



## ICSWA Information Leaflet

### **Searching for Siblings:**

Changes in legislation have granted adopted and other individuals the right to access information about their birth origins. The Birth Information and Tracing Act was legislated for in 2022. People who were adopted, boarded out, the subject of an illegal birth registration, or born in a Mother and Baby Home or a County Home, now have clear access to information and records about their birth and early life.

Consequently, many people discover the existence of siblings for the first time. They may find that they have full or half-siblings, who could be either older or younger than them.

The Adoption Authority of Ireland and the TUSLA Child and Family Agency Adoption Tracing Service have been strengthened on a statutory basis by the Birth Information and Tracing legislation. Social Workers have the skills and experience to advise and support those going through the process and allow relationships to develop in a paced way. Working with a Social Worker can help people and their sibling throughout this emotional and complex process.

Social Workers, working as intermediaries can help maintain a sense of privacy and control until people feel ready to have contact with each other.

A Contact Preference Register has been established on a legislative basis under the Birth Information and Tracing legislation. This register enables an adopted person, parents or other relatives over the age of 18 years old to register a preference in relation to contact with each other. Social work support is available in regard to this. Applicants will be notified by the Adoption Authority of a match with a relative who is also on the register. It is advisable for those enquiring about their siblings to join the Contact Preference Register, irrespective of adoption status.

Further information on the Birth Information and Tracing Act can be obtained at:

[www.birthinfo.ie](http://www.birthinfo.ie)

### **Sibling Search:**

These siblings may have been:

- Raised by your birth mother and/or birth father.
- Raised by a family member.
- Raised in a foster family or boarded out.
- Raised by adoptive parents.
- Subject to an illegal birth registration.
- Raised in an institution.

Discovering that you have siblings can be exciting but also overwhelming. It may take some time for you and your family to adjust to the knowledge of their existence.

When embarking on a search, it is recommended to consider the following questions:

- What is motivating your search?
- Is it curiosity, clarification of the past, or establishing a longed-for-relationship?
- What are your hopes and expectations in tracing your siblings?
- What might be the potential impact on you and your family?
- Will you proceed with the assistance of a Tracing Service?

TUSLA Child and Family Agency or the Adoption Authority of Ireland provide this service.

Please see their websites for more information:

[www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie)

[www.aai.gov.ie](http://www.aai.gov.ie)

### **Other considerations:**

- Will you proceed to search without the help of a Tracing Service?
- Do you have the support of a close friend or family member?
- Have you considered potential cultural and ethnic differences?
- Have you considered tracing through a DNA test?
- Are you aware of the professional support services such as Barnardo's and HSE Counselling Services?
- Have you considered possible differences in life experiences?
- Have you considered finding out unexpected information that may come as a surprise?

Please see these websites for more information:

[www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)

[www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)

## **Guidance on Making Contact with Siblings:**

### **1. Adopted Person Tracing an Adopted Sibling:**

Several considerations arise when initiating a search for a sibling placed for adoption. For instance:

- Your sibling may be unaware of their adoption or birth family history.
- It may be unexpected for your sibling to hear that they have a brother or sister who was placed for adoption.
- Your sibling might have existing relationships with birth parents or other siblings.
- Discovering multiple adopted siblings can be overwhelming.

### **2. Adopted Person Tracing a Sibling who was not adopted:**

Sibling awareness varies, and family members may differ in their readiness for contact. Each situation is unique, and responses may differ.

### **3. Siblings Raised by Birth Parents Tracing an Adopted Sibling:**

Similar considerations apply when contact involves siblings raised by birth parents and adopted siblings. It is crucial to discuss your plans with your birth parents and consider potential emotional implications for them and others in the family.

A Social Worker from a Tracing Service can provide support for you in these situations. Professional support services, like Barnardo's, or your GP or HSE Counselling Services may also be beneficial.

## **New Developments:**

Under the Birth Information Act 2022, you will be given information about your birth family which may enable you to search on the Internet and on social media. It is helpful to think ahead about what you intend to do regarding a trace. Many adopted people find it helpful to have the support of an Adoption Social Worker who can provide intermediary support throughout this process and has the skills to help you deal with the complex emotions that may arise for you.

### **A. Using Social Networking Sites/Media for Tracing:**

Whilst using social media can be a tempting way to trace, there are concerns about privacy if you decide to take this route. For example:

- Consider your sibling's feelings if they discover your search through these sites.
- A lot of personal information is shared on these sites.
- This may be overwhelming for both parties.
- Reflect on how you would feel if the roles were reversed.
- Consider how you would feel about having so much information so quickly.

Despite the appeal of easy access to information, exercise caution. Confidentiality isn't always assured, and the process may go beyond your control.

### **Social Networking for Tracing Siblings:**

Social networking sites offer an immediate contact point, but this may have advantages and disadvantages. Consider the following points:

- It's easier to find a person on social media than finding an address or email account.
- The person being approached may feel pressure to respond as soon as they receive a message, while a personal written letter may allow them more time to think through the implications and prepare for contact. Be aware of your privacy and that of the person you are tracing. Once information is shared, it cannot be retracted and can have serious consequences for how the relationship develops.
- Consider your own privacy settings on your own social media.
- If sending a private message, there may be several reasons why you may not get a response. The person may still be emotionally processing your message or do not have the messenger application and thus did not receive it.
- Using social media as a searching tool is likely to provide you with an opportunity to see your birth family living their life, perhaps with a spouse or children. This can bring you comfort, or it can make you feel envious or sad.
- It can also be used as a medium to let them know that you're happy and doing well through your own posts and can give you both some peace of mind.
- You will be able to reflect on the image you had of your birth family, and you will get to see them living their daily lives closer to reality. This can be disillusioning for some or bring peace of mind to others.
- You both need to be more aware of what you share on social media and how it can affect the other person and their wider circle.
- Whatever happens, you'll need to be ready to accept any result with respect and empathy.

- CORAM (formerly BAAF - British Association for Adoption and Fostering) has compiled a useful guide in relation to social networking sites and tracing, available at:  
[www.coram.org.uk](http://www.coram.org.uk)

## **B. Using DNA to Search for Birth-family:**

Advances in scientific technology have made DNA testing kits widely commercialised and accessible, and their popularity on the Internet has boomed. This has created new opportunities for the adoption community to find birth relatives independently, whether they are registered with a tracing service or not.

Discoveries through DNA for adopted people can result in very quick results in relation to obtaining a connection with their birth relatives. This can be exciting and at the same time overwhelming.

Recent research in Ireland (Linehan, 2021) highlights on the experience of Irish adopted people who undertake a trace using DNA.

The following is a list of advantages and disadvantages they experienced that was included in this research:

1. It can provide individuals with their human ethnicity, history, ancestry and genealogy.
2. A number of participants agree that tracing through DNA testing was accurate quicker, honest, and fact-based.
3. It can highlight potential genetic medical and health conditions in family history.
4. Provides answers when other options fail.
5. Information can be controlled if privacy settings are used correctly.
6. Some found that biological relatives were not willing to be contacted. This can result in frustration.
7. There was no controlled way of making contact and a lack of guidance and support on how to deal with results.
8. There were concerns raised about the potential risks and limitations of companies providing DNA testing. The financial expense of the service, the significant waiting times, and a lack of professional support to decipher results and the information may also be a source of concern.
9. DNA testing provides adopted people with greater autonomy.
10. This method also enables adopted people to obtain family health history without initiating contact prematurely with biological relatives. It can also be the case that some outcomes lead to a lack of close matches and there can be the complexity of interpreting results.
11. The lack of professional help when using private tracing methods often leaves adopted people in a vulnerable position.

This research is available from:

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/carl/DeniseLinehanCARLReport2021.pdf>

### **Possible Outcomes of Tracing Siblings:**

If you decide to trace your siblings through the Information and Tracing Services, there are several possible outcomes worth considering:

- Your sibling may not be aware of your existence and may need some time to come to terms with this information.
- Your sibling may not be open to contact.
- Your sibling may only be prepared to exchange some information.
- Your sibling may be open to contact and the possibility of meeting.
- Your sibling may have more information and/or contact with other birth family members.

### **Preparing for Contact with Your Sibling:**

As with any other birth relative, contact with a sibling is voluntary. It is an individual's decision as to whether or not they want to establish contact with you and the timing involved. This decision must be respected.

### **Advice on Writing Letters:**

Social Workers encourage those who are searching to begin contact with a letter as it is a positive way of engaging with the person who has been located. Prior to meeting, correspondence provides a unique opportunity to share information. It can help build a relationship, making the initial meeting easier and more comfortable. Email, telephone, and text communication, although faster, usually demand an immediate response. Writing letters allows you to take time, reflect on the process, and make informed decisions on how you wish to pace the contact. It may be useful for you to read the Post Adoption Information Leaflet for Adopted People "Beginning the contact with your birth mother or birth father" as the suggestions may be helpful in beginning contact with a sibling. See the ICSWA website for further information.

### **Contact Meetings:**

The timing of a meeting varies enormously, depending on how comfortable both parties feel about this. It is only organised by the Social Worker when both parties have expressed a wish to do so. In most situations, a meeting is held in person. However, in recent years, in light of technological advances, a virtual meeting can take place via a video call. This is particularly helpful in situations where siblings live abroad.

### **How Do Sibling Contacts Generally Work Out?**

It may be useful for you to read the Post Adoption Information Leaflet No 9 for Adopted People, "Preparing for a reunion meeting with your birth mother or birth father" as the suggestions outlined apply equally to meeting a sibling.

Meetings between siblings tend to be less complicated than reunions between a birth mother or birth father and an adopted person. Research studies have found that sibling contacts often work out well, and relationships tend to be long term in duration, but they can vary as much as other relationships. Shared common interests, similar lifestyles, or similar occupations can help build an ongoing relationship.

### **Post-Contact Meeting Support:**

After there has been initial contact, 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 with the issues that arise in the post-contact period. Talk to your Social Worker at any time if you feel you need support, and he/she will be glad to assist you.

### **Things to Consider:**

On rare occasions, some siblings may experience feelings of attraction to each other. Contact with a sibling can sometimes 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 their 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 essential that you talk about them with your social worker, who may have come across this before and will be able to offer you advice and support.

### **Challenges Around Identity and Roles:**

One of the possible realisations for you at this stage, is that meeting your sibling cannot replace the years that you did not know one another. This can lead to feelings of sadness and anger and these feelings can re-emerge at any time. It is important that you acknowledge these feelings and accept them; as otherwise, they may interfere with your new relationships in a negative way. At this time, challenges around identity and the roles played in each other's lives can emerge for everyone involved.

**Beginning the Relationship:**

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

**Developing the Relationship:**

You may experience ups and downs in your relationship with your sibling. The advice for this relationship, like many others, is to take your time, do not rush, but enjoy getting to know the other person. Try to develop an understanding of his/her life and give each other space when needed.

One of the tasks of any relationship is working out whether you like the other person and have something in common with them. Like any relationship, it will require negotiation and recognition of the different needs that each person brings to the new relationship.

It can be important to try and gain insight into your sibling's life and experiences. For example, if you are adopted, it may be useful to meet a sibling who is adopted as well. If you meet a sibling who was raised by your birth parent, you can also learn about the grief and loss that a birth parent can experience and how that can impact on their children. If you are not adopted, learning about the feelings of adopted people can be helpful.

**Final Considerations:**

You can always learn more by talking to your Social Worker, by reading relevant information, and by accessing adoption support groups such as Barnardo's Post Adoption Support Service.



**Bibliography:**

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Denise Linehan 2021

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