

Information leaflet for birth mothers

This leaflet was adapted from the 'ARMS' Australian group for birth mothers by the Danú Birth mothers support group that was set up in Sligo in 2005. Please see our website for more information.

<http://birthmothersgroup.com/>

Introduction

If you are a mother who has lost a child through adoption, this booklet has been produced to assist you to prepare for contact with your adult, adopted child. If contact with your son or daughter has already occurred, this information will also be useful in dealing with the on-going issues which may arise. Although it has been written with mothers in mind, much of the material in this booklet also applies to fathers.

The experiences of mothers who have lost children through adoption are unique but have similar features. This booklet is intended as a guide only. It is not intended to address the issues of all mothers who may read it. The emotions involved in adoption separation and reunion are often complex and sometimes confusing. Mothers are encouraged to move at their own pace and to prepare themselves for contact with their son or daughter in a way that suits them best.

You may choose to prepare yourself by reading relevant material, by attending support group meetings and talking to other mothers or by undertaking counselling. It is important for you to prepare yourself for making an approach to your son or daughter, but at the same time to realise that you may never feel completely ready.

Talking with another mother who has also lost a child through adoption can be a wonderfully rewarding way to begin your grieving. Finding acceptance and concern will make the grieving process more bearable and manageable.

As part of your preparation, it may be helpful if you explore your own experience of adoption loss and the impact it has had on your life and also if you try to understand what it may have been like for your adult son or daughter to have grown up as an adopted child.

The birth of your child

The fact that you are reading this material now suggests that you have decided to address this issue at this time in your life and that you feel ready to explore what it has meant to you to be separated for many years from your child.

Thinking back to the circumstances that lead to the adoption may be helpful for you. Your pregnancy was most likely unplanned and represented a crisis in your life. You may or may not have shared the experience with family members. If you did discuss it with others, you may have been advised that your child would benefit from being raised in a stable, two-parent family and that you would be acting sensibly and unselfishly by agreeing for your child to be adopted. Allowing your child to be adopted was probably presented to you as a way to show your love for your child.

You may have also been told that you would be bringing happiness to a couple who were unable to have children.

It may be that you desperately wanted to raise your child but you had no financial support with which to achieve that goal. You may have been very young or felt quite powerless and the decisions about your child's future may have been taken out of your hands. You may have felt inadequate as a mother or may not have wanted your child raised within your own family, if you, yourself, had not experienced a happy and secure childhood. You may have hoped that your child was raised in a stable home with loving dedicated adoptive parents who accepted and loved your child unconditionally.

The impact of the loss of your child

At the time of your child's adoption you were probably told that you could expect to recover from the experience quickly and that it need not have a negative impact on your life. In fact, research shows that for the majority of mothers who have lost children through adoption, the sadness resulting from this event has been long-lasting.

Many mothers kept their pregnancy a secret. Others did not, but they did not share the information with new people who entered their lives after the adoption of their child. Some did not tell subsequent partners or children. Secrecy has been a major issue for many mothers.

Whether or not the pregnancy was a secret, it was rare for mothers to be encouraged to talk about their lost children. You were probably told that it would be the best for you to forget your child and go on with your life as if the child had never been born. For those who knew about your child, they may have assumed that as you did not discuss the subject, it no longer concerned you. Because it appeared to others that you had chosen for your child to be adopted, they usually did not understand that you may have suffered greatly as a result of the separation from your child.

You most likely did not receive any gifts, flowers or support when your child was born. The loss and grief that you experienced as a result of placing your child for adoption was also not recognized, this lack of support and care that you experienced would not have happened if you had bereavement. This lack of public acknowledgement may have contributed to your grieving process being delayed.

For many years you may have denied, to yourself and perhaps to others that this child existed. However, there will have been frequent reminders, such as your child's birthday, the births of other children, Mother's Day and other times of loss in your life. You may have continued your relationship with your child's father and had subsequent children or you may have had no subsequent children and have lost your only child through adoption. Perhaps you lost more than one child by adoption.

Your thoughts about your lost child may have been complicated by feelings of guilt and shame, depending on the values and beliefs which influenced your behaviour at the time of the birth. For many years you may have felt that you were not being your true self as you hid your emotions. This may have given you a low sense of your own

value as a person. You may have suffered from depression or been involved in abusive relationships. On the other hand, you may have created a very busy, active life for yourself in order to avoid confronting your deepest emotions.

Anger is a common response to any loss and especially a loss such as this. Over the years, you may have felt angry with your child's father, who did not stand by you and help you to raise your child. You may have felt angry with your parents who were unwilling or unable to provide a home for you and your child. You may have felt angry with those in authority who arranged your child's adoption for convincing you that this was the best option. You may have felt angry that your feelings were not considered and that you were made to feel inadequate and powerless. You may have felt angry with the couple who adopted your child for having raised your child, when you felt that you should have. You may still feel angry with yourself for allowing the adoption to happen. You may think that you were weak and should have tried harder to keep your baby.

In fact, it may have taken a great deal of energy on your part to have lived with your feelings for your child over the years, whether those feelings have been acknowledged or suppressed. Now that you have decided to take some action in this area of your life, you may feel a sense of relief, as you will be able to use that energy more productively. You may also experience a degree of sadness as feelings that you have not previously addressed come to the surface. There may also be fear for finding out what life has been like for your child and fear of what the future holds for both of you. Do not be afraid of your feelings. Feel confident that your feelings are quite natural and that you can manage them. Learning about the experiences of others will be very helpful.

Grieving the loss of your child

You will be more prepared for contact with your child if you have begun to grieve the loss. There may never come a time in your life when you can say that your grieving has been completed, as it is often a lifelong process, but it will be easier for you to begin to build a relationship with your child if you have begun that process. It may have helped your grieving process if you have had opportunities over the years to talk about your lost child and to share your feelings with someone who has been supportive and non-judgmental.

On the other hand, like most mothers, you may have sometimes felt alienated and alone, as if no one would understand. You probably felt that, looking back, it was difficult enough for you to try to understand how you were separated from your child. How could you possibly explain it to someone who had never been in that position, in a way that they would understand and feel sympathy? Talking with another mother who has also lost a child through adoption can be a wonderfully rewarding way to begin your grieving. Finding acceptance and concern will make the grieving process more bearable and manageable.

The stark reality is that you have lost the opportunity to raise your child and nothing can alter that. There is no way of knowing what the experience would have been like and it is not helpful to speculate. It will help you to progress towards building a relationship with your son or daughter, when you are able to accept that your child is

now an adult and no longer the baby which you lost and that nothing can turn back the clock. The intervening years are lost to you both forever. Others have shared them with your child in your absence. You may wish to hear stories of those years and see photographs. You may not. You will probably have mixed feelings about how your child experienced those years. You will be glad if you learn that your child was content and well cared for but unhappy to recall that you played no part in that. If however, your child experienced an unhappy or even abusive childhood, you will no doubt feel angry at those who caused your child's pain and perhaps guilty that you were not able to prevent it. Learning about your child's life will also remind you of the many years of your life during which that child was absent.

Your child's experience of separation

Your child has experienced being raised outside his or her family of origin. While you may not know what this has meant specifically for your child, you can try to learn about what the outcomes of such an upbringing have been for others.

Some adopted people initiate or welcome contact with their families. Some do not. Some adopted people have already explored and tried to understand the impact of adoption on their lives, before any contact occurs. Others have not. Some adopted people are very accepting and understanding of the circumstances which led to their separation from their mothers. Others, however, feel angry and resentful and feel that being adopted meant that they had been abandoned by their mothers.

Some adopted children were raised in an environment where it was understood that adoption had meant a loss for the child and they have been encouraged to talk freely of their feelings about being adopted.

In some adoptive families there has always been recognition that contact with the child's birth family would be a positive outcome. In some adoptive families on the other hand, adoption was not discussed and there have been no attempts to understand what it has meant for the adopted children to be raised apart from their birth mothers and families. If these children are then reunited with their mothers when they are adults, sometimes all of the feelings which have not been addressed throughout their childhood come to the surface and they may find the experience overwhelming and confusing. They may benefit from some sort of support to help them to recognize those feelings and to take the opportunity to address them.

Deciding to make contact with your child

Only you will know when you feel that the time is right for you to try to make contact with your child. If you have not been open about your child over the years, you may feel that you first of all want to disclose your secret to family members and those close to you. You may fear their response, however, both to your experience and to your having deceived them. It may also be distressing for you if friends and family members are not supportive of your desire to make contact with your child.

You may have fears about whether or not your child knows that he or she is adopted. You may be afraid that your child will be angry with you and blame you for the adoption. You may be worried that your child might have problems such as substance

abuse or criminal behaviour and of the impact that may have on your life. Please be reassured that all of these feelings are common among mothers and that there are many women who have faced them and experienced them already. It will be useful to you to learn about the experiences of others, either through attending a support group or by reading relevant material.

What can your child gain from having contact with you? Your child can learn about the circumstances of his birth and about why you did not raise him/her. Your child can learn about her family members and the common heritage that he/she shares with them. Your child can learn that you care about him/her and that he/she is and always has been a valued human being. Your child can learn that you never forgotten him/her and you are concerned for their well-being. Most of all, your child can learn that he or she was not abandoned by you but that you were led to believe that adoption would be in your child's best interests. These are wonderful opportunities for your child that only you can offer.

First steps in finding information about an adoption

If you know the name of the agency involved in placing your son or daughter for adoption you can contact them directly. 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 and 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. · Any details about your son/daughter's date and place of birth.
- Your current address and contact details including phone number.
- Include a photocopy of some form of photo identification.
- What information you would like to obtain.

Both the Adoption Authority and the adoption agencies welcome enquiries and will treat all enquiries as confidential.

National Adoption Contact Preference Register (NACPR)

It is also advisable to consider placing your name on the National Adoption Contact Preference Register which is a confidential register operated by The Adoption Authority. The NACPR facilitates contact between an adopted person and a birth mother, a birth father, a sibling or other 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.

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

Recently proposed Legislative changes: Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill, 2015

The new proposed legislation on Information and Tracing which is not yet in enacted provides for a new Adoption Information Register. Túsla – the Child and Family Agency will be responsible for the provision of this service and its operation. The Child and Family Agency shall offer support and guidance to adopted adults or birth relatives who request contact and or/ sharing of information. It is envisaged that there will be a lead in period of 12 months before any changes are made and everyone who has already signed on the National Adoption Contact Preference Register will be notified of these new changes once they come into effect. See the Child and Family Agency website for details on all of their adoption related services:

<http://www.tusla.ie/services/alternative-care/adoption-services>

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 in this way, it can be overwhelming. It is also possible that that person you contact in this way may not prove to be your son or daughter. It is really important in terms of your future relationship with your son or daughter 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/>

What happens next?

Some people are easier to find than others. Sometimes, sadly, a child has pre-deceased the mother. Some adopted people have changed their names or moved to another country. Your search for your child may be a very short process or it may be lengthy.

You may choose to use an adoption agency to act as an intermediary on your behalf or you may choose to contact your child directly. Any approach should be made sensitively and carefully with an awareness of confidentiality issues. It may be useful to consider some advice from others who have searched:

- Be patient
- Proceed cautiously at your own pace
- Don't expect too much too soon
- Be clear about your expectations of contact
- Prepare yourself for rejection · Respect people's confidentiality
- Deal with your own unresolved issues prior to making contact
- Never forget that although you may have been searching for some time, the other person may only just be beginning to think of you as a real person
- Seek support from other birth mothers

Hopefully, the contact will be welcomed by your child. However, the contact may not be welcomed by your child's adoptive parents, partner or children. Contact is easier to manage for adopted people who receive emotional support from those around them. It is difficult for you to prepare yourself for every eventuality, but it is important to remember that if your child chooses not to proceed with contact at this time, this is a sign that he or she is not yet ready.

As a mother, you have been waiting at least eighteen years for your child to become an adult and perhaps many more years before you have taken the step to contact your child. It may be disappointing to discover that your child has had little or no preparation for this event. If your child is not ready, then you may need to be patient for some time. For some adopted people, the preparation for reunion does not begin until contact is actually made. Hopefully the fact that you have initiated contact will result in preparation taking place, in order that your child will come to a point in life of being able to accept the opportunities which you are offering.

If, however, your child is ready to continue down the path of contact with you, which does not necessarily indicate that he or she has completed adequate preparation. There may still be difficulties for both of you along the way. Regardless of immediate outcome, this is likely to be a time of enormous emotional turmoil. It will be beneficial for both of you not only to have had some preparation but to have put in place some supports to assist you on the journey of on-going contact.

Issues that may arise in your relationship with your child

It would be impossible to describe all of the issues that may arise in your relationship with your adult child. Family relationships can be complex and adoption adds to that complexity. Although you are his mother, although she is your child, you have not spent years together learning about each other's personalities, experiences, imperfections, values, likes and dislikes. It can also take some time to reach an understanding on a level of contact which will be comfortable for both parties. Openness and honesty – and patience – are vital. The relationship may feel all-consuming and very intense in the beginning, but with time, hopefully, it will find its place in both of your lives.

Building a relationship can bring the past pain of separation, either for the mother or for the adopted person, to the surface. It will be beneficial to your relationship with your child if you are able to find a way of dealing with any hurt and anger that may arise, without it encroaching on that relationship. It is important to recognise that it is not the relationship which is causing the pain, but that the current relationship is allowing the grief from the past to surface and be confronted. This can be a very beneficial, if sometimes difficult experience. If either party does not understand this and assumes that the relationship itself is causing them distress then they may withdraw energy from the relationship in the hope that this will reduce their suffering. If a situation like this arises, it may be useful to seek appropriate support.

Adopted people often struggle with the complexities of being adopted. It can take time for them to adjust to the variety of relationships involved after contact with their family has occurred. Your life also has to adjust to accommodate your newly-found adult child. Hopefully everyone will understand that you can each add a new

dimension to the other's life without taking anything from existing relationships. As with all relationships, building a relationship with an adult child from whom you have been separated by adoption takes time and effort, understanding, generosity, patience and acceptance.

Conclusion

When a mother and child have undergone the permanent, legal separation caused by adoption, they will both suffer grief as a result of that separation. It is natural for them to wish to be reunited with someone with whom they were at one time united in the closest possible way. The issues surrounding the separation, the resultant grief and the outcomes of that separation for both parties, however, are complex in nature. For this reason, the reunion does not always flow smoothly and easily for all concerned.

Reunion can bring great joy and a wonderful sense of peace. It can also bring sadness and distress. What the reunion does do, however, is answer some of the previously unanswered questions, allow those concerned to confront the reality of their situations and give them a sense of wholeness in their lives. Learning from the experiences of others can be of great assistance in approaching this process. Whatever the outcome, once that contact has been made, life will never be the same again for either of you.

Hopefully this material has been of use to you and it will make your experience of reunion more comfortable by knowing that you are not alone in your journey.

Adapted from: © ARMS South Australia October 2002 for Danú group, Sligo

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