



Possible outcomes of the search for your birth mother

Many adopted people who begin a search for their birth mothers wonder what the outcome will be. This leaflet offers some information in this area. The order in which the list of possible outcomes is presented is not intended to indicate that any one outcome is more likely than another.

Possible outcomes

Your birth mother is found and wishes to have contact

Your birth mother wishes to have contact with you. This is the outcome that you may have hoped for. Initially this contact may be by letter where correspondence is forwarded to each party through the adoption agency.

You and your birth mother may be in correspondence for quite some time before you agree to share identifying information and consider the idea of meeting. Corresponding by letter gives you time to process the fact that you are in contact and come to terms with the many emotions involved. It also allows you get to know your birth mother and possibly develop the foundation of a relationship.

A reunion may be a once-off meeting between an adopted person and a birth mother or it may lead to a short-term or indeed a long-term relationship.

There are a number of issues to bear in mind which may have an impact on how the contact or relationship develops. These may include:

- Your birth parents may have married each other. This is not uncommon and for some it can be a very welcome outcome while for others it can be difficult. Your birth parents may need time to consider how best to tell their other children who may not be aware of you. These siblings may need time to adjust to having another brother or sister.
- Your birth parents may choose not to inform their children or to inform them at a later date.
- On occasion when birth parents have married they may not wish to have contact and this can be a very difficult outcome.
- Your birth mother's partner and family may not know of your birth. In the past, births outside of marriage were often concealed because of a fear of the social stigma which was experienced by mothers of children born in such circumstances. Some birth mothers may have been encouraged to keep that secret even from a partner. Difficulties can arise if this secret is revealed. Also,

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some birth mothers experience difficulties in telling their other children about a baby placed for adoption. They can be concerned that such information will cause their children, whether adult or not, to take a different view of them as parents and judge them. These issues can be of great concern to a birth mother.

- Your birth mother may have difficulty in telling you about your conception and birth, her relationship with your birth father and the decision to place you for adoption. The reasons for this may be that:
 - Your birth parents may have had a very short relationship or difficult relationship.
 - Circumstances may have forced your parents to end their relationship.
 - Your birth father may not have been aware of the pregnancy at the time.
 - Your birth mother may be uncertain as to the identity of your father and may be very embarrassed by this.
 - Your birth father may be a close family relative.
 - Your birth mother may have had a non-consensual sexual relationship either with a stranger or someone known to her.
 - You may have been conceived as a result of an extra marital relationship.
 - Your birth mother may have placed more than one child for adoption
 - The experience of placing a baby for adoption can have a long-lasting traumatic impact on a birth mother. When contact is established, difficult and painful memories may resurface for her. She may block out these memories and may be unable to share information.

Unable to locate your birth mother

It may not be possible for the social worker to locate your birth mother. There may be a number of reasons for this:

- The length of time that has elapsed since the adoption agency had contact with your birth mother.
- Your birth mother and her family of origin may have moved from the address on the original records.
- Your birth mother may have moved multiple times or may have emigrated.
- Incorrect or incomplete identifying information may have been given at the time of the adoption.

Unable or unwilling to meet

A birth mother may be unable or unwilling to meet you at this time. There are many reasons why this may be so and some of the more common reasons are outlined below:

- Your birth mother may not have told anyone else about your birth and may fear the reaction of her partner or family if she discusses it with them or if they were to find out.
- Your birth mother may be fearful of the reaction of others if they were to learn that she placed a baby for adoption.
- Your birth mother may be interested in meeting you but may not be able to inform her family about the request for contact and may not be in a position to

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travel to a meeting without their knowledge, for example, because of age or disability.

- Your birth mother may have found the crisis created by her pregnancy so painful that she has blocked it out of her mind over many years and may find it too painful to let it enter her thoughts now.
- Your birth mother may be fearful of your attitude towards her in view of her decision to place you for adoption.
- Your birth mother may feel that she has a lot to lose by engaging in contact with you.
- In the past birth mothers were often told to forget about the fact that they had placed a baby for adoption and to move on with their lives. As a result, your birth mother may find it too difficult to come to terms with the thought of contact.
- The thought of contact being established may be very shocking for a birth mother and she may need time to adjust to this new reality given the fact that she was told in the past that she would never see you again and believed that she did not have any right to enquire about you or establish contact with you.

If your birth mother is unable or unwilling to meet you, you may wish to discuss some or all of the following with your social worker:

- Is it possible to know why your birth mother has made this decision? If the reasons behind a decision are known it can sometimes make it easier to accept that decision.
- Is it possible to ask your social worker whether or not your birth mother will receive or exchange a letter or photograph?
- Is it possible to ask if your birth mother would be willing to maintain indirect contact with you through the adoption agency?
- Is it possible to ask if your birth mother would write you a letter explaining her decision not to have contact and also why she decided to place you for adoption? Is she open to giving some family background and medical information?
- Is it possible to leave a letter or photo on the adoption agency's records in the event that your birth mother should contact and ask for this information?
- Is it possible to meet other adopted people for whom this has also been the outcome?

Some birth mothers change their initial decision not to have contact, if they have time to come to terms with an approach for contact. Also, their circumstances may change and allow them to reach a different decision. However, some birth mothers never change their initial decision not to meet and this can be very difficult to accept. Counselling may be helpful if this is the outcome of your search.

Death

The adoption agency may discover that your birth mother has died. This is not an outcome for which many people are prepared and some can experience great shock and sadness upon hearing this news.

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Depending on the circumstances, it may be possible for you to get some further information about your birth mother and/or other members of your birth family. Discuss with your social worker if any of the following are possible:

- Is it possible to hear more about your birth mother and her life from someone who knew her well?
- Is it possible to meet any family members?
- Is it possible to get some photographs of your birth mother?
- Is it possible to visit your birth mother's grave?

All of the above and the timing of these requests need to be handled with sensitivity as any approach to family members may re-open their pain and grief following the bereavement.

Non-response

A birth mother may not respond to attempts by the social worker to make contact with her. In some cases a birth mother may deny that she is the person being traced. When there is no definite response you can be left with even more unanswered questions.

Negative response

A birth mother may state that she does not want contact under any circumstances and she may ask that the adoption agency does not make contact again.

It can be very difficult for you to learn that your birth mother is not open to or unable to have contact. Considering her perspective and the experiences that she may have had in the past may help you to understand why she has made the decision not to have contact. Having this insight may help to ease the hurt that can be felt when contact is refused. Contact, whether by letter or reunion is voluntary. It is your birth mother's decision whether or not she is in a position to establish contact, wishes to do so and the timing involved. This decision must be respected.

Research on outcomes

Some research studies suggest that 30-40% of adopted people search at some time in their lives. Adopted people do not always search hoping for a relationship or a reunion with their birth relatives. Why an adopted person searches may vary over the course of his/her life.

It is not always the adopted person who searches, birth relatives search as well. This is evident from the number of birth relatives who have signed on the National Adoption Contact Preference Register managed by the Adoption Authority of Ireland (see: www.aai.gov.ie). In general research studies in this area have found that the majority of people who search and have a reunion with a birth relative describe their experience as positive.