



General information about adoption in Ireland and the first steps in finding out more about an adoption

Adoption in Ireland

The Adoption Act 1952 introduced legal adoption into Ireland for the first time. The Adoption Act 2010 consolidates all of the legislation pertaining to adoption in Ireland as well as ratifying the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

The nature and effect of an Irish Adoption Order is that the child becomes the child of the adopters as if born to them within marriage. This means the child has the same family name and the same legal rights as if he/she had been born into the adoptive family. Adoption in Ireland is regulated by the Adoption Authority of Ireland which is an independent quasi judicial statutory body appointed by Government. (See Adoption Authority website for details on all of the Adoption Acts governing adoption in Ireland and for the Authority's current functions and services: www.aai.gov.ie)

The Adoption Authority of Ireland is responsible for:

- The issuing of Adoption Orders
- The operation of the National Adoption Contact Preference Register (NACPR) which enables adopted people and birth family members to register their wishes regarding contact with each other.
- The registration and supervision of the Accredited Bodies. Some of these were previously known as Registered Adoption Societies.
- The regulation of domestic and intercountry adoption practices.
- The maintenance of the Irish and Intercountry Adoption Registers which records the birth names and adopted names of children who have been adopted.
- Issuing Declarations of Eligibility and Suitability to prospective adoptive parents.

Enquires about any aspect of adoption can be directed to the Adoption Authority: www.aai.gov.ie

Historical Context

Since 1952 almost 40,000 Adoption Orders have been made in the State. Between the years 1952 to 1973, nearly 4,000 children were placed for adoption outside Ireland. The majority of these children were adopted by Irish-American families in the United States. Many Irish birth mothers also placed children for adoption in the United Kingdom.

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There are many reasons why children were placed for adoption in the past. These included:

- The social stigma attached to being a single parent and also the stigma attached to children born outside of marriage. This was particularly true until the end of the 1970's.
- Lack of financial support to single parents and their children. The first social welfare payment to single parents was made in 1973.
- The wish of single parents to have their children reared in a two parent family.

The spirit of the 1952 Adoption Act was based on a closed system of adoption. It was not envisaged that a birth parent or an adopted person would ever seek to have contact with each other again. Confidentiality surrounding adoption of children was of paramount concern. The majority of children were placed through registered adoption agencies or the local Health Boards (now Health Service Executive). Children were also placed in adoptive families in the following ways:

- Family Adoptions: Where a child was placed with a known family member, for example with the birth parent's sister, or aunt or with grandparents.
- Third Party Arrangements: Where a child was placed with a family by a third party, for example a doctor, solicitor, nurse or members of the clergy.
- Privately: Some children were placed privately in an adoptive family known to the birth mother, birth father or other birth family members.
- Informal arrangements: There is evidence that some babies were registered in their 'adoptive' family name as if they had been born into that family. No legal adoption order was made in those cases.

Trends in adoption placements

A major reduction in the numbers of Irish children being placed for adoption began in the late 1970's. By 1990 only 8% of children born outside marriage to Irish mothers were placed for adoption. Since the introduction of the Adoption Act 1991, the adoption of children from abroad by Irish residents has become the most common way for adoptive families to be formed. Between 1991 and 2008 over 5,000 children were adopted internationally (Adoption Board Annual Report 2008). An upward trend in international adoptions continued in the following years, however with the ratification of The Hague Convention in 2010 the number of countries from which Irish prospective adopters can adopt has decreased and it remains to be seen what trends will emerge in the future.

Adoption Services

All Health Service Executive areas provide an adoption service. See HSE Website for more details: www.hse.ie. Accredited Bodies registered by the Adoption Authority also provide a range of adoption services. See The Adoption Authority's website for all Accredited Bodies registered under the Adoption Act 2010 www.aai.gov.ie

Registration of a child's birth

Every birth in Ireland is entered in the Register of Births and a Birth Certificate can be issued from this Register. When a child is adopted into a new family an Adoption Order is granted, and the child's details are then registered in the Adopted Children's Register. A new Adoption Certificate, which has exactly the same legal function and standing as a birth certificate is issued for the child who has been adopted.

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This Adoption Certificate records the registration of the child's new identity/name and the certificate includes the names of the adoptive parents as the legal parents of the child. The certificate is a copy of the entry in the Register of Adopted Children.

Amended Baptismal Certificates

Once an Adoption Order is made, the adoptive parents' information is added to the original baptismal record. An amended baptismal certificate is issued for each adopted child in the parish area in which they reside. The original baptismal certificate is usually kept in the Diocesan office of the parish in which the child was born.

Access to Birth Certificates

Adopted people do not have an absolute right to obtain access to their birth certificates. However, adopted people can apply to the Adoption Authority of Ireland and request access to their birth certificate under Section 86 of the Adoption Act 2010. This section enables the Adoption Authority or a Court to direct that the adopted person be given access to the original entry of his or her birth in the records maintained by the Registrar General of Births.

All written enquiries can be sent to: Adoption Authority of Ireland, Shelbourne House, Shelbourne Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4. Tel Ph: 01 2309300 and Freephone 1800 309 300. Email: info@aai.gov.ie Website : www.aai.gov.ie. The Adoption Authority applies certain criteria in relation to the release of birth certificates, one of which is that the birth mother is consulted as to her wishes in relation to the release of the birth certificate to the adopted person. Decisions by the Authority are made on a case by case basis and further information is available from the Authority.

First steps in searching for information about an adoption

You can make a direct enquiry to the agency involved in your adoption. If you do not know the name of the agency, this information will be available to you from: The Adoption Authority of Ireland, Shelbourne House, Shelbourne Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin 4. Tel: 01-2309300 Freephone 1800 309 300. Email: info@aai.gov.ie.

A letter or an email to the Adoption Authority or to the agency should include the following information:

- Your full name and any previous name.
- Your date of birth
- Your current address and contact details including phone number.
- The full names and address of your adoptive parents at the time the adoption order was granted.
- Some form of photo identification, for example; a copy of your passport or driver's licence.

You should also state what information you would like to obtain. The Adoption Authority and adoption agencies welcome enquiries, all of which are treated confidentially.

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National Adoption Contact Preference Register (NACPR)

It is also advisable to consider placing your name on the National Adoption Contact Preference Register which is operated by the Adoption Authority of Ireland. The NACPR was established in 2005 by the Adoption Board. The NACPR facilitates contact between an adopted person and a birth mother, a birth father, a sibling or other birth relatives. Participation is voluntary and contact through the NACPR will only be initiated where both an adopted person and a birth relative register and wish to have contact.

The NACPR allows you to choose whatever level of contact you wish to have. It also includes an option to have no contact with other parties to the adoption if this is your wish. Those who register on the NACPR can indicate their preference about the level of contact and this ranges from:

1. Willing to meet
2. Contact via telephone
3. Contact via email
4. Exchange of letters/information
5. No contact but willing to share medical information
6. No contact but willing to share background information
7. No contact at the moment

The NACPR is confidential and once a match is made through the Register the adopted person and the birth family member will be informed by the Adoption Authority. For further information contact the Adoption Authority of Ireland.

The application form for the National Adoption Contact Preference Register can be downloaded from the Adoption Authority website: www.aai.gov.ie



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?

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.



Adopted people thinking about searching

Everyone's experience of adoption is unique. For some adopted people curiosity about their origins may begin in childhood and continue into adulthood. For others it may be an interest that is sparked following a significant transitional event, for example: when moving away from home, getting married, the birth of a child, the death of a parent or moving into middle/late adulthood. This wish to have more information and/or to consider searching is, for some, a normal part of adoption. Some adopted people may not feel this curiosity or need to search and this too is quite normal.

An adopted person's wish to learn more about his/her birth family may be influenced by many factors which might include: his/her own personal experience of being placed for adoption, his/her own personal experience within their adoptive family, feelings of a sense of belonging to more than one family, questions about identity, age when told about being adopted, and a wish to have more understanding and insight into the reasons that he/she was placed for adoption. Often an adopted person will have considered the possibility of tracing a birth parent long before making any enquiries. He/she may have a variety of motivations for seeking information and tracing a birth parent. These motivations can shift and change over time.

Some adopted people may approach their adoption agency with a view to finding non-identifying background information and/or medical history about themselves and their birth family, but do not necessarily have a wish to trace or meet a birth parent. For others their goal may be to trace and have a reunion meeting with a birth parent. It is important to consider whether or not this is the right time to begin a search. The tracing process can be an emotional journey that can have a deep and long-lasting impact on the adopted person and the birth relatives involved.

Some adopted people may be hesitant or reluctant to trace a birth parent for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons might be:

- An adopted person may feel that tracing his/her birth parent is disloyal to his/her adoptive parents.
- An adopted person may feel that he/she does not have the right to trace and make contact with a birth parent. This view may be influenced by perceived societal and/or familial expectations.
- An adopted person may be fearful of the possibility of being rejected by a birth parent.
- It may be too difficult for the adopted person to consider opening himself/herself up to the tracing process.

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- It may be too painful for an adopted person to consider and reflect on his/her experience of being placed for adoption.
- An adopted person may feel that he/she does not wish to stir up past emotions, feelings and experiences.
- An adopted person may be anxious about what he/she will discover during the course of the trace.

In deciding if this is the right time to approach your adoption agency, with a view to tracing your birth parent, it is important to explore and reflect on the following:

- What/who is motivating you to make contact with your birth parent?
- Do you have realistic ideas and expectations of the possible outcomes?
- Are you prepared for the unexpected and not knowing what the search will reveal?
- What are your fantasies, hopes, fears and dreams about your birth parents/relatives?

You can also discuss these questions with your social worker in the adoption agency. Ultimately it is important that the decision to search is yours. This is a journey that can be enriching, fulfilling, painful, frustrating, enlightening and healing. It is important to consider whether or not you are ready for whatever the journey may reveal.

For many people the search is taken up and dropped several times before reaching any conclusion. The search needs to be seen as a step-by-step process. At times the search can be quite quick and at other times be long and frustrating. It is important that you decide your own pace and allow yourself time to absorb new information as it arises and to give yourself time to adjust to new feelings and experiences.

At all stages help and support from experienced professionals can be valuable in helping you deal with the emotional and practical challenges of the decision to search.

If you are an adopted person being sought or searched for by your birth mother or birth father

Usually it is the adopted person who undertakes a search for his/her birth family, however in some cases birth mothers, birth fathers, siblings and other birth relatives may initiate an enquiry. If you have been contacted in such circumstances you may experience a variety of feelings which can range from excitement, anxiety, concern, to elation and curiosity. You may be concerned about the impact that this contact may have on your adoptive parents and siblings and your relationships with them. These feelings are all normal and to be expected. With support and the opportunity to talk about your feelings it may be possible to reach a decision about the best response you can give at this time.

Birth mothers and birth fathers search for a number of reasons. Their motivations may include, enquiring about their son or daughter's well being and sharing factual information such as their medical history.

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Some adopted people and birth parents wish to keep their contact confidential. Adoption agencies can facilitate the exchange of letters and information, and arrange meetings between adopted people and birth parents in a discreet and confidential manner.

It is important for birth parents and adopted people to have respect for each other's privacy and individuality.



Common phases in the search process

Having made the decision to search for your birth mother or birth father you may find that you experience many emotions during the search process. These experiences will not necessarily fall into any particular order and they can reoccur over time. The phases outlined below draw on the experiences of others. You may find some similarity with your own experience.

First Phase - Practical issues

Initially, most people find they are distant from the emotions involved in searching. At the beginning you may express your desire to search in terms of practical, concrete issues, such as a wish for information, or to pass on information. You may discover that your motivations become more complex as time passes.

During this first phase, some people may decide not to share their wish to search. They believe they will be able to deal with it quietly and they may prefer to tell people when they themselves feel ready.

Generally this phase does not last long and it changes the more involved one becomes in the search. You may find this period confusing as you gradually realise that the search is more of an emotional experience than you had anticipated.

It is important to understand that as you progress with the search your initial reasons for searching will remain, but many other complex emotions and issues will most likely become part of your journey.

You may need to explain to those close to you that this may happen, and that it is possible the search will take up a lot of your time and energy. This will, hopefully, prepare them for some of the emotions you may experience during the journey.

Second Phase - Intensity of feelings

During the second stage of your search you will often find that emotions become more intense. These feelings can sometimes manifest themselves as anger and frustration at the way the process unfolds, e.g. frustration that you are not legally entitled to certain information about yourself or anger at your lack of control over events. Feelings of loss and grief can also come to the surface. Some people feel guilty that they have a desire to search for information and/or contact, and wonder if they are being disloyal to their adoptive families.

The intensity of these feelings may make you feel uncomfortable and uncertain. If you have the opportunity to talk with someone else similarly engaged in the search process, you will discover that many people share your experience.

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Support will be important to help you to deal with the complexity of the emotions you may be experiencing.

Third Phase – Pre-occupation with the search

There may come a time during your search when the process of tracing becomes all consuming. You may have to accept that at times it is difficult for those close to you to respond to your needs completely. They may not fully understand the complexity of the issues from your perspective. They may express a desire that you keep things in perspective. You may have to accept that at times it is difficult for those close to you to respond and to support you as you may wish them to.

Fourth Phase – Time out

Following a period of determination to reach your goal, it can happen that you find yourself withdrawing somewhat, and you may decide to put the search on hold. You may simply need a rest from the emotional roller coaster you have been on. You may need more time to examine the feelings that have come to the surface, and most importantly, you may need more time to absorb new information. You may fear that you could discover something deeply distressing, or that your birth relative may not respond.

For some people this is the final phase, but for others, it is a temporary phase. It may last days, weeks, months or years. This withdrawal may also confuse those close to you. They may be surprised at your decision to halt a search that has been so important to you, and they may be surprised if you decide to resume the search again. Allow yourself the space to take time out when and if the need arises. It is important to remember that this is your search and you need to go at the pace that feels right for you.

Fifth Phase – Acceptance

This phase is arrived at when you accept whatever you have discovered. It can mean continuing with your search, or coming to terms with the fact that your initial hopes may be unrealistic. It may mean that there is an opportunity to meet your birth relative. Reaching a level of acceptance does not reduce the need for support. This is especially true if a reunion is going to take place, in which case you may be need support more than ever.

Everyone experiences the phases of search differently. It is impossible to clearly map any one person's journey, as each search deals with unique circumstances.



Issues and feelings for all involved

Introduction

A number of core emotional experiences which are common to adopted people, birth families and adoptive families have been identified. How an adopted person, a birth parent and an adoptive parent may experience some of these core emotional experiences is outlined below. All of the emotions described are unique to each person. Exploring these emotions and knowing and understanding the different emotions that others may have can assist each person to gain a deeper insight into the impact and effects of the adoption and search process.

Loss

Within adoption the experience of loss needs to be considered. Everyone involved in adoption will have experienced loss to some degree. As a result of gaining a new family through adoption a child loses contact and the opportunity to grow up with the birth family. The birth family loses the opportunity to raise the child and is usually not involved in the child's life. The adoptive parents may have experienced the loss of never having a child born to them.

Traditionally, secrecy was a part of the adoption process. It was believed that secrecy offered the best protection to everyone involved in adoption. This emphasis on secrecy has made it difficult for people to express sadness with regard to their feelings of loss. During the search there are times when one may feel incredibly sad despite the fact there is great happiness attached to potential or actual contact. It will be important to talk about these feelings of loss and sadness with others who can understand either because of their own personal experiences, or because of their professional training and experience.

Grief

When loss is hidden it is more difficult for people to grieve for that loss. In the normal course of grieving there are a number of identified stages of grief: shock and denial, guilt, anger, sadness and resolution. When a loss is not acknowledged, for example the loss of the opportunity to have been reared by your birth family, an adopted person can experience what is termed 'disenfranchised grief'.

Similarly a birth parent can experience this in not rearing his/her own child. This can add an extra 'layer' to one's grief as society may perceive that the person has no right to grieve.

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It is important to seek support for these feelings with someone you feel comfortable with. On the other hand, some adopted people do not feel they have experienced grief around the issue of their adoption. Neither way of feeling is right or wrong.

Birth parents who have kept their child's adoption a secret may also have been unable to grieve for a long time. They may not remember information about the adoption and talk about 'keeping a lid on their pain'. It can be very painful for a birth parent to revisit these blocked or repressed memories.

The overwhelming joy and happiness experienced by adoptive parents at the time of the adoption pushes any feelings of loss that they may have had in relation to adoption into the background. They too often describe finding it difficult to talk about their own sense of loss.

This need to grieve can sometimes be overwhelming. It is important to be able to seek support from those close to you and/or your social worker who is experienced in this area.

Rejection

Some adopted people may struggle with feelings of rejection as a result of their adoption.

Birth parents may feel they have been judged not to be good enough to parent a child. They often fear that people close to them will reject them if they confide that they have previously placed a child for adoption. They may also fear that the child they placed for adoption will reject them or be hostile towards them.

When an adopted person expresses a wish to seek information about his/her birth family and identity it can have a deep and resonating impact for an adoptive parent. Adoptive parents may feel a sense of being rejected by their son or daughter. This can be a concern for adopted people who are considering tracing a birth parent.

Guilt and shame

When people blame themselves with regard to a loss, they can experience guilt. Adopted people may feel shame at being different and may feel guilty about their need to search. Birth parents may feel guilt and shame about placing their child for adoption. Adoptive parents sometimes express guilt for the loss to the birth parent of his/her child.

Identity

'Who am I?' is often a question which motivates adopted people to search. This question also influences everyone connected with the adoption. Adoptive parents can also question their identity as parents because they do not have a biological tie with their child. Birth parents lose their identity as the parent who raises the child. For example they find it difficult to respond when asked how many children they have. For many years they may have had to, at least in public, deny the existence of their children relinquished for adoption.

Adopted people lose their birth family identity through adoption and take on a new identity with their adoptive families. Most people take for granted the availability of

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information such as who they look like or other related family traits. This information contributes to the development of a sense of self and it is not available to adopted people.

Uncertainty about one's identity can lead to feeling of low self esteem. As new information becomes available and new relationships evolve during the search and reunion journey, new questions concerning identity may also emerge.

Intimacy

People who have experienced confusion about their identity may have difficulty getting close to others. Since they have experienced significant losses in their lives, they may have difficulty becoming intimate with others because they fear they may experience another loss. A fear of intimacy can lead to a lack of trust in relationships or at times difficulties in giving an on-going commitment to others.

Control

Feelings regarding control or lack of control may be triggered during the course of the search. All those involved in adoption have experienced the sense of a lack of control over a significant aspect of their lives. The loss of control may have a long term effect because it can induce a sense of insecurity.

Birth parents may feel victimised and powerless about the decision to place their child for adoption. Adoptive parents may not feel fully entitled to be parents to their adopted children because they are not the biological parents. Adopted people may also experience these feelings as they had no control over the decision to place them for adoption.

Control is an important issue within the traditional adoption system and it can be perceived that control lies with another party, e.g. with the social worker in the agency, with the birth mother or the adopted person in relation to the scheduling of any meetings, and with the adoptive family in relation to acceptance of the need to have a relationship with the birth family.

Some of the issues outlined above may seem familiar to you, others may not. However, it is likely that some of them may emerge or re-emerge during your search journey. Experiencing such issues may be very emotional and may cause pain and grief to come to the surface. This is why it is important to seek support during your journey. This support can come from many sources, your family, a trusted friend, or a social worker or other experienced health professional.



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.



Possible outcomes of the search for your birth father

Many adopted people who initially search for their birth mother may then wish to make contact with their birth father. It is important that you know that in order for your birth father to be contacted his identity will need to be confirmed by your birth mother. If your birth mother is unable or unwilling to provide information about your birth father it may be extremely difficult to proceed with the search.

Your birth father may not have any knowledge of what happened to your or your birth mother. Your birth mother's circumstances at the time may have been complex and communication may not have been possible between your birth parents.

Many adopted people who begin a search for their birth father wonder what the outcome may be. This leaflet offers some information and help 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 father is found and wishes to have contact

Your birth father 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 father 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 to get to know your birth father and possibly develop the foundation of a relationship.

A reunion may be a once-off meeting between an adopted person and a birth father 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. Some birth parents may decide that they cannot tell their other children while others 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.

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- On occasions when birth parents have married they may not wish to have contact this can be a very difficult outcome.
- This may be the first time that your birth father has learned about your existence and in view of this it may take him some time to respond to the request for contact.
- Your birth father'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 that was experienced by mothers and fathers of children born in these circumstances.
- Your birth father may have difficulty in telling you about his relationship with your birth mother and the decision to place you for adoption. The reasons for this may be that:
 - Your birth father's experience of placing you for adoption could have had a long-lasting traumatic impact on him. When contact is established difficult and painful memories may resurface for him and as a result he may not be willing to have contact or to share information.
 - Your birth parents may have had a very short or difficult relationship.
 - Your birth father may not have been aware of the pregnancy at the time.
 - Your birth father may not have been involved in the decision making process regarding your adoption.
 - Circumstances may have forced your parents to end their relationship.
 - Your birth father may not have given support to your birth mother at the time of the pregnancy and he may find this difficult now that you want to meet him and know what happened.
 - Your birth father may be a close family relative.
 - The pregnancy may have been as a result of a non-consensual sexual relationship.
 - Your birth may have been as a result of an extra marital relationship.

Unable to locate your birth father

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

- There may be very little identifying information on the record regarding your birth father.
- The length of time that has elapsed since the adoption agency had contact with your birth father.
- Your birth father may have moved from the address on the adoption agency's records.
- Your birth father may have moved multiple times or may have emigrated.
- Incorrect identifying information may have been given at the time of the adoption.
- Your birth mother may not be able or willing to confirm the identity of your birth father.

Unable or unwilling to meet

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

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- Your birth father may not have been aware that he is your birth father. He may never have been informed about the pregnancy and he may not accept that he is your birth father. DNA testing may be the only means of resolving this issue.
- Your birth father may not have told anyone else about your birth and may fear the reaction of his partner and/or his family.
- Your birth father may not wish to inform his family about the request for contact and may not be in a position to travel to a meeting without their knowledge, for example, because of age or disability.
- Your birth father may be fearful of your attitude towards him and his part in the decision to place you for adoption.
- Your birth father may feel that he has a lot to lose by engaging in contact with you.

If your birth father 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 father 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 if your birth father would be willing to receive or exchange a letter or photograph?
- Is it possible that your birth father would be willing to maintain indirect contact with you through the adoption agency?
- Is it possible to ask if your birth father would write you a letter explaining his decision not to have contact? Is he 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 father should contact and ask for this information?
- Is it possible to meet with other adopted people for whom this has also been the outcome?

Some birth fathers change their initial decision not to have contact, if they have the 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 fathers may 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 father has died. This is not an outcome that many people are prepared for and some can experience great shock and sadness upon hearing this news.

Depending on the circumstances, it may be possible for you to get some further information about your birth father 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 father and his life from someone who knew him well?
- Is it possible to meet any family members?

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- Is it possible to get some photographs of your birth father?
- Is it possible to visit your birth father's grave?

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

Non-response

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

Negative response

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

It can be very difficult for you to learn that your birth father is not open to or unable to have contact. Considering his perspective and the experiences that he may have had in the past may help you to understand why he 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 meeting is voluntary. It is your birth father's decision whether or not he 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. What an adopted person wants in searching may vary over the course of his/her life.

It is not always the adopted person who searches, birth relatives also search as well. This is evident from the number of birth relatives who have signed on the National Adoption Contact Preference Register established by the Adoption Board, now known as 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.



Beginning the contact with your birth mother or birth father

Once you have met with a social worker in the adoption agency and the decision to search has been made, the process of contacting your birth mother can begin. The adoption agency will attempt to locate your birth mother and make contact with her. If she is willing to have contact the agency will encourage both of you to correspond by letter. This will be the same process if you are initiating a search for your birth father, but remember that your birth father's identity has to be confirmed with your birth mother before a search can begin. 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.

Advice on writing letters

Most adoption agencies 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, corresponding provides a unique opportunity to gain information and start to build a relationship which can make 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 and reflect on the process and make informed decisions on how you wish to pace the contact.

If your preferred form of correspondence is by email the adoption agency can help with this by agreeing to forward your emails to your birth mother or your birth father. The adoption agency can leave out your email address until you are ready for direct contact.

Most adoption agencies suggest that the person who is searching write the first letter. This is because the person searching will most likely have had more time to think about and consider the issues involved in contact and may be more prepared for writing. The first letter provides you with an opportunity to share some information and to introduce yourself.

Most adoption agencies suggest that letters are exchanged through them without disclosing identifying details until such time as you are ready for direct contact.

Suggestions for writing letters

Getting started is the hardest part. It is often not possible to sit down and immediately write a perfect letter. Some people write several drafts. The suggestions outlined below may be of help to you in writing to your birth mother or birth father.

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- Try to be warm, friendly and reassuring. Assure the person you are writing to that you will respect their wishes about contact and that you understand that circumstances may limit his/her ability to respond quickly, or at great length.
- It's more personal if you write your letter by hand. It is best to sign the letter using your first name. If you type your letter handwrite your name.
- Keep a copy of your letter.
- Don't worry too much about correct spelling, grammar or phraseology.
- Give some background information e.g. upbringing, family situation, education, employment etc.
- Don't attempt to try and cover everything about your life in your first letter. Use this as an opportunity to ask some questions and to invite questions also.
- Say what you might like in terms of the contact. For example it might be that you want to share medical information or to start regular correspondence and hope to meet in the future etc. You may wish to say that you would like to receive a response to your letter.
- Short letters are probably better in the beginning as too much information may be overwhelming in the early stages of correspondence.
- If you wish to enclose a photograph with your letter it may be better to discuss this with your social worker first.
- Always re-read the final letter as if you were the person receiving it. Try to see it through their eyes and try to imagine how they might react.

Discuss sharing any difficult information with your social worker prior to including it in a letter. If there are things that you want to address but believe that a letter may not be the appropriate forum to deal with them, then talk to your social worker about them. You can always discuss the content of your first letter with your social worker if you would like some further advice. Remember, letters are an important part of getting to know each other so it should sound like you.

Waiting for a response to your letter can be an anxious time. It is important to remember that some people need more time than others to respond. If you do not receive a response to your first letter it is advisable to give your birth parent some time to respond before making a second approach. Your birth mother or birth father may have coped with losing you by trying to push aside extremely painful feelings, and while 6-8 weeks may seem a lifetime to you, it's a short time for them to begin to face what was a sad time of their life. Birth parents may need time to absorb all of the information you have shared at this stage before they feel able to respond.

Writing letters may come easier to some more than others. Some people question how many letters they should write or how long should they correspond before moving on to the next stage. This is decided by the individuals themselves. Throughout this process your social worker will maintain contact with you and your birth mother or birth father to provide ongoing support and guidance as the contact develops and possibly moves towards a meeting.



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.



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 the majority of people involved in a reunion are glad they took the decision to have a first meeting, but that not all of them continue to meet or have a relationship with birth family relatives. 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 experience 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 the 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.

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Apart from the practical issues you may also need to:

- Develop an awareness of and sensitivity to each other's lives and the commitments each of you have to partners and family members.
- Be aware that sharing and receiving information such as the nature of conception, may be painful for your birth mother or birth father and for you. Consider when the best time to ask for this information is.

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 a birth mother is not ready to share this information at this time it is important to be respectful of her wishes.

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 birth parent have not told significant family members about each other it may 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 others 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.