisions and learning along the way. Some agencies may be able to link prospective parents to support groups for those awaiting adoption or to counselors who can help them with the sometimes extensive waiting period.

Sometimes a planned adoption does not proceed, and the prospective adoptive parents are devastated. While the prospective parents may have known intellectually that the expectant parents could change their minds about the adoption or that their foster child's grandparents might seek custody or that a child in foster care could be reunited with his or her birth family or that a country might shut down its international

adoptions, the reality can be very difficult to accept. If the parents have already met and attached to the child or served as foster parents, it may be particularly difficult. This is a loss for the prospective adoptive parents, and grief is an understandable reaction. They may need time to work through their grief before they're ready to proceed again.

Impact of (Adoptive) Parenting

For many adoptive parents, completing the adoption matching and placement process means that the most difficult phase is behind them. Most adoptive children settle in with their new family, and research shows that the great majority of adoptive parents are satisfied with their decision to adopt.¹ But settling into parenthood or the "postadoption period" can present its own difficulties for parents. In some cases, adoption-related issues arise long after the adoption, and parents may be unprepared for the lifelong process of adoption. Some parental stressors are the same types of challenges that all families—biological and adoptive—face; however, there are other potential stressors unique to adoption, and adoptive parents may want to familiarize themselves with the possibilities.

¹ Vandivere, S., Malm, K., & Radcliff, L. (2009). *Adoption USA: A Chartbook Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents*. Washington, DC: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Retrieved from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/09/NSAP/chartbook/chartbook.cfm?id=2>.

Information Gateway publishes a series of factsheets to help adoptive parents learn about parenting their adopted children and dealing with developmental adoption issues:

- *Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/preschool.cfm)
- *Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent_school_age)
- *Parenting Your Adopted Teenager* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent_teenager)

Other useful factsheets include:

- *Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_transition.cfm)
- *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy With At-Risk Families* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_interactbulletin)
- *Parenting a Child Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_abused/index.cfm)
- *Selecting and Working With an Adoption Therapist* (www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm)

Depression

After months or years of anticipating parenthood, the excitement of the actual adoption can give way to a feeling of being “let down” or sadness in some parents. Researchers have dubbed this “postadoption depression syndrome,” or PADS, and it may occur within a few weeks of the adoption finalization.² The realities of parenthood, including the tedium, lack of sleep (for parents of infants or children with behavioral or sleep issues), and the weight of parental responsibilities can be overwhelming. Parents may have difficulty attaching to the new child and may question their parenting capabilities. They also may be hesitant to admit that there are any problems after the long-awaited adoption.

In some cases, the depression resolves on its own as the parent adjusts to the new life. In cases in which the depression lasts for more than a few weeks or interferes with the individual’s ability to parent, peer support or professional help (with an adoption-competent therapist) may help the parent to address the issues causing the depression and regain the confidence necessary to assume the parenting role.

Identity and Attachment

Adoption is a life event that changes the identity of the parties as well as the identity of the involved families. Sometimes, adoptive parents are slow to adjust to

² Postadoption depression syndrome was named as such by J. Bond in “Post Adoption Depression Syndrome” from the Spring 1995 issue of *Roots and Wings*. More recent research includes K. Foli’s (2009) “Depression in Adoptive Parents: A Model of Understanding Through Grounded Theory” from the *Western Journal of Nursing Research*.

their new identity, or they wonder what expectations accompany the new identity.

Adoptive parents may worry that they don't "feel" like parents, even after the adoption is complete. They wonder whether they are really entitled to parent their new son or daughter. Or, after years of keeping their parenting desire in check, either as foster parents or because of an uncertain legal outcome, they are reluctant to fully embrace parenthood or to believe they are truly parents like other people are. Parents may even question why they don't immediately love their new child or wonder if they love their child enough. For these new parents, parenting may seem like a tentative status at best. Furthermore, the lack of role models for adoptive parents may give them a sense of isolation.

Identifying as a parent or as a parent of a particular child may be a more gradual process for some parents. If the parents have adopted from foster care, they may have had visits with the child, or the child may have actually lived with them before the adoption. Even so, the finalization creates a permanent family situation, and both parents and child may take some time to develop a bond and evolve into their new identity, just as a couple adjusts to marriage after dating for a long time.

If the parents have adopted an infant, taken in an emergency placement, or adopted through an intercountry adoption, the suddenness of the child's arrival may leave parents little time for becoming accustomed to their new identity. They may be so absorbed in the practical tasks of meeting the needs of their child(ren) and relationship that they have little time

to dwell on their new status. The feeling of being a parent may take some time to develop but may eventually be a result of being able to meet the child's needs and form a mutual attachment.

For some parents, there is a pivotal moment when they first feel like a parent (e.g., the first visit to the doctor, school registration, the first time the child says and means "momma"). For others, it is the day-to-day routine of caring for the child and helping the new son or daughter navigate the world that gradually leads to self-identification as the child's parent. Identifying as the parent is generally linked to a sense of entitlement, or "claiming," and responsibility. Parents are able to move beyond feelings of being "not worthy" or "not capable" of parenting their child; they become comfortable in their new role, accepting the responsibility and recognizing and feeling fully entitled to parent their child.

There are a number of things that adoptive parents can do to help them adjust to their new status as parents and as a family. In fact, there are strategies that may be useful right after an adoption as well as 5, 10, or 20 years later as parents and children encounter identity and adoption issues through their lives—especially around particular milestones, such as birthdays, holidays, births, and deaths. Some strategies that may be useful right after an adoption as well as many years later include the following:

- **Connect with parents who have completed a similar adoption.** Learning how other parents have made the adjustment and have dealt with challenges can be reassuring. Parents

who adopted 1 year or 10 years earlier can serve as role models to new parents. And parent support groups are meant for just that—supporting and lending a hand and a sympathetic ear to parents who need it. (Information Gateway’s National Foster Care and Adoption Directory lists regional groups: www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad)

- **Establish family traditions or rituals.** Parents may want to establish daily or weekly schedules of activities. Routines can be comforting and stabilizing for children and they can help to normalize family life. Rituals can be as simple as bedtime reading or family movie night. Parents may also want to establish traditions to commemorate important days (the day of the adoption placement or finalization) or holidays. These special occasions can be a time for celebration and can reinforce parent and family identification. (Visit Information Gateway’s web section on Parenting After Adoption: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/)
- **Create a family storybook.** In their 1994 book, *Real Parents, Real Children*, Holly van Gulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb suggest that writing a family storybook can help all the family members feel a sense of belonging to their family. Parents can start the book while they are awaiting the adoption; they begin with their own stories, from their own childhood through their decision to adopt. As each new member joins the family, his or her background and story are added. These books can be maintained through multiple generations. (A family’s storybook will be different from the

child’s individual Lifebook, which focuses only on the child and may include information about the child before he or she joined the family.)

- **Connect with your child’s birth culture.** Developing a strong family identity that involves all the members and makes everyone feel included may be especially important for the transracial or transcultural family or for any “conspicuous” adoptive family. Parents can choose activities, schools, friends, encounters with professionals, and neighborhoods that send a message that they value the diversity of all family members.
- **Prepare to respond to outsiders** (including relatives, friends, and strangers) about the adoption. New adoptive parents may be caught off guard by some of the questions that generally well-meaning friends and relatives ask. (In the worst cases, the questioners may not be well-meaning.) Preparing for how to respond to questions, how much of the child’s story to share, and how to inform or educate relatives and friends about adoption can reinforce the new identity of parents and children, empower the new family, and even be a family attachment experience (if the children are old enough to be involved).³ (Visit Information Gateway’s web section on Parenting After Adoption: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/)

³ Marilyn Schoettle (2000) has written the *W.I.S.E. Up Powerbook* for adopted children to help them feel empowered to share information about their adoption when, if, and how they choose.

- **Find an adoption-competent therapist.** In many cases, parents will need to reach outside the immediate family for the first time in their lives in order to seek the help of a therapist, social worker, or other helping professional. If parents decide to see a therapist or to arrange for therapy for any family members because of the adoption, it's important that the therapist have experience with adoption issues and with all the members of the adoption triad. While adoption may mark the end of involvement with the adoption or child welfare agency or the social worker involved with the placement, the agency or worker may be a resource for postadoption help or referral.

Issues Related to the Type of Adoption or Age of Child

Different types of adoption may raise various issues for adoptive parents that impact their identity as a parent and their feelings about the adoption.

Open adoption. There is a growing trend toward open adoption in which a birth parent or other birth relative continues to have some type of contact with the adoptive family after the adoption. It's common for a birth mother to choose the family who will adopt her child and to meet and form a relationship with the prospective adoptive parents. It is also common for birth families and adoptive families to have open adoption agreements in mediated adoptions and in some adoptions from foster care. After the adoption, the extent of the communication can vary, but it may include the periodic exchange of letters and photographs between birth family and adoptive family, or it may be occasional,

regular, or holiday visits with the birth mother, birth father, or other birth relatives.

Research shows that open adoption arrangements generally work well for all involved. They remove much of the mystery and fear that may accompany adoption. In fact, some studies have shown that openness is associated with better postadoption adjustment for adoptive parents as well as birth parents and adoptees.⁴ Initially, adoptive parents may be nervous about whether their child will understand “who is who” or feel fearful of birth family contact. However, parents can provide consistent, age-appropriate information to their child to help the child better understand about the adoption and birth family, and contact with the birth family can serve to support this information. Contact removes much of the mystery for the both the adoptive and the birth families, and it can help the child learn more directly about his or her history and identity. (See Information Gateway's *Openness in Adoption* factsheet for families at http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)

Intercountry adoption—limited information and cultural expansion. Children adopted from other countries come from a wide variety of situations. In some cases, they arrive as infants or toddlers who have spent time in foster homes in their native country. In other cases, they have been in orphanages or other institutions for months or years.

⁴ See, for example, findings from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/Centers/mtarp) as well as Ge et al.'s (2008) “Bridging the Divide: Openness in Adoption and Post-adoption Psychosocial Adjustment Among Birth and Adoptive Parents” from the *Journal of Family Psychology* 22(4).

The children often come into care for the same reasons that children enter foster care in the United States—parental abuse or neglect, parental substance abuse, abandonment, and poverty. Often, there is little reliable information about the child’s background, relatives, or medical history. Parents should be prepared to deal with such unknowns and to accept the fact that their child has had previous experiences that the parents may never know about.

Parenting a child adopted from another country offers both the joys and the challenges that occur when two cultures come together. Many of the joys come from learning to love and celebrate the unique characteristics of each child; many of the challenges come from raising children in a society that may not always be welcoming or approving of transracial and transcultural families or of children from other countries. Parents may prepare themselves for the following experiences:

- Helping the child develop a racial and cultural identity
- Creating a family identity for the multiracial or multicultural family
- Living a multicultural life
- Dealing with racism and bias about race and culture

Adopting a child from another race or culture forces parents to examine their own lifestyle and community and to view them through the eyes of their child.

Adoption from foster care and the older child. Foster parents are the most frequent

adopters of children from foster care.⁵ They have already established a relationship with the child, generally know something about the child’s background, and probably know members of the child’s birth family. That doesn’t necessarily mean, however, that there will be a seamless transition from foster care to adoption! Parents should not be surprised if the child acts out or continues to have issues stemming from past abuse or neglect after the adoption is finalized. The child may be dealing with the loss and adoption issues that all adoptees need to resolve at various developmental stages throughout their lives.

Some researchers have noted that children adopted from foster care may act out or misbehave in order to “induce” feelings of rejection, anger, pain, and abandonment in their parents. This testing behavior may actually indicate that the child feels comfortable enough with the parents to communicate his or her own true feelings. Parents should prepare for their own response, modeling understanding and appropriate reactions/discipline, if that occurs.

Parents who adopt from foster care without having served as the child’s foster parents may have similar experiences. Whereas the child’s visits may have been relatively calm, and the immediate postadoption period may have seemed smooth, the child may still act out after this early “honeymoon” period. This is a normal reaction for a child whose life has been filled with

⁵ According to statistics from the U.S. Children’s Bureau’s Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) for FY 2009, 54 percent of children adopted from foster care that year were adopted by foster parents.

rejection, abandonment, abuse, trauma, and instability.

Parents who adopt from foster care may experience internal struggles regarding their child's birth family. The parents know that, in most cases, it is important for their child to maintain ties with his or her birth siblings, grandparents, or birth parents, but they also know that some of these relatives are the same people who may have neglected or maltreated their child. Adoptive parents may even question their own identity in relation to the child ("Am I the parent?") when their child visits or has other contact with birth family members. As with most parenting tasks, this is a case of putting the child's needs first. Maintaining those ties may be important for the child's identity, development, and long-term well-being, and the adoptive parent's willingness to facilitate the contact provides a model of mature behavior for the child.

Finding help. Adoptive parents who seek help for themselves or their children or families may want to start with their adoption agency. Many agencies offer some kind of postadoption support and services. Some offer preservation programs dedicated to keeping the adoption intact by helping parents understand their child's behavior and manage it appropriately. Research has shown that a good therapeutic relationship between adoptive parents and their social worker can also help during the postadoption phase.⁶

⁶ Zosky, D. L., Howard, J. A., Smith, S. L., & Howard, A. M. (2005). Investing in Adoptive Families: What Adoptive Families Tell Us Regarding the Benefits of Adoption Preservation Services. *Adoption Quarterly*, 8(3).

Any counselors or therapists that the adoptive parent or family uses should always be "adoption competent," that is, they should have experience with adoption issues and knowledge about the adoption triad of adoptee, adoptive parent, and birth parent. Other adoptive families are often good sources of referral for therapists and other assistance. Other adoptive families can also offer their own support and experience as well as normalizing the experience. Local support organizations may maintain lists of adoption competent counselors and therapists.

Visit Information Gateway's webpage on Parenting After Adoption: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/

Read Information Gateway's *Postadoption Services*: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_postadoption.cfm

For more information on resources for adoptive parents, refer to list of resources below.

Conclusion

Adoption is a lifelong commitment, and adoption-related issues may arise at any point in parents' or their child's lifetime. A willingness to learn about the issues and to be open to seeking support if necessary can help to ensure that parents and children experience happy and healthy family lives.

Resources

Resources are divided into websites and books and articles.

Websites

AdoptUsKids: www.adoptuskids.org

While the AdoptUsKids website is a tool for connecting foster and adoptive families with waiting children throughout the United States, the website also offers a number of resources for adoptive families, including information about the adoptive process, adoption advocacy, and stories for parents and children. Parents may also be interested in the respite manual, “Taking a Break: Creating Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Respite in Your Community” (<http://adoptuskids.org/resourceCenter/publications/respitemanual.aspx>).

Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E): www.adoptionsupport.org

C.A.S.E. provides support and education for everyone in the adoption community. The website includes information on adoption-competent therapy, adoption training, community education, and publications.

Center for Family Connections: www.kinnect.org/index.html

This educational and clinical resource center specializes in the developmental, structural, and systemic issues related to adoption, foster care, kinship, and guardianship and offers training, education, advocacy, and clinical treatment.

Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Children’s Bureau, Information Gateway offers information on all aspects of adoption for professionals, policymakers, and the general public. Information Gateway develops and maintains a computerized database of books, journal articles, and other materials on adoption and related topics, conducts database searches, publishes materials on adoption, and gives referrals to related services and experts in the field.

- Visit Information Gateway’s webpages on Adoption and Parenting After Adoption: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption and www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_parenting/
- Access the National Foster Care and Adoption Directory Search: www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: www.adoptioninstitute.org/index.php

The Adoption Institute seeks to improve the quality of information about adoption, to

enhance the understanding and perceptions about adoption, and to advance adoption policy and practice.

Families Adopting in Response (FAIR): www.fairfamilies.org

Through its all-volunteer organization, FAIR offers information, education, support, and fellowship to adoptive and preadoptive families. Membership includes families who have adopted children through public and private agencies, from the United States, and from many other countries. FAIR focuses on the children who need a permanent, loving family and the parents who have opened their hearts and homes to those children, infants through teens.

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project: www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/Centers/mtarp

This site provides research findings from this major study of variations in openness in adoption and the effect of openness on all members of the adoption triad.

New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children (NYSCCC): <http://nysccc.org>

While this website is focused on New York families, many of the resources have relevance for other adoptive families. Transracial and transcultural resources and questions and answers may be particularly useful (<http://nysccc.org/family-supports/transracial-transcultural>).

North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC): www.nacac.org

Founded in 1974 by adoptive parents, NACAC is committed to meeting the needs of waiting children and the families who adopt them. NACAC offers advocacy, education, parent leadership capacity building, and adoption support.

Pact, an Adoption Alliance: www.pactadopt.org

Pact's goal is to create and maintain the Internet's most comprehensive site addressing issues for adopted children of color, offering informative articles on related topics as well as profiles of triad members and their families, links to other Internet resources, and a book reference guide with a searchable database. The site provides reprints of past Pact Press issues, as well as opportunities to interact with other triad members and to ask questions of birth parents, adopted people, adoptive parents, and adoption professionals.

Books and Articles

National Adoption Magazines

- *Adoptive Families* (www.adoptivefamilies.com)
- *Adoption Today* (www.adoptinfo.net)
- *Rainbow Kids* (www.rainbowkids.com)
- *Fostering Families Today* (www.fosteringfamielstoday.com)

- Blomquist, B. T. (2001). *Insight into adoption: What adoptive parents need to know about the fundamental differences between a biological and an adopted child—and its effect on parenting*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
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- Keck, G. C., & Kupecky, R. M. (2009). *Parenting the hurt child: Helping adoptive families heal and grow*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
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- Kruger, P., & Smolowe, J. (Eds.). (2005). *A love like no other: Stories from adoptive parents*. New York: Riverhead Books.
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- May, P. (2005). *Approaching fatherhood: A guide for adoptive dads and others*. London, England: British Adoption and Fostering Federation.
- Melina, L. R. (1986). *Raising adopted children: A manual for adoptive parents*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers. (Available on Kindle)
- Pavao, J. M. (1998). *The family of adoption*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Schooler, J. E., & Atwood, T. C. (2008). *The whole life adoption book: Realistic advice for building a healthy adoptive family*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
- Van Gulden, H., & Bartels-Rabb, L. M. (1994). *Real parents, real children: Parenting the adopted child*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau funds research projects on postadoption services. The following is just one example:

The Colorado Coalition of Adoptive Families (CCAF) received an Adoption Opportunities and Healthy Marriage grant to provide training and support to families who adopted children from foster care in Colorado. The CCAF trained 641 adoptive parents in relationship strengthening skills and provided direct postadoptive services to 730 children and 945 adults over the 5-year grant period (2004-2009). Services included parent support groups, family advocacy, crisis intervention, therapy, respite care, case consultation, special events, a speaker series, and more. The project also was responsible for developing a network of adoption professionals, parents, community leaders, and others. Among the goals of the project was a reduction in adoption disruptions. Statistics comparing 616 participating adoptive families with 1,439 nonparticipating adoptive families showed that participating families had a rate of adoption disruption that was 16 percent lower than nonparticipating families (1.46 percent vs. 1.74 percent of finalized adoptions).

Find more information on the CCAF website: www.cocaf.org