



Preparing for a meeting with your birth mother or birth father

It is recommended that you avail of the support and assistance of your adoption agency if you are planning to meet with your birth mother or birth father. A reunion meeting is a complex emotional process. Part of the social worker's role is to offer support to all those involved and to mediate and facilitate contact.

Studies have shown that a reunion can be a very positive experience even when it does not lead to an ongoing relationship. Generally those who meet consider that there are more advantages than disadvantages to meeting. Those who have met gain more knowledge about the other person and often experience a sense of healing as a result.

There are many issues that you should consider prior to your meeting. It may be one of the most significant events in your life and in the lives of those around you. It is therefore important to prepare for the initial meeting by considering the following:

- Why do you want to meet?
- What are your expectations of meeting your birth mother/birth father?
- How might the reunion affect the people you care about?
- Do you have someone you trust with whom you can discuss your hopes and expectations of this meeting?
- Are you prepared to be mindful of your birth mother's/birth father's feelings?
- Are you prepared to receive information which you may find difficult to accept? How might you handle this information?
- Have you thought about how you will accept your birth mother's/birth father's feelings, choices, lifestyles, if they are different from yours?
- What are your supports to help you cope if you are disappointed with the outcome of the reunion?
- How might it be if your birth mother/birth father wants a closer relationship than you anticipated or are ready for?

Further questions to reflect on:

- How will you feel if your birth mother/birth father has not told anybody about you and may not be ready or willing to do so?
- Are you prepared for the fact that the contact with your birth mother/birth father may be set at her/his pace?
- How will you feel if your birth mother has placed other children for adoption?
- Are you prepared for the different ways your siblings might react?
- Are you prepared for the different ways your birth parent's partner might react?
- How would you feel if your birth parents married each other and had more children?

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- How would you feel if your birth parents were not ready or willing to tell your half/full-siblings about you?
- How would you react if you were told difficult or sensitive information regarding your conception and/or birth? For example if the pregnancy was the result of non-consensual sexual relationship, incest or an extra- martial relationship.
- How would you feel if you learned that there are health issues in your birth family history, for example, mental health concerns, physical disabilities and/or genetic conditions?
- How would you feel if you learned that there is a history of alcohol or drug addiction?
- How would you feel if you learned that your birth parent had engaged in criminal behaviour?
- Are you aware of the issue of genetic sexual attraction?

The following steps can be useful before a first meeting:

- It is generally advised that first names only are used in letters during the early stages and that identifying details are not given. It is easier to share identifying information when both of you are happy and comfortable with the developing relationship. During this time of exchange of information and letter writing, take the opportunity to discuss with your social worker what identifying information you are comfortable sharing so as to ensure that your confidentiality is protected in case at some stage you decide that you do not wish to continue to have contact.
- Exchange of information – this can include a résumé of life events. This can be useful in bringing each person up-to-date on the other's life, and past and present circumstances. It can be helpful to have such information before a first meeting.
- Exchanging letters, photographs, tapes, dvd's'/video before a first meeting. Photographs or dvd's are a way of getting to know the person you are meeting. However not everyone will be comfortable with sharing photographs. Letters may give an opportunity to ask/answer some questions and to build up some information. Remember not everyone finds writing easy so you will need to take this into account both for yourself and for your birth parent(s).

Planning for a first meeting

The plan and structure of the meeting should be discussed with your social worker and it is best if these details are agreed by everyone beforehand.

Who attends?

Usually the first meeting is between you and the birth parent you have searched for. It is important that an opportunity is created for the people directly concerned to meet each other first.

How long should the meeting last?

This is hard to decide, but generally about 2 hours is a good rule of thumb. Because the first reunion meeting is an emotional event for everyone, it is important that you have enough time but also that it is not overwhelming. If your meeting is being facilitated by a social worker, he/she will offer to check in with you during the meeting, and you can decide if you feel this would be helpful.

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What else will help?

It will be important also to think about the following:

- Discuss where the meeting will take place. Your social worker will consult both of you and a decision will be reached regarding the location of the meeting.
- It will be important that the time you meet is arranged so that one person will plan to arrive earlier than the other person. Be sure you set it up so that you do not meet in the reception area of a building.
- Discuss with your social worker prior to the meeting what information you are happy to share, or not yet ready to share with your birth mother or birth father.
- Decide if you would like to have the social worker with you to make initial introductions.
- Some people like to bring a small gift, but this is not essential. Discuss this with your social worker before the meeting in order to see what might be best in your particular situation.
- Recognise that everyone will be nervous. Be yourself, use first names and try to relax.
- Consider bringing along some photographs. These can help to start and keep conversations going as you relate stories from the photographs.
- You may wish to bring a camera to your first meeting. It is a good idea to discuss this with your social worker so that you can find out if your birth parent is okay to have photographs taken.
- Be aware of both your own and your birth parent's need for privacy and be prepared for the fact that there may be some difficult or private issues which will not be discussed at the first meeting.
- It is important that the first meeting ends in a planned way. The ending of the meeting, especially if you are not sure what will happen next, can be very difficult and emotional for everyone involved.
- The first meeting can bring up emotions and feelings that you may not have expected or been prepared for. It is important to give yourself time to reflect on this first meeting. It is not advisable to rush into making plans for further meetings at this stage. Take some time out to decide if and how you would like to proceed with contact.
- At the end of the meeting it is a good idea for you both to contact the social worker to organise the next meeting if that is what you have agreed. Alternatively if you have agreed to share your phone numbers you can arrange further meetings directly with your birth parent.
- Arrange some support for yourself. It is not advised to return directly to work or to college after the reunion. Many meetings can be emotionally exhausting for everyone involved. Take time out either by yourself or with a friend or family member.

The first meeting may be different from what you had expected. You may need some support and a chance to reflect on the experience and your feelings afterwards. Sometimes it can be disappointing for one or both parties, particularly where one or the other has expectations of a warm relationship that is not shared by the other person. Your social worker will provide support for you and may be able to put you in touch with others who have had experiences similar to your own.

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The support of your social worker will continue to be available to you for as long as you wish after the reunion so you should feel at ease asking for this help if you need it.