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Searching for Birth Relatives



While interest among adopted persons in finding their birth families has always been high, the percentage of adult adopted persons who take action to initiate a search appears to be on the rise. This trend is accompanied by a growing interest on the part of many birth parents in searching for their (now) adult children who were placed for adoption many years earlier. The expanding number of organizations that advocate searching for birth relatives and

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- The decision to search
- Steps in the search process
- Hiring a professional searcher
- International searching
- Reunion issues
- Additional resources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



Child Welfare Information Gateway
Children's Bureau/ACYF
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20024
703.385.7565 or 800.394.3366
Email: info@childwelfare.gov
www.childwelfare.gov

provide advice and resources for doing so indicate both increased interest in and acceptance of this process. New legislation in some States permits more access to birth information, and new technology has the potential to make the searching process faster. A recent study shows that adopted persons are more likely to seek out information about their birth families now than in the past (Harris Interactive Market Research, 2002). And a study that reviewed estimates abroad and in the United States suggests that 50 percent of all adopted persons search at some point in their lives (Muller & Perry, 2001a).

The purpose of this factsheet is to provide some guidance on the search process and information access, as well as resources for further help in conducting a successful search. This factsheet is designed to address the concerns of both adopted persons who are searching for birth parents or other birth relatives, as well as birth parents (both mothers and fathers) who want to locate a child who was adopted. While not a complete “how to” guide, this factsheet provides general information on searching and reunion.

In addition, a list of resources is included at the end. The list includes websites on searching, books and articles, and more. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (Information Gateway) website (www.childwelfare.gov) is a good starting point for resource information.

The Decision to Search

Adults who were adopted as infants or young children are the most common group

of people searching for adoption information and birth relatives. This group most often searches for birth mothers first (Muller & Perry, 2001b), but may later seek out birth fathers, siblings, or other birth relatives. An event in the life of an adopted person, for instance, the birth of a child or death of an adoptive parent, may trigger the actual search (American Adoption Congress, 2002).

Other groups that search include birth parents searching for children placed for adoption years earlier and a growing number of adoptive parents who search in order to know more about their adoptive children’s background or medical history (Freundlich, 2001). In addition, some national organizations that work with children in foster care report increased interest by siblings in finding their siblings who were placed with other families.

The question of why an adopted person or birth parent searches for birth relatives has as many answers as there are searchers. Some of the more common reasons include the following:

- **General family information.** Searchers may want to know the names of their birth relatives, where they live, and what they are like. Birth parents may want to know whether their birth children have been happy and well treated.
- **Family traits and personalities.** Many adopted persons and birth parents want to know how their birth relatives look and act and whether they share similar traits.
- **Medical history information.** Information on genetic diseases and conditions can be crucial for safeguarding

an adopted person's own health and the health of their biological children. (The desire or need for family medical history is sometimes the only reason that will compel a judge to open sealed adoption records.)

- **Circumstances of the adoption.** Often, adopted persons feel a need to know why they were placed for adoption or why the rights of the birth parent were terminated and how that decision was made. Birth parents may want the opportunity to explain the circumstances to their child.

Steps in the Search Process

Every search is unique in its unfolding, but there are a number of steps and resources common to most searches. This section of the factsheet addresses the steps in the search process, including:

1. Emotional preparation
 2. Assembling known information
 3. Researching relevant State laws
 4. Registering with reunion registries
 5. Obtaining missing documents
 6. Filing court petitions
- 1. Emotional preparation.** Both adopted persons and birth parents should expect to prepare emotionally for the search process. Such preparation may include reading about other adopted persons' or birth parents' search and reunion experiences and talking to others who are

going through or have gone through the same process. Support groups for adopted persons or for birth parents who are searching can be extremely helpful, not only in providing emotional support, but also in sharing practical information. (For a State-by-State listing of support groups, see the Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.)

Gathering emotional support from family and friends also can be helpful. Adopted persons may be reluctant to share their decision to search with their adoptive parents for fear of hurting their feelings. However, in many cases adoptive parents can be an enormous source of support, as well as a source of information. Adoptive parents may take some comfort from knowing that an adopted person's decision to search usually has nothing to do with dissatisfaction with the adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992).

The search process may trigger a number of different emotions at different stages for the searcher. At certain stages, some searchers may feel that they need more emotional or moral support than they are receiving from family, friends, and support groups. In these situations, they may want to talk to a professional counselor. Searchers who seek professional counseling will want to ensure that the counselor is familiar with adoption issues. (See the Information Gateway's factsheet on selecting adoption therapists at www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/r_tips.cfm.) In addition, some State laws require a meeting with a counselor before a reunion takes place.

- 2. Assembling known information.** Once a decision has been made to search, the first step involves gathering all known and easily obtainable information. For adopted persons, this may mean talking to adoptive parents to find out the name of the adoption agency, attorney, or facilitator involved in the adoption. It also means pulling together all readily available documents, such as the amended birth certificate, hospital records, and any other information, no matter how unimportant it may seem at the time. Birth, death, marriage, divorce, school, church, genealogy, health, military, DMV, and property records related to the birth kin all have potential usefulness for leading to a name and location of a birth parent or birth child. It may be helpful to organize and record all information in a central place for easy reference.
- 3. Researching relevant State laws.** Searchers may want to become informed about State laws regarding adoption and records access in the State(s) in which they were born and adopted, keeping in mind that some State laws vary according to the applicable years. Access to information about State laws as well as which States offer reunion registries can be found at the Information Gateway website (www.childwelfare.gov). (Other websites that maintain databases or updates on State laws are included in the Resource List at the end of this factsheet.)
- 4. Registering with reunion registries.** A number of States, as well as private organizations, offer reunion registries that allow adopted persons and birth parents to register the fact that they are searching for each other. Most of these reunion

registries are “passive,” meaning that both parties (e.g., the adopted person and the birth mother) must independently register in order for a match to be made. When both parties register at the same passive registry and a match is made, registry officials share the mutual information and help to arrange for contact. Passive registries do not actively search for the other party.

The largest passive registry is the International Soundex Reunion Registry (www.isrr.net). This is open to all adopted adults over 18 years of age, all birth parents, and all adoptive parents of adopted children under 18 years of age.

There are also a number of “active” registries that charge fees to actually go out and search for the birth relative. Some of these are State registries that will initiate a search for a fee. Others are maintained by private search and support groups.

There are few reliable statistics on the success rate of these registries; however, as expected, passive registries tend to show a much lower match rate than active registries. One study of passive State registries found an average success rate of less than 5 percent in 1998, with only two States showing double-digit success rates (Mitchell, Nast, Busharis, & Hasegawa, 1999).

- 5. Obtaining missing documents.** At this point, the searcher may want to attempt to acquire some of the missing documents that could help with the search. There are many types of documents that may lead to locating a birth parent or child or provide a breakthrough to this

information. The following is a list of potentially helpful documents:

- **Adoption agency records**—If the name of the adoption agency is known, the searcher can request nonidentifying information or even records. For instance, in her 1998 book, *Search: A Handbook for Adoptees and Birthparents*, Jayne Askin provides an extensive list of possible questions to be addressed to the agency, including questions about siblings, medical information, and consent to release information. Askin also recommends that the searcher supply a waiver of confidentiality to the agency, so that information about the searcher can be provided to the birth child or birth parent, if that individual also contacts the agency.
- **Hospital records**—Hospital records, when they can be obtained, may provide information on the birth mother, birth father, attending physician, and incidental health information. Adopted persons generally need to know their birth name, as well as the hospital's name and location. If the searcher has difficulty obtaining these records, a request made by a doctor may have a better chance for success.
- **Birth records**—Most adopted persons will not have their original birth certificate but will have, instead, an amended document listing their adoptive parents' names. However, there are a few States that allow adopted adults to have access to their original birth certificate. (See Information Gateway information on access to adoption records at www.childwelfare.gov/adopted/obtain/index.cfm.) In other States, the original birth certificate may be available if the adopted person petitions the court.
- **Court adoption file**—The court adoption records consist of a number of documents, including the original, unaltered birth certificate; petition to adopt; finalization papers or final decree; consent to adopt from birth parent(s), relinquishment papers, or orders terminating parental rights; and any agency or attorney papers, including information about birth parents. Many of these documents may also be available elsewhere. For instance, adoptive parents should have copies of the court proceedings finalizing the adoption, although the final court order will not provide the names of the birth parents. If this is not available, an adopted person searching for birth parents may be able to contact the attorney or law firm that handled the adoption to obtain it. A request may also be made to the court. Often, identifying information will be blacked out of the court-supplied document; however, there may be some remaining clues that are helpful. The final adoption papers should provide the name of the attorney, judge, and agency involved in the proceedings. This information may lead to discovering other useful clues.
- **Other court records**—While most or all of the court records may be officially sealed, in some cases a searcher may be able to view the court's Docket Appearance Book, a daily record of

who appeared in court and why on a particular day, or even the Minute Book log, with the results of each court appearance (Culligan, 1996). Also, local newspapers from the time of the adoption may carry a notice of the filing of the Petition to Adopt in the classified section. This normally includes the name of the couple adopting, as well as the birth name of the child/infant and the name of the social worker assigned to the case (Culligan, 1996).

- **Other types of records**—Other potentially useful records may include physician records, newspapers (for birth announcements), cemetery and mortuary records, probate records, Social Security information, records of military service, school records (including yearbooks), marriage licenses, divorce or annulment papers, DMV documents, and death certificates.

6. Filing a court petition. If none of the above have been successful, adopted persons may petition the court to have the sealed adoption records opened. Whether this is successful may depend on the State, the particular judge, the reason given for the request, and any number of other factors. Petitioning the court does not require an attorney's services, but a petitioner may choose to hire an attorney.

The judge may deny the petition completely or agree to release only nonidentifying information or a summary. In some States, the judge may appoint an intermediary, such as the original adoption agency or a professional searcher, to locate the birth parents and determine whether or not they want to release information or be

reunited with the adopted person. In other cases, the petitioner may be able to request the appointment of a confidential intermediary, who will conduct a search (for a fee) and determine if the birth parents are willing to be contacted.

Following these steps may lead the searcher to enough identifying information that birth relatives can be located. In cases in which the search seems to be leading nowhere, the searcher may want to review information or begin to research such things as alternative spellings of names or places. In some cases, information may have been falsified, making it difficult or impossible to continue the search without new information.

Hiring a Professional Searcher

Adopted persons or birth parents searching for birth relatives have the option of hiring a professional searcher. In some cases, it may be useful to hire a professional searcher if specific information needs to be located in another State. For instance, a professional searcher may be able to search courthouse or church records in a faraway locality. This limited professional help may be enough to allow the adopted person or birth parent to continue his or her own search.

Individuals who choose to hire a professional searcher should research the reputation of the searcher or company. There are some searchers who have a certification from Independent Search Consultants (www.iscsearch.com), a nonprofit organiza-

tion that trains in adoption searching. Other searchers may be licensed as private investigators by a particular locality. Individuals should ask whether private investigators have specific adoption search experience before making a decision to hire them. Other professional searchers may be experts in a particular locality or a particular field but may not have a certification. Before hiring anyone, it is crucial to call references and to check with the Better Business Bureau. In addition, support groups can be a ready source of information about professional searchers.

In some cases, a court or agency may refuse to open sealed records or provide full information in response to a petition or request; however, the court or agency may appoint a professional searcher. In such cases, this professional searcher serves as an intermediary whose job is to locate and contact the birth parents (or birth child) and to find out whether they want to have their name and address revealed and whether they want to resume contact. The professional is given access to sealed records, but the petitioner (who generally receives no access to records) pays the fee of the professional searcher. If nothing is found, or if the found person refuses to release information or agree to contact, there is generally no recourse (except that the adopted person or birth parent can continue to search on his or her own).

International Searching

People who were adopted from outside the United States (through intercountry adoptions) face unique challenges in locating

birth parents. Each country has its own laws governing information access. In addition, there is great variation in record-keeping practices across countries and cultures, and in many cases, searchers will find that no information was ever recorded, that records were misplaced, or that cultural practices placed little emphasis on accurate record-keeping. However, in a very few cases, it may actually be easier to gain access to an original birth certificate in a foreign country than in the United States, since some countries do not seal their vital records.

The child-placing agency is the best beginning point for an international search. The U.S. agency should be able to share the name and location of the agency or orphanage abroad and, perhaps, the names of caregivers, attorneys, or others involved in the placement or adoption. The agency, or its counterpart abroad, may be able to provide specific information on names, dates, and places. They also may be able to offer some medical history, biographical information on parents, and circumstances regarding the adoption.

Some other resources for international searchers include the following:

- Adopted persons seeking documents (such as a birth certificate) that the U.S. or foreign child-placing agency is not able to provide may want to apply to government agencies in the birth country. Mailing addresses of offices of vital records in foreign countries can be found on the U.S. State Department website at www.travel.state.gov/visa/reciprocity/index.htm.
- Searchers adopted from another country can contact the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (<http://uscis.gov/>)

graphics/index.htm) to receive copies of their immigration records.

- An international agency that may offer help is International Social Services, which provides a broad range of social work services, including helping adopted persons find birth families abroad. Their U.S. branch has a website at www.iss-usa.org.
- Support groups for adopted persons from particular countries may be able to offer help and information on searching. Countries that have placed a large number of children with families in the United States, such as Korea, have support groups and organizations with websites and search information. (See the Resource List at the end of this factsheet.)

In general, searching overseas is more difficult than searching in the United States. In cases in which the search for the birth parent is unsuccessful, some adopted persons may derive some satisfaction from visiting their birth country and experiencing their birth culture. Many agencies and support groups have begun to organize homeland tours for adopted persons and adoptive families. These tours generally provide an introduction to the country and culture. Visiting the birth country for the first time as part of such a group may provide searchers with some emotional security, because the people in the tour group are often looking for answers to similar questions. (The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory lists groups that offer homeland tours: www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.)

Reunion Issues

Reunions between long-lost birth family members have been the subject of books, articles, and television shows. Two important themes emerge from these accounts:

- 1. Participants should be emotionally prepared for the reunion experience.** Adopted persons and birth parents may carry a picture in their mind of the perfect family, but the reunion experience may not live up to that ideal. In preparing for contact and reunion, adopted persons (and birth parents) should prepare for a whole range of realities, including rejection. Although most birth parents are agreeable to further contact, research indicates that a minority, perhaps 9 to 15 percent, reject any contact (Muller & Perry, 2001b).
- 2. Pacing the contact can be key to having a successful reunion and relationship.** In a small study of adopted women who experienced reunions with birth kin (Affleck & Steed 2001), it was found that successful reunion experiences were associated with (1) preparation with a support group and (2) a slower pace between initial contact and actual meeting, involving letters and phone calls. This interval between contact and meeting allowed information to be exchanged and gave the “found” relatives some time to become accustomed to the idea. Such an interval can also give the found relatives time to share the news with spouses and children in their family, if they desire.

Some factors that may increase the possibility of a successful longer term relationship include (Muller and Perry, 2001b):

- The establishment of limits regarding each others' lives
- Support from adoptive parents
- Minimal expectations
- Similar lifestyles and temperaments
- Acceptance by other family members

In many cases, a successful reunion with a birth mother may prompt the adopted adult to continue the search process for the birth father. Meeting with birth siblings also may occur, and each reunion experience requires preparation and time to evolve.

Conclusion

Each search for a birth relative is guided by a unique set of circumstances. The outcome is uncertain and, even when the birth relative is located, the reunion experience does not always turn out as expected. Nonetheless, many adopted persons and birth parents have conducted successful searches and built successful relationships with their new-found relatives. For those who are just beginning the search, the best preparation may be finding out about the search experiences of others. To that end, a list of resources has been included below. In addition, support groups for adopted persons and birth parents across the country can be found in the online National Foster Care & Adoption Directory on the Information Gateway website at www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad.

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Additional Resources

Books and Articles

- Bailey, J. J., & Giddens, L. N. (2001). *The adoption reunion survival guide: Preparing yourself for the search, reunion, and beyond*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- Byrne, M. (2000-2001). Search and reunion etiquette: The guide Miss Manners never wrote. American Adoption Congress (Winter/Spring), 11-13. Retrieved April 14, 2004, from www.americanadoptioncongress.org/articles-archives/search-etiquette.htm
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Strauss, J. A. (1994). *Birthright: The guide to search and reunion for adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents*. NYC: Penguin Books.

Websites

Resources for beginning the search:

- The ALMA Society (Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association) at www.almasociety.org
- American Adoption Congress's Beginner's Search Checklist www.americanadoptioncongress.org/search.htm
- International Soundex Reunion Registry at www.isrr.net
- Family Search Internet Genealogy Service (sponsored by the Church of the Latter Day Saints) at www.familysearch.org

Resources for international searches:

- International Social Services at www.iss-usa.org
- Korean Adoptee Adoptive Family Network at www.kaanet.com
- U.S. State Department at www.travel.state.gov/visa/reciprocity/index.htm

Resources on State adoption laws:

- American Adoption Congress at www.americanadoptioncongress.org/legislation.htm
- Bastard Nation at www.bastards.org/activism/access.htm
- Child Welfare Information Gateway at www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/adoption.cfm
- The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute at www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/polreg.html
- National Adoption Congress at www.americanadoptioncongress.org/legislative-updates.htm
- National Center for Adoption Law and Policy at www.adoptionlawsite.org
- The White Oak Foundation at www.whiteoakfoundation.org/mappage.htm

The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad contains information on State adoption officials, State reunion registries, adoption agencies, and support groups.

Other information on the Information Gateway website includes resource lists (www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/index.cfm) on such topics as organizations that provide adoption research and factsheets (www.childwelfare.gov/search/pubs_search.cfm) on such topics as intercountry adoption.