



Searching for information about your birth family

You may be thinking about taking the first step in relation to searching for information. All adoption agencies welcome enquires from adopted people who wish to know more about their birth family or birth history.

Many adopted people initially search for their birth mother and they may in time wish to progress to contacting their birth father. Birth fathers often feel that they have been excluded from the adoption process. Sometimes, through no fault of either parent, birth fathers have no knowledge of what happened either to the child or the birth mother.

If you are searching for your birth father, his identity may have to be confirmed by your birth mother before a search will be undertaken. In a situation where the birth mother is deceased or unable to be contacted, the adoption agency will discuss with you how best to proceed in relation to your search.

Accessing and using the information and tracing services of an adoption agency

If you decide that your next step is to seek further information about your adoption you should contact the agency involved or the Adoption Authority of Ireland if the name of the agency is not known to you. Consider the questions you would like to ask, write them down, send them to the adoption agency and/or bring them with you when an appointment has been received. It may be important to bring any information you already have.

At the first appointment

- Ask whether it is possible to confirm or update any information you have.
- Explain what you would like now: for example any background information, whether or not it is possible to trace the person you are seeking.
- Discuss with the social worker any queries you may have.
- Ask about the agency's policy and practice in relation to information and search.
- Ask about the agency's waiting list. Consider putting your name on the waiting list even if you are uncertain about your wish to proceed as you can always withdraw or defer your enquiry.
- Ask some or all of the following questions with regard to the search process:
 - How is a search usually carried out?
 - What is the average time involved in the searching process?
 - Is counselling offered to everyone involved in the search process?

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What can the adoption agency offer?

Background information

Adoption agencies will provide non-identifying information dating back to the time of the adoption. The adoption agency cannot provide the adopted person with identifying information including his/her original surname, the birth parent's surnames or addresses. This is because the Adoption Authority of Ireland and the adoption agencies must follow the legal requirements to uphold rights to privacy.

It is important to note that the information on file may not be current, for example the address given at the time may not be where your birth mother is now residing. Tracing a new address may take some time. It is also important to remember that past adoption practice in Ireland involved keeping as little information as possible on the birth family and so it is often the case that there is, in fact, very little information recorded. The accuracy of the information will also need to be confirmed in due course.

Counselling

In relation to adoption issues, counselling provides time and space for you to:

- Explore issues that are important to you
- Explore the possible effects of the search process on you and those close to you
- Explore the best time to actively pursue the search
- Explore the possible outcomes

During this time you will obtain information about the search process and you may also wish to receive non-identifying information.

Ideally, a professional relationship based on mutual trust will develop between the social worker and the adopted person making the enquiry.

Help with the search

Your social worker will offer you support and advice in relation to the search. He/she will attempt to locate and approach the person(s) you are seeking and thereby obtain his/her wishes about being in contact.

Using social networking sites

There has been a growth in the number of people using social networking sites to make contact with an adopted person or birth relative. Finding someone in this way is very exciting, but because of the speed in making contact with a birth relative in this way it can be overwhelming for all involved. It is also possible that that person you contact in this way may not prove to be your birth parent or birth relative.

It is really important in terms of your future relationship with a birth relative to consider using an adoption agency to make contact. A very useful resource and 'top ten tips' to consider when thinking about using a social networking site to search or to make contact with a birth relative, has been compiled by BAAF and these are available from this link:

<http://www.adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk/contact/socialnetworking/>

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Who should I tell?

Remember this is your search and you should be the one who sets the pace and makes the decisions about when and how to search. Be selective about the people in whom you confide. Not everyone close to you will understand your need to search, your feelings about it and the emotional reactions you will have as the process goes forward. It is beneficial to have the support of close family and friends. You will be the best judge of who to tell. The following information may help you to decide.

Adoptive Parents

When you were adopted, your adoptive parents may have been given important information which may facilitate your search. However, adopted people sometimes feel that tracing their birth family involves disloyalty to their adoptive parents. Many consider not confiding in their adoptive parents at all, or putting off the search until their adoptive parents have died.

Some adoptive parents can feel threatened if a search is undertaken, as they fear they may lose you or that you may be hurt. They too may need to seek some help or support during this time and this can be provided through the adoption agency. Although you may be reluctant to confide in your adoptive parents for fear of hurting them, you may wish to consider the following;

- Could your adoptive parents be a source of support?
- Will it become more difficult to tell them if your search moves towards a reunion?

Siblings

Siblings who are also adopted can provide important support, particularly if the siblings have already searched themselves. However, your sibling may feel threatened if you discover birth siblings in the course of the search. Your sibling may be concerned that this could change your relationship or cause you to view him/her differently and he/she may need reassurance.

Partner

If you are involved in a relationship and have confided in your partner it is likely that he/she will want to support you. However, although initially supportive, partners can sometimes find it difficult to understand the significance and depth of feelings that you experience. He/she may also view your search as a potential threat to your relationship with them and may resent the time and energy it absorbs. He/she may raise objections to your decision to search in order to protect you from pain or possible rejection.

However, partners and families are usually understanding and supportive, and at any stage in the process the social worker in the adoption agency will be available and discuss issues of particular concern in the search process.

Children

Telling your children you are searching will depend on their age, maturity, and on the nature of your relationship with them. If they have asked questions about their family history, it may be possible to introduce the topic of adoption.

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For younger children, there are some good story books available explaining the concept of adoption which you may find useful. See list of books on <http://councilofirishadoptionagencies.com>

Older children may express mixed feelings. They may be concerned that their grandparents will be displaced in your affections and/or that new relationships will cause family friction. Children will generally be both curious and interested in your search. However, it is possible that they may also express indifference. Whether to tell your children and how and what to tell them is something you should discuss with your partner, as it will affect the family as a whole.

Remember, when you decide to tell children, particularly young children, it is important not to burden them with the need to keep secrets as this can prove very difficult for them. If you have adult children, it may be important to inform them of your intention to search in order to prepare them for what you may find, and also to give them an opportunity to support you.

Friends

While close friends can offer valuable support during your journey, it can be painful to discover that a close friend is unable to offer support, or cannot grasp the significance of your search. To some friends, the phases of your search can resemble chapters in a novel and they may be intensely interested. If your search is progressing slowly, they may induce feelings of frustration in you by constantly questioning how things are progressing and expressing opinions on the pace or progress. Some friends are happy to support your pace irrespective of how slow or quickly your search is progressing. You will quickly sense when and with whom you can express your true feelings. Although it is likely that you may be disappointed at the reaction of some close friends, there may be others who can offer appropriate support and assistance.

Other adopted People/birthparents:

You may already know someone who has experienced adoption and it may be useful to talk with him/her. It does not have to be someone whose experience of adoption is similar to your own. Adopted people and birth parents can provide you with genuine and meaningful support. The aim of the search/reunion for an adopted person and birth parent may be the same and the fears that each experience may be similar. Motives may be different but complementary and so it may be good to talk to others and hear different opinions and experiences.