



Post reunion issues for everyone involved

Many people who have had a reunion with a member of their birth family find that some questions and concerns still remain. This leaflet seeks to offer assistance in this area.

Are reunions generally successful?

This question is often posed by people to help them make a decision whether or not to proceed to a first meeting. Adoption research has shown that a majority of people involved in a reunion are glad they took the decision to have a first meeting, but that not all of those continue to meet or have a relationship with their birth family member. The following is an outline of some of the stages and issues that can arise in post-reunion relationships. These stages are only a guide and do not necessarily happen in sequence. Indeed, they may, or may not be evident in your life after a reunion.

First stage – getting to know you

Some reunions may happen as a once-off meeting. This may be because the adopted person or birth relative may only wish to have one meeting or because the relationship between them does not develop beyond an initial meeting. Each reunion is a unique experience for the individuals involved. The reunion process you are entering is uncharted territory. As a result it is wise to consider how much identifying information you are ready to share at this early stage for example your telephone number and address. It is easier to provide further information as a relationship develops rather than regret having shared information too early. It is important to respect an individual's decision to share or not to share identifying information.

The first stage is sometimes described as the honeymoon stage in which those involved try to get to know each other and spend time with each other. This period can be very intense and can lead to feelings of exclusion for others in your family.

Some issues that may need to be discussed at this stage in the relationship include:

- What to call each other.
- When and how to introduce each other to friends/acquaintances.
- How often to meet and have contact. This may be determined by distance and location but can lead to difficulties if one person has very different expectations to the other, or if one person does not respect the wishes of the other.
- Agreeing the frequency, time and date of contact arrangements. For example, checking with each other whether it is best to text first and then call. It may be important to arrange a specific time to call that suits you both.

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Apart from practical issues you may also need to;

- Try to develop an awareness of and sensitivity to each other's lives and the commitments each of you have to partners and family members.
- Consider sharing information regarding conception, the birth and the decision to place your child for adoption. This information may include details about the birth father and his family.

It is important to remember that sharing this information may be very painful for a birth mother. It may be difficult and emotional for an adopted person to hear this information as well. If you are not ready to share this information at this time it is important that your wishes will be respected.

Genetic Sexual Attraction

During this stage, a small number of people describe a feeling of being attracted to their birth relative which can include a sexual attraction to a father, mother, son, daughter or sibling. A reunion may be the first time that the adopted person has had an opportunity to meet someone who is genetically linked to them. Some people feel attracted to a birth family member without any sexual component being present. Where there is a sexual component it is generally described as genetic sexual attraction. These feelings can be very powerful and may threaten to overwhelm those involved. If these feelings do arise for you it is really important that you talk about them with your social worker. Your social worker is likely to have experience of working through similar issues with other people and will be able to offer you advice and support.

Second Stage - pulling back

This is described as a 'time out' stage in which one person feels less closely involved than he/she appeared to be in the first stage. It can be very hurtful for the other person and it may increase fears of being rejected and or abandoned. It may also bring feelings of loss and grief. This stage can also include a need to look at the new relationship and to see how it is working for all involved. The relationship may then either settle down into a mutually agreeable level of contact, or, in some instances, it may end completely.

Issues which may need to be resolved during this period are:

- If it is to be successful, the new relationship needs to take into account the lifestyle and commitments of the other person.
- If you and or your son or daughter have not told significant family members about each other it will pose challenges for your relationship.
- Once the initial intense period has passed, other considerations come into play such as sharing or not sharing common interests, lifestyles, values and goals. Where two people are very different, it may be more difficult to get to know each other well and to enjoy each other's company.
- Where the birth mother and the birth father have not stayed in touch and now have contact, they may need to negotiate a relationship that does not threaten their present relationships. It is important to recognise the emotions and challenges involved in this process.

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- One of the possible realisations for everyone at this stage is that no reunion can replace the years that have passed since the adoption. This can lead to feelings of sadness and anger for some or all concerned and these feelings can re-emerge at any time. It is important to acknowledge these feelings and accept them, as otherwise they may interfere with the new relationship in a negative way.
- At this time challenges around identity and the role played in each other's lives can emerge for everyone involved.

Third stage - maintaining the link

This is described as the solidifying stage. Issues continue to be resolved and to be reworked. The relationship is moving more steadily and along more solid lines. New issues can arise, for example invitations to weddings and christenings. Interpersonal and interfamily conflicts develop, as they do in all families. Where conflicts remain unresolved, one or other person may decide to terminate the relationship completely. This is less likely to happen where both people establish good communication, are flexible and have similar expectations of each other. Over time the new relationship may need to be negotiated and renegotiated as individual needs, wishes and expectations change.

Post reunion support

After the reunion meeting is over, you are embarking on another journey and as with the experience you have just been through, one which is largely uncharted. However, other people have travelled this path and social workers in adoption have considerable experience of the issues surrounding the post-reunion period. Talk to your social worker at any time if you feel you need support with any of these issues and he/she will be glad to assist.