

# A child to call my own



the benevolent society

post adoption resource centre



A study of adopted  
women and their  
experience of  
motherhood

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# FOREWORD

The Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) proudly introduces its latest research, '*A child to call my own: a study of adopted women and their experience of motherhood*', a new direction in post adoption work. The idea for this project grew from our ongoing discussions about the many and various experiences created by adoption.

As our work continues into its second decade, we naturally look beyond the experience of separation and reunion and allow ourselves to explore the lifelong impact of adoption. The impact of adoption and motherhood on each other has been a personal interest of mine, and the PARC team was able to work together to bring an idea to fruition.

The authors of this report, Phoebe Masso and Victoria Whitfield, were final year social work students from the University of Sydney, who were on placement with PARC to conduct the research. Their quick grasp of the issues, skills in reading statistical data and commitment to completing the project has made this very much their research report. PARC thanks them for all they have understood and contributed.

Of the PARC team, Jane Adams, Janet Henegan and myself have worked closely on the project.

Paul Bullen, a consultant in social research with whom we have worked in the past, has contributed his considerable skills in creating the database and statistical information.

As with all of PARC's work, the most important people to thank are those individuals who allow us the honour of hearing their stories, in this case the 195 adopted women who formed the original focus group, completed the questionnaire, wrote their accounts or were interviewed. It is their contribution which gives our research its entire foundation.

Sarah Armstrong  
Senior Manager, PARC  
The Benevolent Society  
January 2003

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*"It would be an abnormal situation in my family to have your own child and then keep and raise it. How am I going to do it? I have no role models for that."*

## Why the research?

Adoption impacts people throughout their lives and workers at the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) have found that there appear to be stages of adoptees' lives that are critical for thinking about adoption - the start or end of a relationship, a death or a birth. This is true for both male and female adoptees, but PARC's counsellors had noticed that adopted women often expressed a need to talk about the decision to have a child in conjunction with aspects of their adoption experience.

In thinking about these issues, we found that very little had been written about this area of the adoption experience, encouraging us to explore how adoption is related to pregnancy, birth and motherhood. We hoped to develop a clearer picture of how, if at all, becoming a mother impacts on adopted women's views of adoption, their family relationships and the kind of mother they become.

## The sample

- Of the 190 adopted women, 149 had children and 41 did not. The average age for women with children was 39 and 33 for those without.
- 78% of women with children were married or living with a partner, with a further 20% being divorced/ separated/widowed. This compared to 50% of women without children being married/ living with a partner (with a further 8% being divorced/ separated/ widowed).
- 79% of women with children expressed a wish to have contact with their birth parents, with 48% being in current contact. Of women without children 93% wished to have contact, with 60% already in a reunion.

## Women without children

The sample of 41 women without children who were interviewed varied in their reasons for not having children, with 80% of them having not yet ruled out the possibility of having children in the future.

- 80% of those who felt they were not emotionally ready to have children felt that their adoption had an influence on this.
- 43% of the women without children think that their experiences within their adoptive families have affected their ideas about whether or not to have children and 40% have been affected by their doubts about their ability to mother.

The questions put to the women without children allowed us an insight into the complexity of the decision to have a child:

*“How could I have children until I had found my family and found out who I was? I didn't want a child to end up like me . . . not knowing who they are.”*

## **Women with children**

- 56% of the adopted women with children feel that adoption was a factor in their decision to have a child
- 83% of women feel their adoption has affected their experience of being a mother to some extent.
- 79% feel that their wish to form a biological connection with someone was an important influence in the decision to have a child
- 68% believing that since becoming a mother they have an increased need to trace their biological history.
- 85% of adopted women with children thought about their adoption to some degree during their first pregnancy
- 64% feel that since becoming a mother they have more empathy for their birth mother, whilst 14% feel less.
- 43% describe themselves as being calm, relaxed mothers; 43% see themselves as over-protective and 22% feel they are anxious. 40% experienced fears of losing or being separated from their baby.
- 94% of women feel that their experience of being a mother has impacted, at some level, their beliefs around adoption
- 32% of adopted women believe, since having children, that adoption is unnatural; 37% believe that adoption is a positive and workable option.

What this research has given us is a starting point and some new insights into the way that adoption may influence the next generation. The adopted women in our sample do not take lightly the decision to have their child, and it is clear that their experience of motherhood is, to some degree, influenced by their adoption.

***“As an adopted person I knew that having a child would finally mean I am attached to someone of my blood and we would have a connection that in my lifetime I was yet to become familiar with.”***

# INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

## Why 'adoptees and motherhood'?

Adoption impacts people throughout their lives. Workers at PARC have found that there appear to be stages of an adoptee's life that are critical for thinking about adoption – for example, adolescence, the birth of children or the death of a parent. The team at PARC was interested in exploring how adoption relates to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, after much work with adopted women around these issues. What little has been written on this subject is based on reflections on work with adoptees rather than quantitative data, and PARC staff were eager to expand the body of knowledge in this area.

The purpose of the 'adoptees and motherhood' project was to gain greater insight into the effect of adoption on women's experiences of pregnancy, birth and motherhood. We also hoped to develop a clearer picture of how, if at all, becoming a mother impacts on adopted women's views of adoption and their family relationships. In doing this, we sought to come to a greater understanding of the issues being presented by PARC clients. Our aims in conducting the research were:

- to explore whether adoption was involved in women's desire or decision to have a child
- to ascertain the extent to which adoption affects women's feelings around fertility, pregnancy and birth
- to discover whether adoption has had an impact on how adopted women parent
- to find out if motherhood has made adopted women think differently about their own adoption or adoption generally
- to develop a greater understanding of how becoming a mother has impacted on birth, adoptive and other family relationships
- for women who have not had children, to establish whether or not adoption has affected this decision and what the impact of this is.

It is hoped that this research will be a useful resource for adopted women thinking about issues of adoption and motherhood.

## Available Literature

Linda Yellin has written about her clinical and non-clinical experiences with the adoption community. In her article, *Adoptees as Parents and Implications for Children of Adoptees*, she writes that thinking about having children can raise issues for adopted people. For example, if there has not been a reunion with a birth relative the lack of medical information may prompt a search. Reitz and Watson, in their work on *Adoption and the Family System*, assert that many adopted people feel a great desire to have children due to a 'profound hunger to know a birth relative – someone they might actually look like' (1992: 224). Yellin supports this, finding that becoming a parent can be an overwhelming experience for some adopted people, as their baby

may be the first biological relative that they have seen or touched. Adoption issues may be raised and the adoptee may face fears about losing their child, or about whether they will be able to parent adequately.

Looking at their baby, adoptees may be prompted to consider and question the decision made by their birth parents to relinquish (Yellin 1993). Reitz and Watson state that while adoptees may identify with their birth parents and feel a renewed wish to know them, there are also implications for the relationship with adoptive parents. They have found that adoptees become more aware of not having a biological connection or birth experience with their adoptive parents, and that this relationship needs to be reaffirmed and renegotiated (Reitz & Watson 1992). As children grow, according to Yellin (1993), adoptees may struggle to explain their own adoption to their children and negotiate the roles of birth and adoptive grandparents.

In starting to think about this project, the PARC research team attempted further literature searches and was astounded at the lack of literature which addressed this issue. In adoption literature, the impact of adoption on various relationships is vigorously explored, yet the intense mother-child relationship often reported by female adoptees was found to be unexamined. Similarly, we found little reference to the impact of adoption on the decision to have a child, despite our counselling practice informing us that adopted women often struggle with the issues that this decision raises. The paucity of relevant written material made the continuation of our research even more important.

### **The participants**

In July 2001 a focus group was conducted at PARC with a small group of adopted women, to discuss their experiences of adoption and motherhood. All of the women in the group had had a reunion, but had a range of parenting experiences – from being pregnant with their first child to having children up to the age of 36. Common threads in the discussion included:

- anxiety about separation from their babies
- fear of rejection from their partners and children
- a sense of disbelief or awe in having one's own child
- empathy or grief imagining their birth mother's grief in separating from their baby
- a sense of the mother-child relationship perhaps being more intense than for non-adopted women.

The discussion also focussed on issues of identity and self-image for adoptees and how participants felt this related to their parenting. For example *“being adopted made it difficult to trust one's instincts”* in parenting.

From this group discussion, and anecdotal accounts from our counselling work, the relevance of the research into adoptees and motherhood for PARC clients was confirmed and two questionnaires were devised.

Of the 190 women who participated in the research, 149 had children and 41 did not. 40 people completed Questionnaire 1 (women without children) and 144 people

completed Questionnaire 2 (women with children), upon which the statistical findings were based.

All of the women involved were adoptees, some of whom were PARC clients (32%) and others who responded to an advertisement placed in *Sydney's Child* (25%) or an article written for *Practical Parenting* magazine (2%). The remaining participants became involved through word of mouth, reading about the research project on the PARC website or other means.

It was important to reflect, through all stages of the research, the fact that a great number of PARC clients live interstate or in rural and remote areas. A large number of questionnaires were completed by women living outside the Sydney metropolitan area, and 25 of these were interstate. Interviews were conducted to reflect the experience of these women and were held at PARC, at participants' homes, or over the telephone.

### **Ethical considerations**

Our first consideration was whether a quantitative approach would make the participants feel that the complexity of their individual experiences was not being fully acknowledged. In an attempt to counter this, the covering letter sent with each of the questionnaires clearly stated that we would be happy to receive anecdotal accounts of people's experiences or thoughts. Women who contacted the research team and expressed that the questionnaire did not account for their experience were invited to be interviewed or to write their story.

We discussed whether or not to send reminders to those who had not returned their questionnaire. We decided that reminders would be an unnecessary intrusion, particularly since most women had signed a consent form (Appendix A) indicating their willingness to participate. Questionnaires were only sent to those who confirmed their involvement, either verbally or with the form.

The researchers were concerned that completing the questionnaire could be confronting or emotionally difficult for some participants. The availability of trained counsellors at PARC was made clear to women who expressed these feelings, or expressed a desire to begin a search for birth relatives.

### **The questionnaire**

It was decided that a quantitative approach to collecting data, with a qualitative element, would be most effective in gaining an understanding of the issues. Two questionnaires were devised with the assistance of Paul Bullen, a consultant in social research – one for women with children and another for women without. Participants were asked to complete a series of multiple choice questions as well as some which required people to rank issues in order of importance.

The questionnaires were anonymous, except in cases where women chose to add their name and contact details. Participants were mailed the relevant questionnaire, a stamped addressed envelope, and a stamped addressed postcard. The postcard, which identified the participant when returned separately to the questionnaire, allowed the questionnaire to remain anonymous. A number of participants were



emailed the questionnaire and some of these returned it via email while others printed it and posted it to PARC.

**In total, 56 women were sent Questionnaire 1 and 41 (73%) of these were completed. Questionnaire 2 was mailed to 204 women and 149 (73%) were returned.**

Both questionnaires included a series of demographic questions and a question addressing whether participants had searched or made contact with their birth parents. A covering letter (Appendix B) invited all participants to add anecdotal accounts or personal thoughts to the questionnaire on extra pages. 9 women with no children added personal comments to their questionnaire, as did 40 women with children.

Questionnaire 1 (Appendix C), for adopted women with no children, included questions about:

- the desire to have children
- what factors have led to the participant being without children
- the impact of not having children on family relationships.

Questionnaire 2 (Appendix D) was written for adopted women with children. It addressed issues including:

- the decision to have children
- women's experiences of fertility, pregnancy and birth
- how adoption had affected women's experiences of the immediate post-natal period and motherhood
- the impact of having children on relationships with adoptive parents and birth parents
- how women view their adoption, and how having children has affected their ideas about adoption and their birth mother.

## **The interviews**

While the questionnaires were used as the basis for the research, it is acknowledged that a qualitative element is crucial in order to address the complexity of issues and experiences faced by women adoptees in relation to motherhood. In addition to the anecdotal accounts written by a number of participants, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Of those interviewed, sixteen had children and five did not. Some women were contacted after they added their identifying details to the questionnaire or indicated a willingness to contribute further, and others were selected at random from the database of women who had returned their questionnaire.

## **Limitations to the research**

A number of limitations were identified, including:

- The usefulness of a questionnaire may be limited in addressing the range of complex individual experiences of adoption and motherhood.
- Findings from Questionnaire 1 (women with no children) are based on a relatively small sample and it became clear that a significant number of these adoptees had not yet reached a point in their lives when they wanted to have children, but were intending to become mothers in the future. This is quite a different group of

women to those who have chosen not to have children or have been unable to have children. This being the case, the research team felt that the research was less than complete in this area.

- No control group was identified.
- Participants were not a purely random sample of adopted women. 32% of the participants were from the PARC client database, indicating that they had sought out or responded to a PARC counsellor in order to discuss elements of their adoption experience. The remainder, coming from an article in '*Practical Parenting*', an advertisement in '*Sydney's Child*' and various other sources (such as the internet) wanted to express their views on the issue of adoption and motherhood in some way. It is apparent that these women thought their adoption significant enough to warrant the effort required to respond.
- A number of incomplete questionnaires were returned which meant that the statistical analysis of some questions was affected by missing data.

### **The use of pseudonyms**

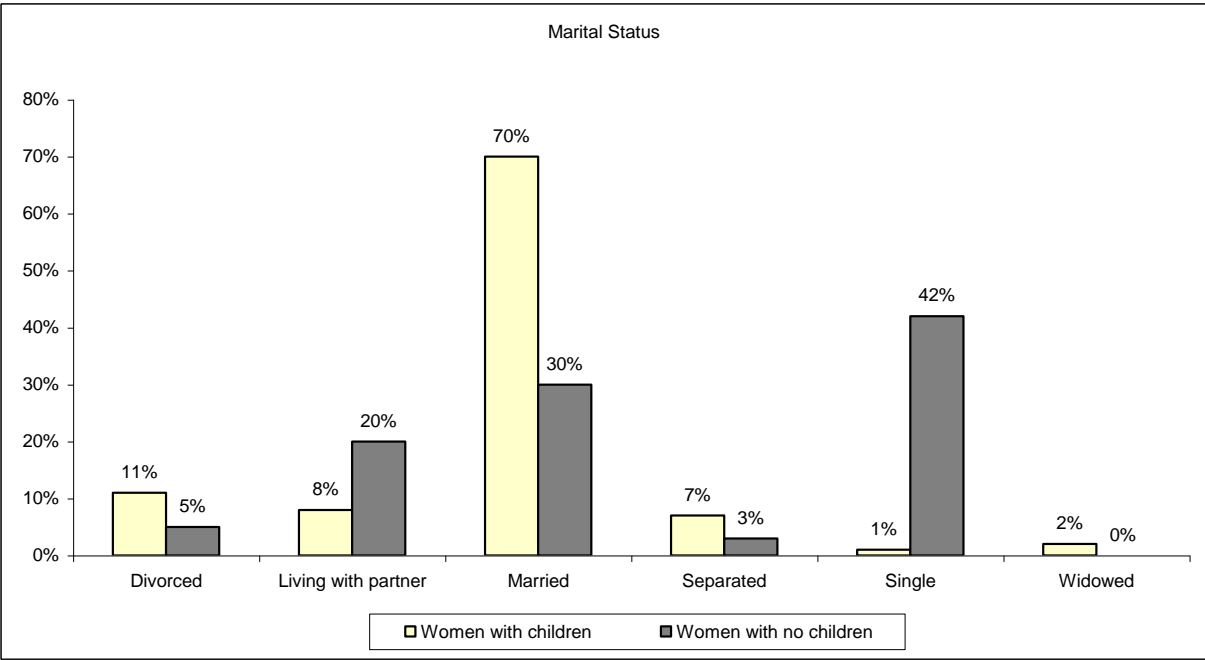
In order to protect the confidentiality of those who took part in the research, all names and identifying details have been changed.

# THE PARTICIPANTS

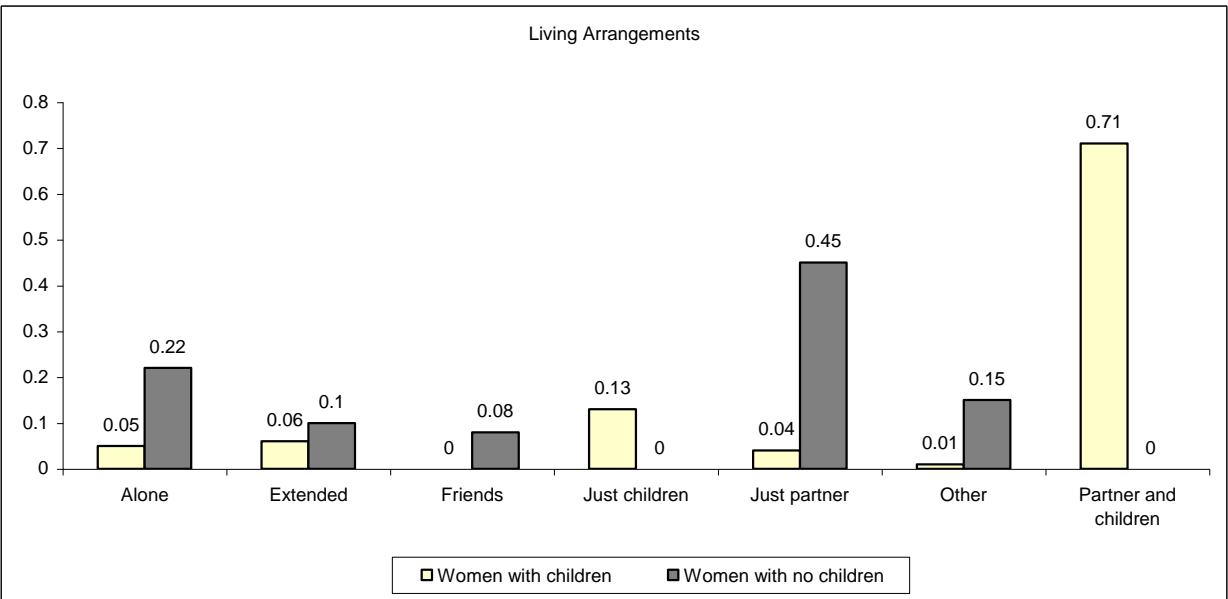
## Age

The average age of women in our sample without children (Questionnaire 1) is 33 years, with the youngest being 21 and the oldest 62. Of the women with children (Questionnaire 2), the youngest is 24 and the oldest is 76 years old. The average age of women with children involved in the research is 39 years.

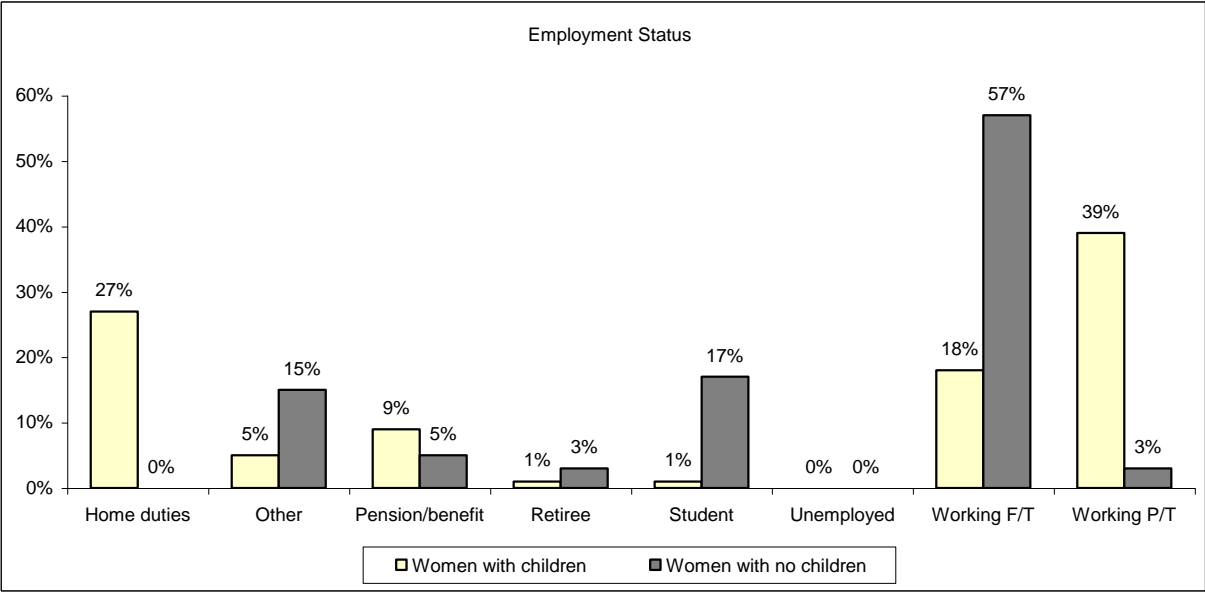
## Marital Status



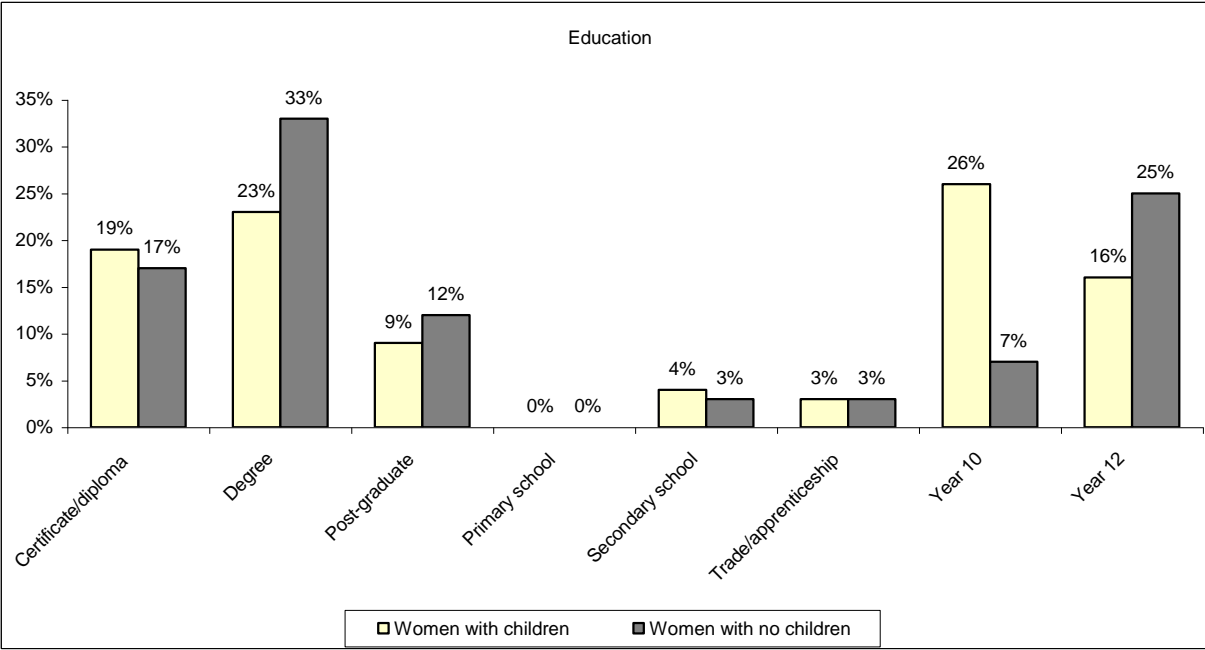
## Living Arrangements



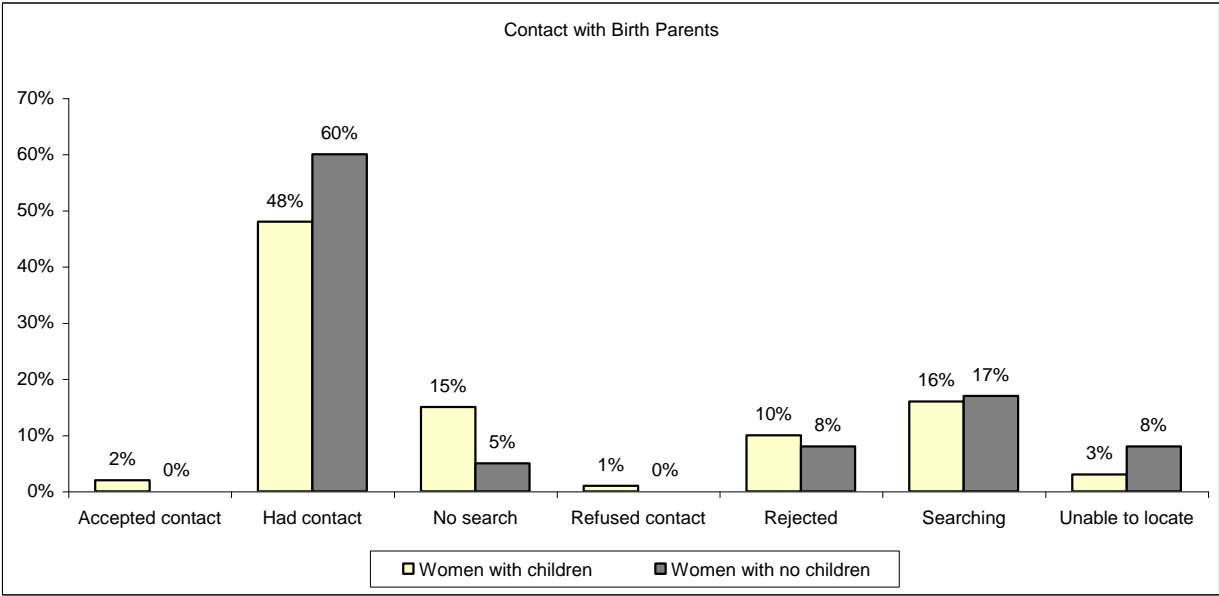
## Employment Status



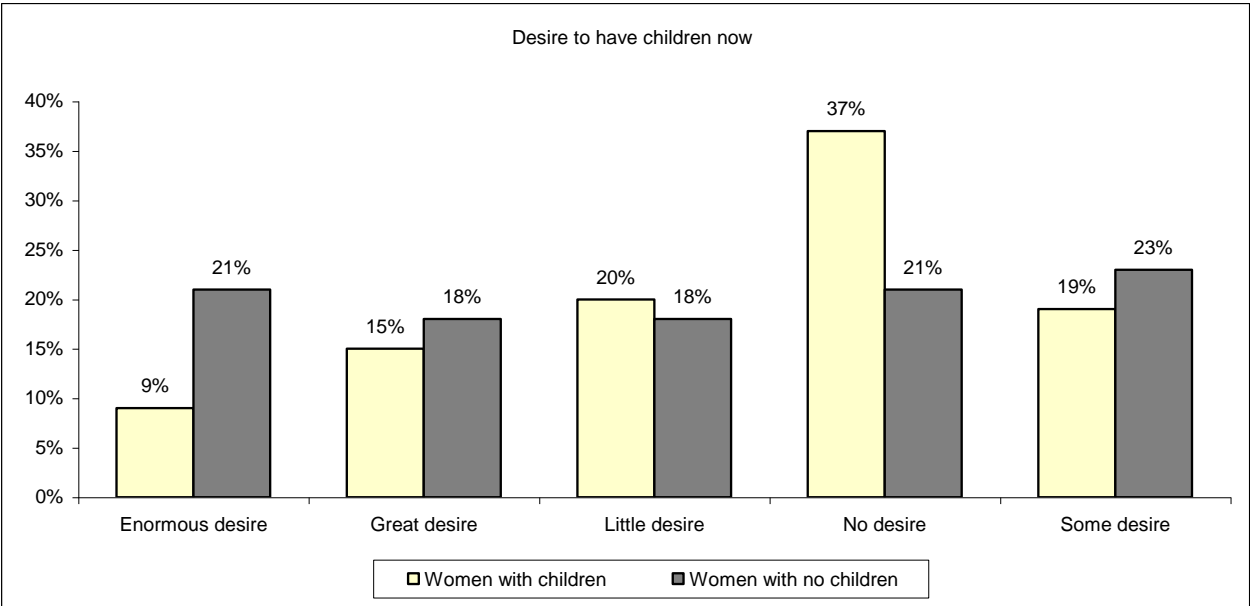
## Education



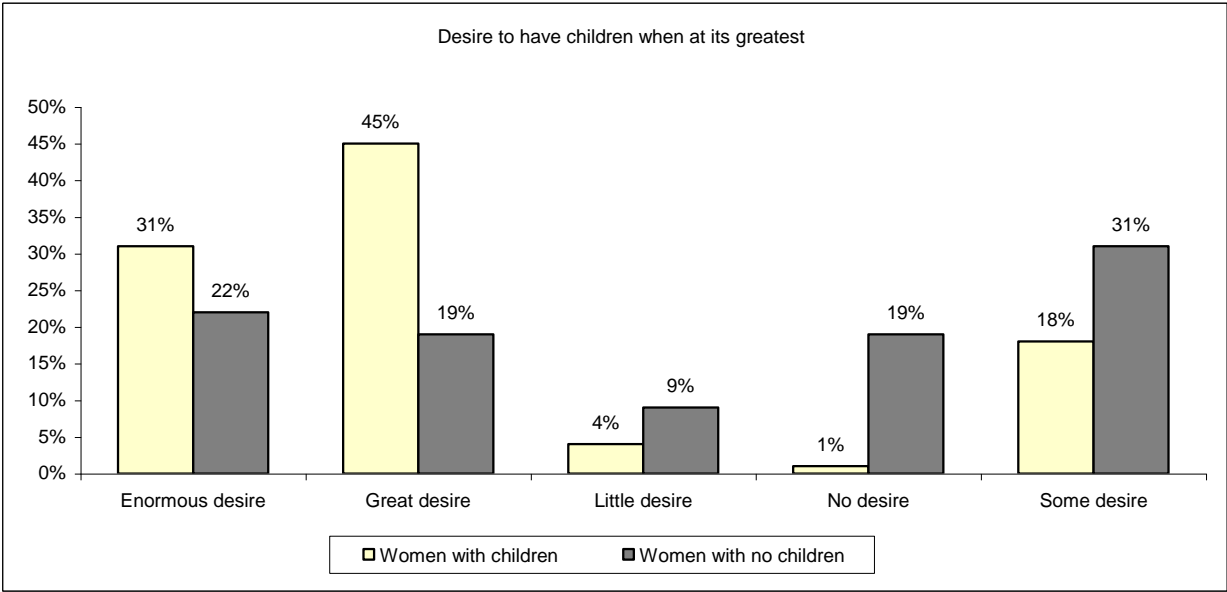
### Contact with birth parents



### Desire to have children now



# Desire to have children when at its greatest



# FINDINGS

## ADOPTED WOMEN WITH NO CHILDREN (QUESTIONNAIRE 1)

Based on their experience in the post-adoption field, the PARC research team was interested in establishing whether adoption has affected the decision some women have made not to have children, and what the impact of this might be. Partly as a result of initial discussions in the focus group, we were expecting to find some link between the decision not to have children and adoption issues. We were unsure how prevalent this would be amongst adopted women without children but felt that it warranted attention.

***“I feel alright about being childless now but I definitely think there was always a subconscious fear of babies and mothering.”***

In analysing the data from Questionnaire 1, it became clear that our participants fell into one of two groups. Half of the forty adopted women surveyed feel that adoption has nothing to do with them being currently childless and this is reflected throughout the questionnaire. Conversely, the rest of the women feel that their being without children has something to do with adoption. This link affected women's lives in various ways, whether being adopted had influenced a conscious decision not to have children, or being childless had affected family relationships.

This research into adopted women without children has been somewhat limited by the relatively small number we were able to survey and by the fact that we did not isolate a group who had made a final decision not to have a child, whatever the reason for this decision. The sample of 41 women were somewhat younger than those with children (average age 33, compared to average age 39) and were more likely to be single or separated (50%, compared to 19% of women with children). In all likelihood, many of the women who expressed a lack of readiness for motherhood now, or who reported that their study/ career/ relationship situation made it unlikely at this stage, would at some point choose to have children.

What was clear, and well worth examination, were the influences on these adopted women which impacted upon the way they thought about having children. They spoke of their adoptive and birth family relationships and the way they thought about their adopted selves. A number of the women had clearly had quite troubled adoptions and expressed a need to work through their experiences before being able to think about bringing a child into their lives.

## Desire to have children

Of all the women who completed Questionnaire 1, 39% have little or no desire to have children now, 22% have some desire and a further 39% have a great or enormous desire.

*"I've always been puzzled by my lack of strong desire to have a child or children and even to be married . . . I've never had much contact with babies. I even felt afraid of them. I feel alright about being childless now but I definitely think there was always a subconscious fear of babies and mothering."*

*"I wanted children with a passion, an absolute passion."*

*"I feel that even though I didn't know about my adoption, it affected my attitude towards babies – I didn't want to go there."*

*"It nearly killed me when I decided not to have children with my first husband. I wanted to have kids more than anything. Adoption and my aboriginality have had everything to do with my decision not to have children."*

When asked about their desire for children at the age at which the desire was greatest, 28% of the women said that they had little or no desire to have children, 31% had some desire and a further 41% had great or enormous desire. The average age at which the participant's desire to have children was greatest was 28 years of age.

When comparing their desire to have children with that of other non-adopted women, 37% of respondents feel they have less desire to have children, 28% think their desire is no different and 35% think they have a greater desire to have children than other non-adopted women.

It would be interesting to put these questions to a much larger sample, perhaps at an older age and also to have the benefit of a control group to test out some of the comparisons with non-adopted women.

There are clear differences between the two groups in how they perceive their need to mother compared to non-adopted women. Just over half of the women who feel that adoption has had nothing to do with being without children, see their desire to have children as equal to that of non-adopted women they know. In contrast, 69% of the women who see their adoption as significant in their not having children believe their desire to have children is less than non-adopted women.

## Reasons for being without children

A variety of reasons were given by adopted women to explain why they are without children. Of the participants, 25% are not ready emotionally, 23% are still considering the possibility of having children, 17% have not yet considered the possibility of having children, 16% are actively attempting to have children (8% via natural pregnancy, 5% via assisted reproductive technology and 3% via adoption), 8% of the women's partners do not want children and 8% want children but are unable to have them.



**It appears, therefore, that some 65% of women have not yet made a conscious decision to be without children, with a further 16% actively attempting to have children. This gives a total of over 80% of our sample who have not yet ruled out the possibility of having children, even if some ambivalence or doubt has been expressed.**

We may speculate that the reason for such a large percentage of the sample having not yet made a decision is related to the fact that the majority of the participants are of an age where children are still a biological possibility but have other influences on their life such as work or study. On reflection, it would have been beneficial to establish within the questionnaire whether the participants had or had not made a conscious decision to be without children. Despite this, there are many interesting variations in the women's thinking; particularly in relation to the way they believe their adoption has had an influence.

***“How could I have children until I had found my family and found out who I was? I didn't want a child to end up like me . . . not knowing who they are.”***

Interestingly, 80% of women who stated that they were without children because they were not yet emotionally ready were from the group who felt that their adoption is linked in some way to them being without children.

*“It had never occurred to me that adoption was the reason I hadn't had children.”*

*“If I hadn't been adopted I would definitely want to have children and it would not be an issue.”*

## **Effect of adoption on whether or not to have children**

43% of the women without children taking part in our research think that their experiences within their adoptive families have affected their ideas on whether or not to have children. Of these women, 20% think this was the most important factor.

*“I believe that both my birth and adoptive parents contributed to my fear of motherhood. A child needs to be cherished and loved, however my experience of love was accompanied by abandonment, abuse and neglect and this made me distrustful of love and people. Without having had love and nurture myself, I could not believe that I would be a good mother and I did not want to risk passing on my bad experiences to a child of my own. I am certain that had I been raised in a loving and secure environment, I would have had children, but the trouble was that, because of my pre adoption and adoption experiences I learnt too late that love is not always destructive.”*

*“My adoptive mother was not a good mother . . . It was from her that much of my fear of motherhood came. If being a child was no picnic for me, it was from my adoptive mother that I learned that motherhood could be a burden and a great disappointment. My adoptive father on the other hand destroyed my trust in fidelity and commitment.”*

*"I am ill-equipped to look after a child because of all the issues that have stemmed from my adoption. I am not adult enough in the relationships I have with my parents to be a parent myself."*

*"Stuff may be in the past but it affects people's parenting skills and relationships."*

*"The main reason I am scared to have children is that I don't think a child should be born into a situation where they have to deal with lots of baggage and my situation does have a huge amount of baggage."*

*"An indescribable feeling of not belonging and being stuck between two cultures as I am of a different ethnicity from my adopted family."*

*"I don't want to carry on negative emotions from my past into my children's future. Issues and problems with relationships are cross generational, emotional control and guilt have already cause problems including the fact that my birth mother gave me away and that my adoptive mother feels so insecure."*

40% of adopted women surveyed think that their doubts about their ability to mother have affected their ideas on whether or not to have children, with 20% of women believing this to be the most important factor.

*"The lack of an appropriate mother role model has left me with little confidence that I could even love a child let alone parent him/her in an appropriate manner. I fear that I would reject the child as I was rejected by both my mothers and lacking a model of parent/child love, I'm not confident I could make it up as I go along. I feel I am doing the best thing by not bringing a child into such an emotionally volatile scenario and until I develop the confidence to parent, I will remain childless."*

*"I have no children. The idea of being a mother always terrified me. I feared that I wouldn't be a good mother and that it would not be a happy experience for either my child or myself. Another fear was that my partner would abandon me and that I would be forced to raise a child on my own."*

*"It would be an abnormal situation in my family to have your own child and then keep and raise it. How am I going to do it? I have no role models for that."*

23% of women who answered Questionnaire 1 believe that the thought of being close to a baby somehow brings forward feelings of grief, and this has affected their ideas on whether or not to have children. This is certainly consistent with what many adopted women have reported to PARC counsellors, expressing hesitancy or fearfulness about what may be brought to the surface by pregnancy or motherhood.

*"Afraid to express my love for another."*

Other issues which affected the participants' ideas on whether or not to have children include a lack of knowledge of their genetic background (23%), their birthmother's experience of being separated from them (15%), their birth mother's decision to have them adopted (13%) and their adoptive parents' infertility (3%).

*"The many years of not knowing about my genetic background thus feeling of emptiness, lack of genetic link to a family history!"*

*"Having my own blood connections."*

*“To have a connection.”*

*“Knowing my adoptive mother wasn’t my birth mother (preventing small part of bonding on my behalf).”*

Some of the other ways in which women think adoption has affected their ideas on whether or not to have children include:

*“Adoption does have a part in the way I feel about having children .... I have a strong desire to care for people, including children.”*

*“Not wanting the long term responsibility.”*

*“Lies and misinformation told to me regarding my aboriginality.”*

*“Only found out 7 months ago – nothing clarified.”*

*“A sense that it’s never an ideal environment enough (financial security).”*

*“Maternal instincts.”*

*“The world being an unsafe place to raise children.”*

*“Babies have frightened the life out of me all my life”.*

*“I have so much love within me and no-one to give it to.”*

*“I want to have kids, I definitely will have children, it is the normal thing and I don’t want to end up old and lonely.”*

Some women indicated that their adoption had not affected their decision not to have children, or in fact that they have not yet made a conscious decision to be without children.

*“If the time had been right, I think I would have had children regardless. Looking to start a family in the next few years.”*

*“I don’t think being adopted has had an impact.”*

*“Being adopted isn’t related to my decision whether or not to have children.”*

*“The time just hasn’t been right, not ready to settle down yet.”*

## **The impact on relationships**

### **Adoptive parents**

87% of the participants believe that being without children has not had an impact on their relationship with their adoptive parents. 26% of women think that their relationship has improved and 84% of women feel that their adoptive parents accept their situation.

Of all the adopted women without children, 21% have felt pressure from their adoptive parents to have children. A concern identified for a small number of respondents is that their adoptive parents are fearful that if they have children they will have to share the grandparent role with their birth parents.

*"[I] worry about demands for birth and adoptive mothers about being grandmothers."*

*"When I give birth who has a right to be there? I would want my adoptive parents there but what about April's [birth mother] rights as a grandmother?"*

This was not a concern however for the majority of women (90%).

## **Birth parents**

The women without children had shown a greater tendency to seek contact with their birth parents, with 60% of respondents having had a reunion with their birth parents, 17% currently searching, 8% having been unable to locate and 8% having had their attempt to make contact rejected. **This gives a total of 93% who have attempted or intend to attempt some sort of contact.** (This compares to a total of 79% of women with children.)

A majority (76%) of women who answered Questionnaire 1, and have had a reunion feel that being without children has not had an impact on their relationship with their birth parents. None of the adopted women feel that their relationship has improved, but for a small proportion it has been negatively impacted upon.

A concern of 7% of respondents is that their birth parents are fearful that if they have children they will have to share the grandparent role with the adoptive parents.

13% of women surveyed have experienced pressure from their birth parents to have children.

## **Not having children and the decision to make contact**

A small proportion of participants feel that being without children has affected their decision to make contact with their birth parents (13%) or their decision to continue contact with their birth parents (3%).

*"My decision to contact my birth parents was greatly influenced by my ambivalence towards starting my own family. I had hoped that by meeting my natural mother I would be able to settle some of my own doubts about my ability to parent."*

*"How could I have children until I had found my family and found out who I was? I didn't want a child to end up like me . . . not knowing who they are."*

80% of the adopted women feel that their relationship with their birth parents has been unaffected by the fact they are without children.

# ADOPTED WOMEN WITH CHILDREN (QUESTIONNAIRE 2)

## How to tell women's stories? A life process model

Questionnaire 2 aimed to explore the experiences of adopted women who have had children. In collaboration with the initial focus group as well as members of the PARC team, this questionnaire was developed to reflect the various stages of motherhood. These included the initial desire and decision to have a child, the pregnancy, the birth, immediate postnatal period, experience of motherhood and parenting. We also asked a number of questions about adoption in women's lives generally.

Adopted women contacting PARC to discuss their adoption experience often do so at significant times in their lives, for example: adolescence, the beginning or end of a relationship, or the birth of a child. Thinking about adoption may be triggered by pregnancy, the early months of parenting a child, or could occur if some concern about their child's health is raised.

***“Adoption is a life changing event. It never goes away as it has formed an essential part of one's personality and how one deals with the world and relates to others.”***

In order to best capture the experiences of the adopted women involved in the research, we analysed the quantitative data in terms of a life process that women move through. It became clear that there were critical points in the lives of adopted women with children and that looking closely at these stages would help tell their stories. This is not to say that all women have had the same experiences throughout the life process, but that there appear to be stages where adoption issues and experiences of motherhood intersect for a significant number of women. The life process model focuses on the decision to have children, pregnancy, motherhood, and adoption in women's lives generally. Key questions for this research have asked how adoption has affected the experience of being a mother, and how motherhood influences ideas about adoption.

## Stages of the life process

- decision to have children
  - expectations of fertility
- pregnancy
- experiences of birth
- immediate post-natal period
- motherhood
  - adopted women as mothers
  - comparing adopted and non-adopted mothers
- effects of becoming a mother
  - how beliefs around adoption have been affected
  - the impact on relationships
- the changing importance of adoption – now and in the future

## Four groups of adopted women with children

From adopted women's responses to the questionnaire, together with the interviews conducted and personal stories written, it is clear that women have had a broad range of experiences of adoption and motherhood. General adoption issues and experiences of motherhood impact upon these adopted women in complex ways, and to various degrees. In telling the stories of adopted women with children and to capture a sense of this diversity it is important to gain an understanding of commonalities and shared experiences, while not losing sight of individual stories.

In looking at the data from Questionnaire 2, four distinct groups of women emerged. The groups are significantly different at each of the key life stages, with women in each group sharing similar experiences to others in the group throughout the life process. We have used the four groupings of women with children as a tool for capturing a sense of diversity of individual experience while exploring commonalities among the participants.

### Group 1

Group 1 is made up of those women for whom **adoption was not considered significant throughout the life process**, from the decision to have a child to experiences of parenting.

### Group 2

This group of women did not consider their adoption was a significant factor in their decision to have a child, or during pregnancy, but **it then became an important issue after the birth of a child**. For these women, the first weeks after the birth of their child appear to have prompted an emotional reaction connected to their adoption experience.

### Group 3

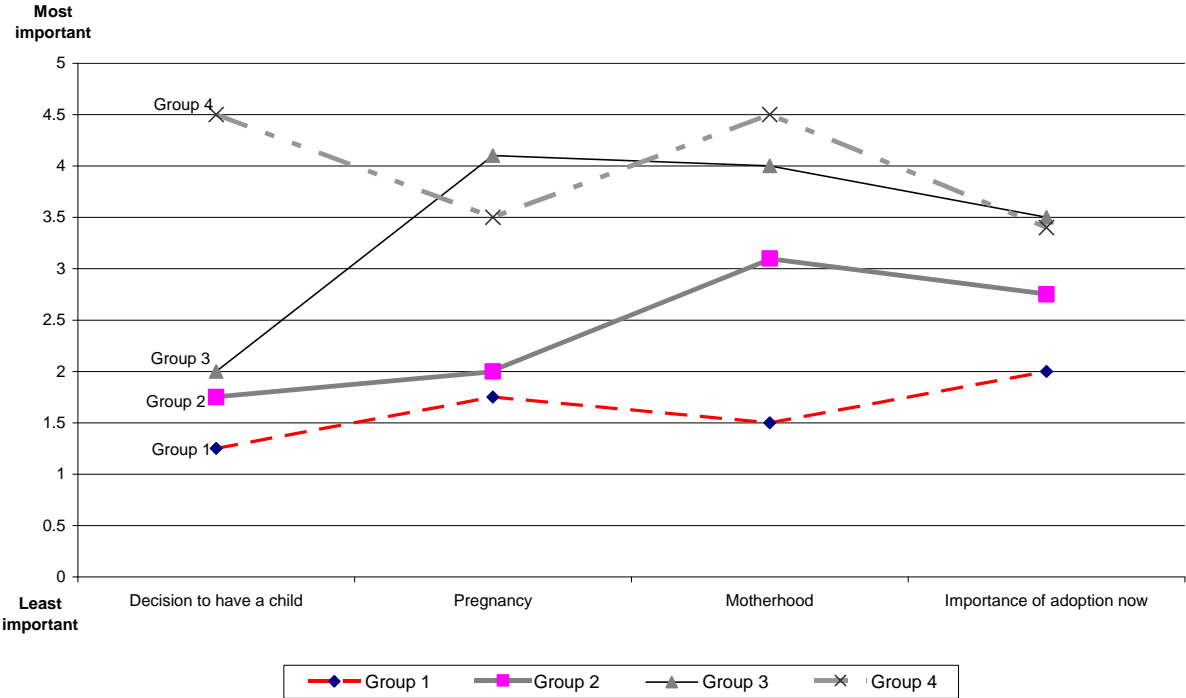
Group 3 is comprised of women who did not consider their adoption as significant in their decision to have a child, but at each stage after this it was important. That is, women **began to think about their adoption at some point during their pregnancy**.

### Group 4

Women in Group 4 consider their **adoption as significant for them through the whole life process** – from their decision to have a child, through pregnancy and the time immediately after the birth, and into their experiences of motherhood. These women tended to feel most strongly of all the four groups that their adoption had affected their experiences at each stage, and that becoming a mother had influenced their beliefs around adoption and family relationships.

The following graph illustrates the very different and distinct ways that women in the four groups responded to questions about the importance of their adoption at different life stages.

**Level of importance of adoption showing the four groups at different life stages**



**Decision to have children**

In conducting this research, one of our priorities was to explore what has influenced adopted women’s decision to have children. We wanted to ascertain whether adoption had been an important factor in the decision to start a family, and what else had influenced this decision.

56% of the adopted women in our sample feel that adoption was a factor in their decision to have a child. That is, 31% feel that adoption was a little or quite important, 12% see it as important, and 13% view it as having been an extremely important factor in their decision to have a child.

On average, Groups 1, 2 and 3 feel adoption was not at all or only a little important in their decision to have a child, whereas Group 4 views it as very or extremely important.

A variety of factors have been identified as important in the decision to have a child. For 78% of women, having a child was a natural progression in their relationship. Of all the adopted women, 68% had always wanted to have a child, and 36% of women viewed this desire as the most important factor.

*“I have always loved babies and small children and had an almost insatiable urge to become a mother.”*

*"I always wanted to have children, to have a type of bond that I'd never had before. I wanted to feel a biological connection."*

Over half (53%) of adopted women involved in our research had a need to feel a biological connection. This did not surprise our research team, given the knowledge of the importance of this factor for adoptees in general. On average, the priority for feeling a biological connection increases from Group 1 to 4. 26% of women were influenced by a desire to begin their genetic line.

**A need to feel a biological connection with someone or to begin one's genetic line was an important influence in the decision to have a child for 79% of adopted women. 17% of women believed these factors to be the most important influence.**

*"As an adopted person I knew that having a child would finally mean I am attached to someone of my blood and we would have a connection that in my lifetime I was yet to become familiar with."*

*"I longed to see the person who looked like me and shared my blood and genes. I wanted to suddenly feel a sense of belonging and instant bonding. I wanted to hear her story."*

A number of other factors were identified as having influenced women's decision to start a family:

- an accidental pregnancy was a factor for 17% of women
- for 14% of women, the decision to have a child was influenced by their desire to please a partner
- 13% felt a need to provide a grandchild for their adoptive parents
- 1% had a need to provide a grandchild for their birth parents
- 15% of women felt that other factors had been important in their decision to have a child. For example:

*"I knew I had so much love to give."*

*"To complete and have a family of our own. To love and nurture a child."*

*"I absolutely love children and always thought I could improve on mistakes made by adoptive parents as we had four children in the family. I basically looked after them!"*

*"Natural desire to continue the cycle of life."*

*"Wanted to feel a sense of connection with family."*

*"To have unconditional love."*

*"To embark on another of life's adventures."*

*"Wanting to share my/our life with another. Nurture instinct."*

*"To become a mother and be a mother as I felt was right."*

*"To grow as a woman."*



*“To create a family of my own.”*

*“I simply felt driven to go through with this pregnancy and not have a termination. I did not tell anyone I was pregnant until 3-4 months into pregnancy.”*

There are clear differences between each of the four groups of adopted women in what influenced their decision to have a child. Women in Group 4, for whom adoption has always been a significant factor, on average were more strongly influenced by a need to feel a biological connection and/or begin a genetic line than were women in any other group. Women in the other three groups appear to have had children based more on a natural progression in their relationship than other factors.

## **Expectations of fertility**

We were interested in exploring adopted women’s expectations of fertility before they had children, and whether these had been influenced by their beliefs about the experiences of their birth mother or adoptive mother. We speculated that women may have developed expectations of fertility from beliefs about their birthmother’s perceived fertility or from a complex set of expectations built up from knowledge of the adoptive mother’s struggles with fertility. Adoptees frequently have little modelling in their nuclear family of conception and birth and perhaps have therefore developed a different set of expectations to their non-adopted peers. These speculations, however, were only marginally borne out by the research results.

***“I always wanted to have children, to have a type of bond that I’d never had before. I wanted to feel a biological connection.”***

When asked whether they had a sense that it would be easy for them to fall pregnant, 14% of adopted women answered that they had thought it would be very easy, 38% had a sense that it would be easy or somewhat easy, 29% were not sure, and 19% of women felt that they had not had a sense of this at all.

In order to discover whether women’s expectations of fertility were linked to their adoption experience, we questioned what had influenced these expectations. We wondered whether the ease with which women expected to fall pregnant had been influenced by beliefs about the experiences of either their birth or adoptive mother.

**40% of women feel that their expectations of fertility were influenced, at some level, by their beliefs about their birth mother’s experience. Almost exactly the same proportion of women (41%) see themselves as having been influenced by their adoptive mother’s experience, to some degree.**

66% of adopted women had experienced some degree of anxiety about their ability to have children, with 14% being extremely anxious. On average the level of anxiety about the ability to fall pregnant increases from Group 1 through to Group 4. It is interesting to note that half of the women who felt extremely anxious about their ability to have children were from Group 4, who believed their adoption to have ongoing significance.

The same proportion of women who experienced at least some anxiety about their ability to have children felt some degree of anxiety about falling pregnant accidentally. 8% of adopted women had been extremely anxious about accidental pregnancy, 13% were very anxious, and 46% felt anxious or a little anxious. On average, Groups 1, 2 and 4 had been a little anxious about falling pregnant accidentally, in contrast to Group 3 who had experienced a higher level of anxiety. Of the women who felt extremely anxious about accidental pregnancy, half of them are members of Group 3, the group for whom adoption became significant during their pregnancy.

## **Pregnancy**

We chose to ask women about their *first* pregnancy, in order to make our comparisons between experiences more accurate. 65% of adopted women surveyed had an easy and straightforward first pregnancy, 21% had medical complications, 23% suffered challenging physical symptoms and 26% experienced emotional difficulty.

During their first pregnancy 44% of women felt a little or occasional anxiety, 29% felt some anxiety and 16% felt high anxiety. 11% of adopted women felt no anxiety.

Almost half of the adopted women felt excitement during their pregnancy and one fifth felt acceptance. 9% of women felt detachment during their first pregnancy and a final 5% felt a strong disbelief about what was happening.

56% of women felt a connection to their baby in pregnancy, 15% at birth and 21% soon after birth. 7% felt a connection months after the birth and 1% continue to lack connection with their baby.

*“In all three of my pregnancies I ‘bonded’ with the child as soon as I found out I was pregnant, and enjoyed every moment of those pregnancies, even though they weren’t completely trouble free.”*

### **85% of adopted women with children thought about their adoption to some degree during their first pregnancy.**

36% of women thought about their adoption occasionally, 21% quite often, 13% often, and 15% thought about their adoption very often during pregnancy. 15% of women did not think about their adoption at all during this time.

*“I used to talk to my baby in utero about how she was going to have all these grandparents etc. Trying to explain my adoption to her already.”*

On average, the frequency with which women thought about their adoption during pregnancy increased from Group 1 (not at all or occasionally), to Group 2 (occasionally), and again to Group 4 (quite often). Group 3 thought about their adoption most frequently, on average.

Women in Group 3 did not consider their adoption a significant factor in their decision to have a child, yet their pregnancy appears to have prompted them to begin thinking

about their adoption. We can only speculate as to how Group 3 women felt during their pregnancy to provoke an increased awareness of adoption issues. The experience of pregnancy may trigger an emotional response which brings an awareness of adoption into the life of adopted women. The fact that 85% of the women thought about their adoption during their first pregnancy is compelling evidence for pregnancy impacting upon the significance of adoption.

Most women in Group 1 (87%) and Group 2 (75%) did not think about their adoption at all during pregnancy or else thought about it only occasionally. In comparison, this was true for only 9% of women in Group 4 and none in Group 3. The majority of Group 3 and 4 felt that they thought about their adoption often or very often.

*“During my pregnancy I worried that I would be a detached mother, due to my adoption, I worried I wouldn’t be good enough a mother, I worried my adoption and the later rejection of contact would make it hard for me to love my baby. But as soon as I saw her, my whole body fell in love, I had never felt so protective of anything before. I just wanted to hold her and never let her go.”*

*“Being a mother myself made me think more about my birth mother and how she must have felt through her pregnancy knowing that she was going to give her baby up for adoption. I had always thought that adoption was a good option for teenage pregnancies but I don’t know that I could have given up my children even in those circumstances given the strong bond established during pregnancy, let alone after holding your newborn in your arms after birth!”*

## Experiences of birth

*“My son was very wanted by both my partner and I and yet I was left with that familiar sense of being unwanted, again and at such a crucial time . . . That’s why I find it hard to identify my feelings as an adopted woman trying to explain my pregnancy and birth experience. Because it was like my ‘experience’ were thrown into a basket and I am now on the task of pulling each issue out one by one and facing it head on.”*

On average, women in our sample had their first child when they were 27 years old. Of the 149 women with children, 98 have two children, 34 have three and 9 women have four or more children. 35% of women have had at least one additional pregnancy.

Of all the women with children in our sample:

- 71% of the respondents had a natural vaginal delivery
- 19% had an emergency caesarean
- 5% had a planned caesarean
- 50% carried their babies to full term
- 28% had an induced labour
- 10% had a premature labour
- 1% had a still birth
- 13% experienced complications after the birth
- 11% had babies who experienced complications

***“[My kids] make me feel like superwoman . . . the pride that I gave birth to them and no-one else did, that they came from me, that they’re mine.”***

67% of the respondents felt very or extremely supported during the birth of their first child.

It may be speculated that, among other reasons, the importance of knowing family medical history during pregnancy prompted some women to think more about their adoption, or even begin a search for birth parents. In anecdotal accounts and interviews some women expressed frustration at not being able to answer the many questions asked by medical staff during this time, particularly in medically challenging situations.

*“What family medical history may lie unknown to me that my children or myself could benefit in knowing, especially after the death of my first daughter for reasons unknown.”*

## **Immediate post-natal period**

*“Since giving birth to my first child, a son, in September 2001, I have suddenly found that adoption has become an issue for me. For the first time in my life I could touch another human being, knowing that we had the same skin, hair, blood, fingernails. I was so excited to finally hold something so precious that finally belonged to me and was of me. I would firmly hold on to each tiny toe and think that it was my toe too. The lips, hair, eyes and nose were all mine as well. At last, I had created a family line!*

*No one ever realises the pain they inflict whenever they say my son looks like someone else. It literally takes my breath away. I want to scream out, ‘No! No! He looks like me!’ I’ve waited my whole life to look like someone and these people are taking that away from me . . . I’ve promised my husband that the next baby can be like him because I desperately need this baby to look and be like me.”*

From working with clients, and feedback from the original focus group, it appeared that the first few weeks after the birth of a child was a time where women tended to think about their adoption. We were interested in clarifying this, and exploring how thoughts of adoption impacted the new status of women as mothers. Again, we asked women to respond to the questionnaire in terms of their experiences with their first child.

One fifth of adopted women with children did not think about their adoption and/or its impact during the first weeks after the birth of their first child.

*“Did not know I was adopted at this time.”*

*“Perfectly happy and content . . . Adoptive mother ecstatic and shared in the joy.”*

*“I was 22 when my first child was born. I believe I blocked out a lot about my adoption. I believe if I had a child now at 35 I would have thought a lot more about some issues.”*

## **40% of women experienced fears of losing or being separated from their baby.**

This was the most prominent adoption-related factor for 19% of participants, and these fears increased, on average, from Groups 1 through to 4. The fear of loss or separation was felt by over half of Groups 3 and 4. One woman spoke in an interview about being fearful immediately after her son’s birth, while still in hospital. She

remembers that in her transfer from delivery to the maternity ward she refused to let her son out of her sight and insisted on holding onto his crib as they were moved. During her stay in hospital she refused strong painkillers because she wanted to be alert to care for her baby, and declined offers by nurses to take her son to the nursery to give her a break. A number of women spoke of similar experiences, recalling a need to keep their baby with them constantly rather than allowing them to be cared for by nurses.

Some women did not think about their adoption during the immediate post-natal period because they had been unaware of their adoption when their first child was born. It appears, however, that some late discovery adoptees believe they were affected by their adoption. This comment came from a woman who did not know she was adopted when her child was born:

*“When I was first pregnant . . . I had an overwhelming compulsion, which I could not explain, that following my baby being born, he/she should not leave my side. So it ended up that I was the only woman on the ward in the hospital who had her baby rooming in with her all the time. . . . Twelve years later after learning of my adoption, the context in which I had been so insistent that my son not leave my side, made sense. I believe my spirit intuitively knew I had been removed from my birth mother. I believe as a way of healing, even though consciously unaware of my adoption, my spirit had encouraged me to keep my son with me.”*

A number of adopted women spoke in interviews about their insistence that they give birth naturally and have the opportunity to see and hold their baby straight away. This was seen as a need to have an immediate connection with their baby, which their birth mother had not experienced. One woman expressed her grief at having her baby by caesarean section, and then being separated from him after the birth:

*“When the doctor had to take him away it ripped my heart apart more than the caesarean had my body . . . . I kept on saying ‘I don’t want it to be like it was for Dorothy’.”*

Thoughts about adoption during this time impacted upon adopted women in a variety of other ways. **Almost half (46%) of the women with children in our sample thought about their adoption in terms of imagining the birth mother’s grief at separation and since**, and for 9% this was the most important factor that impacted them.

**39% of women felt more empathy for their birth mother in the first weeks after their first child was born.**

*“In the days after her birth, I realised how hard it must have been for my birth mother, how she couldn’t of just walked away and forgotten.”*

*“You’ve never felt love like you do when you have your own baby.”*

*“I had my first child, a beautiful boy . . . in Feb 1998. At that time, I was so busy, elated and exhausted the only issue regarding adoption that I recall was a real sadness for anyone that had a baby taken from their arms, and how could anyone voluntarily give their child away? I also felt overwhelmed with appreciation for all that my adoptive mother had done for me.”*

A similar number of women (38%) felt that their thoughts about adoption during the immediate post natal period resulted in more empathy for their adoptive mother.

Thoughts of adoption resulted in anxiety about their own mothering potential for 38% of adopted women.

*"[I had a] fear of hurting my baby and ruining everything (thank God for a supportive husband who believed in me)."*

One third of women experienced a strong sense of their own separation from their birth mother as a baby. Of these adopted women, a quarter believes that this was the most important adoption issue they thought about.

*"Through him, I really saw myself as a baby . . . [there was] a process of grieving that I went through for my own vulnerability as a baby."*

During the first weeks after giving birth, this sense of one's own separation from the birth mother as a baby was felt most strongly by women in Group 3. This was the group where adoption was not considered significant in their decision to have a child, but then became important. Something during pregnancy or the birth of their child prompted women in Group 3 to think about their adoption, and this appears to have continued strongly in the weeks after the birth.

*"As the days went by, my anxiety grew and I was faced with my own horrors – a baby lost and alone, motherless and confused; a sense of desolation. This was all felt within the context of delight in my son and a new kind of love for my husband, but it was hard to maintain joy and to keep fear at bay. I didn't know whether the baby I imagined was my son or myself, but the picture was hard to shake."*

*"After giving birth, I sometimes looked at my baby and felt a little resentment that he had the perfect birth. He was delivered and put immediately into his loving mother's arms where he suckled from the breast. He felt loved immediately and could feel my heartbeat and warmth. I, on the other hand, was wrapped in a blanket and taken to a nursery where there was no constant care from the one person . . . I hope my baby realises how lucky he is. I can now see that looking at him as a vulnerable baby, made me look at myself."*

28% of research participants felt that their thoughts of adoption resulted in doubts and disbelief about being a mother. 19% of women experienced anxiety about attachment to their baby in the first weeks after the birth. The level of anxiety during this time increased, on average, from Group 1 through to 4.

**For just under a third (31%) of women in Group 4, anxiety about attachment to their baby was one of the most significant feelings experienced during their post natal period.** In counselling at PARC, many adopted women have raised fears about parenting which they relate to their own experience of separation from their birth mother and, as a consequence, to their perception that they may have a tendency to abandon or fail to bond with their child.

Just over a quarter of women, in thinking about their adoption after the birth, felt a greater desire to connect with their birth mother if they had not had a reunion.

*"[I] wanted to know what my birth parents looked like – looking at my child and not seeing my heritage, but seeing small resemblances to me."*

*"Thoughts of whether I would have had a greater connection/love for/with birth mother."*

Thoughts of adoption led to 14% of women feeling less empathy for their birth mother, for example:

*"I stated on several occasions that having experienced the process myself – I could never give up a child and felt contempt for those who have."*

*"Wondering about how she could decide to give baby up."*

*"Feelings of how on earth could she have given her own baby away".*

2% felt less empathy for their adoptive mother during these first weeks after the baby was born. 10% of women felt anxious about the place of birth and/or adoptive grandparents in the life of their new baby. Other issues, which had not been accounted for by the researchers, were raised by 17% of women, including:

*"I wanted my adoptive mother at the birth of my son so she could connect and experience the one thing about motherhood that she hadn't had herself."*

*"Stressed and in shock due to long labour, breastfeeding problems, unsettled baby and ending relationship with birth mother at this time."*

*"Very excited about starting my genetic line – having someone who would look like me."*

*"I found the first weeks challenging, far more than I had expected and I was also feeling tired and thought there would be no relief."*

*"My adoptive parents weren't interested and it was a lonely time."*

*"I had fears of the unknown in my first child. It took a while to realize she was a wonderful little person and not a monster – i.e. hidden bad genes?"*

*"Anxiety about hereditary traits both physical or mental. Had no information."*

## **Motherhood**

*"While I have – like many adopted people, I believe – a strong awareness of an existential aloneness – this can be a strength if accepted alongside deep connectedness. The experience of parenting, and sharing parenting with my husband, has given me a new experience of that connectedness – Family indeed!"*

17% of women believe that their adoption has not affected their experience of being a mother at all, 10% believe it has not affected them much, 22% believe it has affected them a little, 26% a lot and a further 25% believe it has affected their experience of being a mother enormously.

## **83% of women feel their adoption has affected their experience of being a mother to some extent.**

On average, the degree to which women's experience of being a mother was affected by their adoption increased from Group 1 to 4. Women in Group 1 felt that their experience had been influenced not much or not at all by adoption, while Group 2 had been a little affected. Group 3 (who did not consider their adoption a significant factor in their decision to have children) on average felt that their experience of being a mother had been affected a lot by adoption. Of all the participants, the experiences of women in Group 4 were the most affected by their adoption. 69% of Group 4 stated that their experience of motherhood had been affected enormously.

The desire to have children was not fulfilled by one child for 23% of adopted women who answered our questionnaire. For 11% of women, their desire had been fulfilled slightly by their first child, 26% felt somewhat fulfilled, 23% were mostly fulfilled and a final 15% of women felt that their desire to have children was completely fulfilled by one child.

### **Adopted women as mothers**

*"I am trying very hard to build a happy and stable environment for my children. This is the first tool needed for my boys to build their own self-esteem and feel as though they are loved."*

*"I view my adoption as being not particularly successful although not terrible. Therefore I have found I have had to think through or intellectualise parenting. How can I parent when my experience of being parented was inadequate, not right or just didn't fit?"*

43% of adopted women involved in the research believe that they are calm, relaxed mothers. The same proportion of women describes themselves as over-protective, and 22% feel they are anxious mothers. An example of this given by a number of women in interviews is the distress they experience when their children cry, and the speed with which they attend to them. One adopted woman explained that the thought of 'controlled crying' terrifies her. She believes that she is quick to respond to her baby son when he is upset because of her own pain and adoption experiences. Similar feelings were expressed by another mother:

*"Not letting my children feel abandoned in any way, even for a second [is important to me] . . . I don't let them cry at all."*

Alongside these feelings, this adopted woman feels that she would be more anxious and controlling as a mother, and her children would not feel as secure as they do, if she had not searched and made contact with her birth parents. Resolving some of her adoption issues through searching was significant in shaping the person she is today, and therefore the way she parents. Other women also indicated that the extent to which their adoption issues had been resolved affected their experience of motherhood and relationships.

When describing themselves as a mother, over half (56%) of the adopted women feel they have really found their role and most (88%) really enjoy their children.



*"I thoroughly enjoyed being a mother from the word go. He was so beautiful. He was my little miracle and I could hardly believe he was my son."*

*"[My kids] make me feel like superwoman . . . the pride that I gave birth to them and no-one else did, that they came from me, that they're mine."*

28% of women fear being rejected by their children whilst 18% find it hard to discipline them.

A small proportion (5%) of women feel that it takes a long time for parents to develop close, warm feelings for their children and a similar number have found that child rearing is not as rewarding as they thought it would be. 18% of women see themselves as very strict mothers.

40% of adopted women are afraid of failing as a parent. On average Groups 3 and 4 are afraid of failing as a parent more so than Groups 1 and 2.

*"After my baby was born I felt very frightened that my baby would be taken away. Even more I felt that I should give my baby to someone else, someone much more capable than myself of doing a good job. 'Mothers that really love their babies give them to someone else to care for – other people – better people so they can be properly cared for'. This belief has surfaced and resurfaced, continuing to haunt me for the past 10 years. My child's insistence that I am the one that my child wants to be with is helping to lay this belief to rest."*

The majority (61%) of adopted women we surveyed make joint decisions with their partner about parenting. One third finds it hard to know whether they are doing a good job as a parent.

34% of women find it hard to ask for help with parenting although, in contrast, 9% of women rely heavily on parenting advice from others. On average, the difficulty in asking for help with parenting increased from Group 1 through to Group 4.

10% of women in our sample find it difficult to think of themselves as mothers, expressing feelings of disbelief or a sense of unreality about having a child. For some women it was difficult to connect the experience of being pregnant to that of mothering a child.

*"I still have trouble believing that I am a mother. I can't quite grasp the concept that my pregnancy resulted in this baby who is mine. The two seem separate."*

*"I look at my little boy and I don't think the reality of him being my son has hit me yet. It is so warming to look down at his precious face and see a little of me there. I try hard to remember him in my tummy and to make that connection that yes, he really did grow inside of me. But it doesn't seem real for some reason. It is like it just hasn't twigged."*

*"I find it hard still to believe that I am really a mother. I look at my son's beaming, open face and see elements of myself there, but how can that kind of connection be real? Every morning when I wake up, if it is not to the sound of his voice calling me, there is the heartbeat's pause when I am fearful of having lost him."*

*"I knew I loved Claire in the first few days (perhaps hours), but I wasn't quite sure what to do next. I went through the motions, but didn't really understand what had happened. This is hard to explain. I mean, one minute you're pregnant and the next you have another human being in your arms that totally depends on you. All I knew was that I would protect her and look after her, I loved her, but I didn't feel connected – like she wasn't real or something."*

Without a control group, it is difficult to know whether these feelings of unreality have any foundation in the adoption experience or whether similar responses are expressed by women with no adoption connection. The adoptee's usual experience of being raised in families where biological connection is less common may have a significant impact on the way they experience the first hours and days of motherhood.

***"I know my adoption will in some way impact how I raise my own baby . . . be it in my over-protectiveness, my constant checking on her while she is asleep just to make sure she hasn't disappeared or the struggle I have leaving her with others, even my husband."***

### **Comparing adopted and non-adopted mothers**

We asked the participants to self-select how they compared themselves to non-adopted mothers, knowing that we would get a highly subjective analysis as a result. We were interested in finding out where the participants perceived differences or similarities and in examining the self-descriptive elements of these questions.

*"Sometimes I look at other mothers and wonder at their preoccupation with other things, giving these things priority over their children. A child-mother connection is so special and makes such a difference to the child. I think my lack of this relationship makes me more conscious of its importance."*

32% of adopted women feel that they have a stronger need to be a mother compared to non-adopted mothers, and 13% feel their need is less. 55% feel it to be the same as non-adopted women.

Of all the adopted women involved in the project, 30% view themselves as more anxious than non-adopted mothers. On average, from Group 1 through to Group 4, women feel increasingly that they are more anxious than non-adopted mothers.

*"My first born son had digestive problems which meant as a feeding duo, we were a disaster. . . There seemed no successful way I could soothe him and felt a total failure as a mother. . . The impact of this experience along with my ingrained anxiety and over protectiveness has impacted my son. He has absorbed my anxiety, for which I feel terribly responsible."*

*"I haven't let my son cry much. Is it because that is my way of parenting or am I over anxious to be completely available to him so he doesn't feel abandoned?"*

19% of the adopted women feel they are more relaxed than non-adopted mothers. Over a third (35%) of women feel they are more possessive and 39% view

themselves as more over-protective. On average, women in Groups 3 and 4 feel more possessive and over protective of their children, compared to non adoptive mothers, than women in Group 2, and more so again than those in Group 1.

A number of women who feel they are more over-protective of their children spoke about the difficulty they face in leaving their children with others, even relatives. Some women identified a need to constantly check their children, fearful that something may harm them.

*“Once I had children, especially the first, I was like an animal. Had someone picked up my baby without letting me know, I could have easily killed them. I realised this was totally over the top. I realised that my adoption had affected me after all. I never felt rejected as a person, the way some adoptees felt, but when I had children, my basic instinct was acute. I lived in a “danger mode” that someone may take them away.”*

*“I have fears surrounding being separated from my son and I am dreading the thought of having to be away from him at night when overnight contact starts with his father. The fear of separation has been a strong issue for me to deal with. I also have a great fear that I will lose my loved ones and be left alone.”*

*“I had no trouble bonding with my son. I feel I may be quite protective of him.”*

*“I really hated to leave my son – I was not happy to put him into long day care or even to leave him with my adoptive mother as I knew she was so strict . . . This problem of not being able to leave my son I think stems from the influence of adoption. It was terribly heart wrenching for me to imagine putting him into long day care every day – I simply could not have done it.”*

*“Even my friends wouldn’t know about the kind of mother I am – the over protective fearful checking I have to do. Other, non-adopted mothers are anxious too, but the connection I make in my own life about the way I feel about myself as a mother is, I believe, evidence of the impact of my early experience of loss.”*

*“I developed the habit at night of poking a small make up mirror under his nose to check if he was still breathing . . . my over protectiveness and vigilance of my son was suffocating.”*

*“I know my adoption will in some way impact how I raise my own baby . . . be it in my over-protectiveness, my constant checking on her while she is asleep just to make sure she hasn’t disappeared or the struggle I have leaving her with others, even my husband.”*

40% of participants believe that they are more of a perfectionist as a mother than non-adopted mothers they know. 26% of women feel that they are more fearful of rejection by their child, and 17% of adopted women feel they are stricter than non-adopted mothers.

18% of participants view themselves as more confident in their mothering compared to non-adopted women they know, whilst over half (53%) view themselves as more self-reliant. From Group 1 to 4, women feel more strongly that they are more self-reliant than non-adopted mothers.

**From Group 1 through to 4, adopted women increasingly feel, on average, that they are more anxious, over-protective and possessive as mothers than non-adopted women. Women in Group 4 feel most strongly that as a mother they are anxious and over-protective.**

The complexities of the link between motherhood and adoption are clear, when we consider that, on average, the degree to which women feel they are more relaxed, confident, self-reliant and more of a perfectionist than non-adopted mothers also increases from Group 1 to 4. It appears that for a number of women, adoption experiences are linked to strengths and positive aspects of mothering as well as some of the more problematic issues.

***“I used to talk to my baby in utero about how she was going to have all these grandparents etc. Trying to explain my adoption to her already.”***

Overall, 45% of adopted women with children feel that they are no different to non-adopted mothers. On average, women in Group 1 feel this way, which is consistent with their view that their adoption has not been significant at any point from their decision to have a child to their experience of motherhood.

## **Effects of becoming a mother**

*“I began to question how Emma felt and thought when she gave me away. How could she have given a baby away after carrying it around for nine months? How could you leave the hospital with such physical signs of child birth - breast milk, stitches - but with no baby?”*

When thinking about the topic of adoptees and motherhood, we were interested in whether or not becoming a mother had affected adopted women’s views of adoption in some way.

Of the adopted women who participated in the research, 36% believe that their experience of being a mother has had an enormous impact on their beliefs around adoption, and a further 31% believe it has impacted them a lot. Only 6% of women feel it has had no impact at all on their beliefs around adoption.

**94% of women feel that their experience of being a mother has impacted, at some level, their beliefs around adoption.**

Between the four groups identified in the research, there are significant differences in the extent to which women’s beliefs around adoption have been influenced by motherhood.

The beliefs of women in Groups 2 and 3 have, on average, been affected a lot by their experience of being a mother, and most women (77%) in Group 4 have been affected enormously. In contrast, Group 1 (on average) has not been impacted much, and the 6% of women who feel their beliefs have not been affected are all in Group 1.

## How beliefs around adoption have been affected

It is clear that a large proportion of adopted women feel that their ideas about their adoption, or adoption generally, have been impacted to some extent by their experience of motherhood.

***“Since I have had my own children and see in them my looks, my gestures – just small things sometimes – it has strengthened my need to find out more about myself.”***

32% of adopted women in our sample believe, since having children, that adoption is unnatural, and the extent to which women feel this way increased through Groups 1 to 4. 29% of women feel that since becoming a mother they find it harder to accept their adoption.

Women in Group 1 generally believe adoption is a positive and workable option, whereas the other three groups appeared to be undecided on this. Of the adopted women overall, 37% believe now that adoption is a positive and workable option.

Most women (68%) believe that since becoming a mother they have an increased need to trace their biological history. On average, Group 3 feels most strongly that their need to trace biological history has increased.

*“After my first child was born, I felt, within 2 months of the birth, a sense of grief that I had not had any contact with my birth mother, and also the grief that she must have felt at the time of my birth and past years. I wondered and still do, if my birth mother would have loved me and cuddled me and kissed me more than my adoptive mother, the way I cuddle/kiss/love my own daughter, feeling that sense of belonging and natural empathy.”*

*“Since I have had my own children and see in them my looks, my gestures – just small things sometimes – it has strengthened my need to find out more about myself. It was always very important for me to have my own children – my own flesh and blood – to see these similarities, to make me feel somehow connected to someone else.”*

*“When I had my child, and as my child grew I could look at that little face and body and see that biological history, though still unconnected with specific individuals. I could see the possibility of my mother’s face, of my father’s face, of my brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts. I had and have a great desire to see these people, to know these people and to interact with these people. This was not a reason to have this child but that and a strong desire to have real family are important to me in the present.”*

*“Since having my son, my interest to know my biological mother did increase and I wanted to make one last attempt to make contact with her.”*

On average, Group 1, who do not consider their adoption to be significant throughout the whole of the life process, now have a stronger belief that how one is raised is more important than biological connections. This was true for 49% of all the adopted women with children who participated.

*“I do feel biological children have more of a connection/bond with their parents than do adopted children.”*

51% of the adopted women in our sample feel that since becoming a mother they are more able to put themselves in their birth mother’s shoes.

### **The impact on relationships**

Becoming a mother has made the relationship with adoptive parents closer for half of the participants, while for 17% it has made it more distant.

For 18% of women becoming a mother has made their relationship with their birth parents more distant while for 3% it has made it closer.

In an interview, one adopted woman who recently had her first child explained that becoming a mother has allowed her to “see both sides now”. She feels that she can now understand her adoptive mother’s need to have a baby and the grief experienced by her adoptive and birth mothers in losing a baby – the former as a result of miscarriage and the latter through adoption.

### **Adoptive parents**

50% of women feel that they have a closer or much closer relationship with their adoptive parents since becoming a mother. 26% feel that their relationship has not changed, however, it has become more or much more distant for 17% of women. 6% of women involved in our study have no contact with their adoptive parents.

*“I will always be proud of being adopted and admire my adoptive parents, who I don’t call my adoptive parents, they are my parents. I will never have any hatred for any person putting their child up for adoption – as they are giving a couple a child.”*

*“My Mum’s my mum . . . and that goes beyond biological ties.”*

For some women, the powerful connection that they feel to their own child appears to have highlighted the lack of this connection with their adoptive parents. This has been further emphasised for women who feel they have a lot in common with their birth parents. A number of women discussed in interviews their sadness that their adoptive parents appear to feel threatened or jealous of their relationship with their children. Some relationships have become strained as a result of the adopted woman feeling that her adoptive mother particularly is unable or unwilling to understand her experiences of giving birth to and mothering a biological child.

*“I feel that when I had my first child that my adoptive mother could not give me the help like a lot of the non-adopted mothers were giving their daughters . . . I felt she wasn’t really there for me . . . After the birth of my son my mum could not give me much advice on anything, eg. breastfeeding, having not done it herself, she really didn’t care if I breastfed or not. She just didn’t have that maternal instinct that goes with having your own children and to this day I feel she still doesn’t have that particular bond with me.”*

*“Since falling pregnant I feel like my [adoptive] mum is a little jealous of this, and our relationship is, I feel, suffering because of it.”*

*“I seem to be able to relate to or accept my children – even, perhaps understand them, in a way my adopting parents were unable to see what made me “tick”. This has been a great inspiration.”*

## **Birth parents**

*“I had my natural mother on a pedestal for a while . . . she came off before I had my daughter thank God, because she would have come off with a thud after that.”*

Adopted women who took part in our research have had a broad range of experiences with their birth families. Some women have had children since making contact, while others had started their own families before they met any birth relatives. One woman in the latter situation spoke of her feeling that finding her birth parents when she was in her 30's was a positive experience because she and her partner had already established their own family. She stated that:

*“My relationship with my birth parents isn't one of need.”*

Since becoming a mother, 3% of women feel that their relationship with their birth parents has become more or much more distant. For 22% of adopted women there has been no change in the birth parent relationship, 18% feel they have become closer or much closer. Just over half (57%) of our participants have no contact with their birth parents.

***“In the days after her birth, I realised how hard it must have been for my birth mother, how she couldn't of just walked away and forgotten.”***

One woman, who sees her relationship with her birth mother as much more distant wrote that:

*“She sees herself as my mother, I do not and will not ever relate to her as my mother. She feels I have rejected her particularly that I shut her out of my pregnancy, birth etc. . . . Despite this and many more issues I still have a need to have some connection, some contact with her. I don't even know why, except that now as a mother myself I for the first time realise the huge biological and physical impact that a baby has and can only begin to imagine the emotions of that baby being taken out of your life, willingly or not.”*

And a woman who now feels closer to her birth mother:

*“I have suddenly felt a greater attachment and closeness to my birth mother. We've kept in touch over the years but now I can fully empathise with what she went through. Just imagining having my baby taken away sends shivers down my spine . . . I feel the need to hang on to my baby a little tighter for fear of losing him.”*

A majority (64%) of adopted women in our sample have more sympathy for their birth mother since becoming a mother themselves. 39% of women feel that they now

understand their birth mother better. Group 4, for whom adoption is significant at all life stages, feel most strongly that they now understand their birth mother better. On average and of the four groups, Group 1 felt this least.

*“After having a child myself, I do not understand how a woman could be separated from her child and not be deeply devastated, as it is so abundantly clear that a bond between mother and child can not be severed, even by separation.”*

*“I have a great deal more insight now into the impact of relinquishment.”*

Just over a third (35%) of participants feel more forgiveness for their birth mother since having their own children, and the same proportion now feel a greater sense of connection to her.

*“I am surprised at the intensity of my feelings surrounding adoption now. My birth mother hoped that I would forgive her for giving me up. I have never felt the need to forgive her because there was nothing to forgive . . . My ideas on adoption haven't changed much, just my understanding of the pain at losing a baby.”*

10% of our participants are angrier towards their birth mother since having a child. Becoming a mother has made it harder for 44% of women to believe that their birth mother could give them up.

Not all women who have difficulty understanding how their birth mother could give them up are angry about this. Rather, we found in interviews that a number of women have a new appreciation of their birth mother and admire her ability to survive through the grief of being separated from her baby.

**From Group 1 through to Group 4, women's levels of sympathy, understanding and forgiveness towards their birth mother increased, as did their sense of connection to her. On average, all groups felt an increased need to trace their biological history with the need most strongly felt by Group 3.**

There is also a slight increase, on average, in the degree to which each group of adopted women (from Group 1 to 4) find it harder now to accept their adoption, harder to believe that their birth mother could give them up and feel angrier towards her.

Some women who were interviewed expressed concerns that meeting or knowing about their birth parents would confuse their own children. They feel that two sets of grandparents are 'enough', particularly for small children. One woman stated that her birth mother would want to be known as "Grandma" to her small son and that this would be inappropriate. In our work at PARC we hear of the complex set of negotiations that are needed to sort out this issue of 'pecking order' with grandparents when the adoptee is in an ongoing reunion. There tends to be much discussion about the role that birth and adoptive grandparents can take, with the adoptee frequently struggling to reassure their adoptive parents of their central role as grandparents, whilst also trying to validate the birth grandparents' roles. Some adopted women in our sample expressed their reluctance to interfere with or challenge their children's relationship with adoptive grandparents:

*“It would be unforgivable to destroy their relationship with my adoptive parents.”*



Opinions varied amongst participants about the right time to tell children about their own adoption, or introduce them to birth family members. While quite a few women spoke in interviews about wanting their children to know the truth and have a relationship with birth parents, they were also cautious about the effect of this on the children. Most women we interviewed felt that openness and honesty were crucial and that even if they believed children should be older before hearing the full story, they were at least spoken to about the adoption.

***“I will always be proud of being adopted and admire my adoptive parents, who I don’t call my adoptive parents, they are my parents. I will never have any hatred for any person putting their child up for adoption – as they are giving a couple a child.”***

## **The changing importance of adoption**

Only a very small proportion (6%) of adopted women in our sample feels that their adoption is becoming less important or much less important as their children grow up.

50% of all women viewed their adoption as having the same importance as time passes, 24% saw their adoption becoming more important and a further 14% saw it as much more important.

**Therefore, 38% of women believe the importance of their adoption is increasing as their children grow, whilst 12% believe it is decreasing.**

From Groups 1 through to 4, adoption is becoming more important as children grow. On average, women in Groups 1 and 2 feel that the importance of their adoption is staying about the same as their children grow. Of those who feel adoption is becoming much more important, 55% are in Group 4.

## **Adoption now**

Almost a third (32%) of all women who participated in the research believes that their adoption is important to them now, and the same proportion feels it is very important in their life. A quarter of women believe their adoption is only occasionally important and 11% believe that it is now no longer part of how they see themselves.

*“My adoption is a part of who I am and therefore is important.”*

*“Adoption is a life changing event. It never goes away as it has formed an essential part of one’s personality and how one deals with the world and relates to others.”*

## Adoption in the future

In ten years time 15% of adopted women in our sample would like to view their adoption as no longer part of how they see themselves, and 35% would like to view it as only occasionally important. 40% of respondents would like to view their adoption as important or very important to them in ten years time. A number of women commented that they are working towards integrating their adoption experiences with other aspects of their lives and their sense of self:

*“My adoption will always be important, but won’t rule my life. I have started unravelling the knots but will always know I am different.”*

*“I hope I can learn to integrate this experience into who I am, as well as the unusual upbringing I had.”*

*“I would like to accept my adoption as simply ‘part of the story’ rather than feel the pain and loss I still feel at present.”*

*“My adoption has shaped me and affected me deeply. I will always carry this burden but I work on seeing my emotional survival as a strength in me.”*

*“Ongoing healing from initial attachment wounding. I think that will always be fundamentally important to my understanding of myself – but not disabling.”*

*“I would still like to view it as very important, but hopefully a more comfortable feeling of it being part of my identity in the context of the relationships, eg. with natural mother and adoptive mother.”*

*“As part of a whole range of things that contribute to who I am as a person.”*

*“Adoption is part of me and I will continue the journey.”*

On average, women would like to view their adoption as less important in ten years time than it currently is. Over half of the women in Group 4 view their adoption as very important in their lives now, yet only one fifth of this group would like to view it as very important in ten years time. Most women in Group 4 would like to view their adoption as important (26%) or only occasionally important (34%) in ten years time.

In contrast to this, approximately two thirds of women in Group 1 view their adoption now as only occasionally important or no longer a part of how they see themselves. A very similar proportion of women would like to see their adoption in this way in ten years time, indicating that they are content with the importance of adoption in their lives.

*“I can’t see how adoption has any relevance on my life now or in the past. That is the view I have always had and can’t see it changing. I am me.”*

10% of adopted women with children offered further comments about how they view their adoption or how they would like to see it in the future:

*“I see my life as a jigsaw puzzle which I am now in control of completing. However with my birth mother refusing contact – it will never be finished as that first piece will always be missing.”*

*"My feelings are quite unique. My adoptive parents loved me so much that they couldn't tell me I was adopted. I feel disloyal to them in researching my birth parents."*

*"I wish I had found my biological mother before I told my 4 children, I needed biological relatives. I felt a misfit in my family despite being loved. It is not that my adoptive parents were/are not good, they were, but I needed to know my origins."*

*"[My] mother was told I died at birth so I have trouble accepting that someone felt that they had the right to make an adoptive decision for her."*

*"Look forward to having children that look like me and have a genetic connection."*

*"I would also like to say how disturbing it is that no-one will acknowledge the harm done and lies told to the mothers and children that were separated for the so called "good of the child". WHEN WILL SOMEONE SAY SORRY TO US."*

*"If I'm still lucky enough to be alive [in ten years time] it will be no more or no less important. I have a good relationship with my birth mother, but would not change her for my adoptive mother."*

*"I would like my adoptive parents to let go their power play in my life and in both my daughters' lives. They have been so negative all this time and made us miserable."*

*"I hope to have met my deceased real father's relatives in USA."*

*"I have found myself abnormally attracted to a new found sibling (brother). The whole idea of adoption is abnormal! I feel I will always owe my adoptive family more than I can feel. So I feel guilty. In 10 years I hope it is No.1 [no longer a part of how you see yourself]."*

*"That the best was done at the time and that all secrecy is removed from adoption. A child has the right to know who it is and where it has come from – no barriers! TOTAL HONESTY."*

*"The importance of my adoption relates to the wonderful adoptive parents I got. Of course their unconditional love will always be very important."*

*"Hopefully that it wasn't so absolutely destructive to me that I am not still going to counselling for the abuse my adopted parents did to me."*

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

## Women without children

This project has established that there are indeed some women for whom adoption is linked to not having children. It would be valuable in future research to consider specifically exploring issues for women who make a conscious decision not to have children because of something to do with their adoption. A random sample of all adopted women without children would not be useful, but we feel that this could be justified by clear research aims. Rather than researching all adopted women without children, as we have done, the purpose would be to narrow the sample and focus on a particular group of women. A qualitative approach would probably be most appropriate.

## Women with children

Over the course of the project, a number of issues which would benefit from further investigation were raised by participants, the staff at PARC and the researchers. As there has been little written about issues of adoptees and motherhood, this research has been useful not only for exploring the experiences of adopted women and developing new knowledge, but also identifying issues for consideration in the future. These include:

- Further exploration of the link between issues of adoption and motherhood, and contact with birth family. We asked participants about contact, however, it would be interesting to research in greater depth the level and nature of contact. For example, is there a different experience for women whose birth family relationships break down, or for those who are rejected by birth family members?
- Considering the relationship between the issues explored in this research, and other features of the adoptive family. For example, how women who were adopted and an only child negotiate or make sense of sibling rivalry and relationships – between their own children and with their birth siblings. Also of interest is the effect of having older parents than one's peers when growing up, and whether this impacts on the adopted person's own parenting.
- A number of participants expressed curiosity about a relationship between adoptees as mothers and post-natal depression – how many adopted women experience this and is the experience different as a result of adoption?
- Research into the nature of grandparenting in adoptive relationships, and negotiating the roles of birth and adoptive grandparents in the life of a child. Quite a few women spoke in interviews about difficulties with their adoptive parents. For example, if having a genetic connection is important and is realised through the birth of a child, some adopted women experienced challenges negotiating a relationship which is not based on a biological link.
- Consider comparing adopted women as mothers with the general population of non-adopted women. A control group proved to be unworkable for this project,

however, we did ask women about how they perceive themselves to be different from non-adopted mothers.

- Incorporating the experiences of late discovery adoptees with issues of adoption and motherhood. Some women involved in our research (both with and without children) felt that their adoption had affected their experience of motherhood, or their decision whether or not to have a child, despite not knowing about their adoption at the time.
- It is important to note that our entire sample of women spoke English at home (only one other language – Hebrew – spoken by one woman). While this may simply reflect the nature of past adoption practices, it would be interesting to question whether issues of adoptees and motherhood are similar for other culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Linked with this, we feel that it would be useful for future researchers in this area to consider the transracial adoption experience with issues of birth, pregnancy and motherhood.
- Further research needs to take the male adoptee's experience of parenthood into account.

## CONCLUSION

In conducting this research, our expectations were that we would find a significant proportion of women to have been impacted upon by their adoption and that this would trigger an additional response to the experience of motherhood not felt by non-adopted women.

The writing of the questionnaires and the evolution of our thinking on this particular aspect of adoption surprised us in its complexity. We quickly found, once we started to receive responses to the questionnaires that adopted women were eager to talk about this aspect of their lives and were, like us, surprised that nobody had examined this before. The range of their answers was broad and the groups that their responses and attitudes formed them into gave us greater insight into the ongoing nature of adoption's impact and, to an extent, the polarised views which adoption can provoke.

The adopted women involved in the research, very much like our experience at PARC suggests, ranged from seeing little or no connection between their adoption and their experience of becoming a mother to being overwhelmed by the power of that connection. As with all of our research, it is not just the 'black and white' responses that tell the story but also the many shades of grey in between.

Rather than focusing the research solely on adopted women as mothers, we felt that it was important to explore how, if at all, adoption had influenced the decision some adopted women have made not to have children. We found that of the research participants who do not have children, some did indeed attribute this directly or in part to their adoption. It appears that for many of these women, negative adoption experiences have impacted upon them to such an extent that they questioned their ability to become mothers themselves.

Other women surveyed did not see any connection between the fact that they did not have children and their adoption experience. A significant proportion of women indicated that having children is still a possibility for them in the future. When considering the demographics of this group of adopted women, it appears that issues such as age, work or study commitments may provide reasons why some women have not yet become a mother.

Women's experience of motherhood is a rich and emotional journey. The backdrop of adoption can bring some elements of this journey to the fore in ways which can remind the adoptee of their own origins and of their birth or adoptive mothers' experiences at the time of their birth. It can also give the adoptee a strong sense of beginning their line, of creating their own bloodline and of separating from past issues. At best, it can create a sense of continuity and connection with the different elements of their lives. At worst, the fear of loss and the power of anxiety can impact all too strongly.

Whilst we have endeavoured not to lose sight of individual stories, there are some very striking results. A clear majority of women acknowledged a need to feel a biological connection or to begin one's genetic line as an important influence in their decision to have a child. For example, 85% of adopted women thought about adoption to some degree during their pregnancy. A similar proportion of women felt

that their adoption had affected their experience of being a mother in some way. Almost all adopted women with children feel that their experience of being a mother has impacted their beliefs around adoption, at some level.

We have found through *A child to call my own* that adopted women have an extensive range of ideas about and experiences of motherhood, and these intersect with general adoption issues in multifaceted ways. Each of our participants has their own unique adoption story to share, yet throughout the project there has also been a sense of a unity of experiences shared by significant groupings of the adoptees.

What this research has given us is by no means the full picture of the impact of adoption and motherhood on each other. We have, however, a starting point and some new insights into the way that adoption may influence the next generation. It would be fascinating to know the ways in which children of adoptees have to learn to make sense of their parents' adoption, as it would to know how the different sets of grandparents cope with their roles in the lives of these children.

What we have found through *A child to call my own* is that adopted women do not lightly take on the decision to have a child; for them, a family is something which must be made and does not happen through biology alone. They work hard at becoming the best mothers they can be and, in bringing together the past and the future, attempt to understand their own history and origins, whilst cradling the new life they have made.

*Phoebe Masso and Victoria Whitfield*

*Post Adoption Resource Centre  
The Benevolent Society  
January 2003*

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDICES

Appendix A = Consent form  
Appendix B = Covering letter  
Appendix C = Questionnaire 1  
Appendix D = Questionnaire 2





*ADOPTees AND MOTHERHOOD CONFIRMATION SLIP*

Thank you for your interest in our research project.

The research is aimed at female adoptees who have or have not had children. To get a clearer picture of this we have devised two questionnaires and would appreciate it if you could indicate at this stage which questionnaire would apply to you. We will need your name to send you a questionnaire but you will be able to return your questionnaire anonymously if you so wish. Please complete the slip below and send it back to us in the addressed stamped envelope.

Many thanks  
The PARC research team

---

Yes I would like to take part in the research and am happy for you to send me a questionnaire

Name: -----

I do not have children

I do have children

Please send my questionnaire to the following postal address

---

Please email a questionnaire to me at the following email address:

---

**POST ADOPTION RESOURCE CENTRE**  
Postal Address: PO Box 239, BONDl NSW 2026. Phone: (02) 9365 3444 Fax: (02) 9365 3666

Website: [www.bensoc.asn.au/parc](http://www.bensoc.asn.au/parc) e-mail: [parc@bensoc.asn.au](mailto:parc@bensoc.asn.au)



May 2002

**Dear Adoptee**

*The Adoptees and Motherhood project is the fifth major research project undertaken by PARC and we are extremely grateful for your participation. We have discovered over the years, despite numerous female adoptees wanting to talk about the link between having a child (or deciding not to have a child) and their own adoption, little was known or written about this important area of adoption.*

We hope that this questionnaire will give you the opportunity to talk about your experiences in coming to terms with your adoption in relation to motherhood and what has been important to you within this relationship. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers and your anonymity will be protected (do not put your name on the questionnaire).

We would be happy to receive more anecdotal accounts of your personal thoughts on this topic so please feel free to attach more pages with your contact details.

The report of the findings will be published and you will be notified by letter detailing its availability. We have enclosed a stamped addressed envelope and request that you put your completed questionnaire in the mail by **Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2002**.

*If the questionnaire is being emailed to you we suggest that you print it off to see it in its entirety before filling it in. We are happy to receive it back by the above date by email or post.*

*Mail the enclosed postcard (which says you have put your completed questionnaire in the mail) so we know who has returned it - we will not know which questionnaire is yours as it will not have your name on it.*

Should you have any questions please contact the PARC research team on 02 9365 3444 or email [parcresearch@bensoc.asn.au](mailto:parcresearch@bensoc.asn.au).

**for filling out this questionnaire**

Most questions are either:

- tick a box  OR
- circle a number 1 2  4 5

In some questions you are asked to write in words or numbers on the lines available eg. **Other** ...*meeting other siblings*.....

If a question is not relevant to you please tick  none of the above.

Post Adoption Resource Centre  
PO Box 239, BONDI NSW 2026. Phone: (02) 9365 3444 fax: (02) 9365 3666  
Website: [bensoc.asn.au/parc](http://bensoc.asn.au/parc) e-mail: [parcresearch@bensoc.asn.au](mailto:parcresearch@bensoc.asn.au)

# *Adoptees and motherhood*

## *Questionnaire 1 - for adopted women with no children*

### About you and your household

1. Your age: .....

**2. Your marital status**

*(please tick)*

- 1. Married
- 2. Living with partner, not married
- 3. Single, never married
- 4. Separated, but not divorced
- 5. Divorced
- 6. Widowed

**3. Who do you live with?**

*(please tick)*

- 1. Alone
- 2. Just partner
- 3. Just children
- 4. Partner and children
- 5. Extended or blended family
- 6. Friends
- 7. Other

**4. What would best describe your employment status?**

*(please tick)*

- 1. Working full time
- 2. Working part time
- 3. Unemployed, looking for work
- 4. Home duties
- 5. Student
- 6. Receiving a pension/ benefit
- 7. Self-funded retiree
- 8. Other

**5. What language do you speak at home?**

*(please tick)*

- 1.English
- 2.Other .....

**6. What level of education have you completed?**

*(please tick)*

- 1.Up to end of primary school
- 2.Some secondary school
- 3.Up to year 10 (eg school certificate)
- 4.Up to year 12 / HSC (eg higher school certificate)
- 5.Trade/ apprenticeship (eg hairdresser, chef)
- 6.Certificate/ diploma (eg childcare, technician)
- 7.University degree
- 8.Post-graduate qualifications (eg Grad Dip, Masters, PhD)

**Contact with birth parents**

**7. Contact with birth parents:**

*(please indicate which applies to you)*

- 1.Had contact since \_\_\_\_\_ **(state year of first contact)**
- 2.Never attempted search and reunion
- 3.Unable to locate birth family
- 4.Currently searching
- 5.Made approach but was rejected
- 6.Was contacted and accepted the contact
- 7.Was contacted and refused the contact

## Your desire to have children

We want to get a picture of whether or not a desire to have children has featured in your life.

### 8a. How strong is your desire to have children now?

*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
no desire      little desire      some desire      great desire      enormous desire

### 8b. At what age did you most desire to have children? .....

### 8c. How strong was your desire then?

*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
no desire      little desire      some desire      great desire      enormous desire

### 9. Overall, how strongly would you rate your desire to have children compared to other *non-adopted* women that you know?

*(please circle a number)*

#### **My desire to have children is:**

-2                      -1                      0                      +1                      +2  
far less              less                      same                      more                      much more

## What has lead to you being without children

### 10. What has lead you to being without children?

*(please tick as many as apply)*

- 1. Still considering the possibility of having children
- 2. Not yet seriously considered the possibility of having children
- 3. Not ready emotionally
- 4. Actively attempting to have a child via natural pregnancy
- 5. Actively attempting to have a child via assisted reproductive technology
- 6. Actively attempting to have a child via adoption
- 7. Same sex relationship
- 8. Partner does not want a child
- 9. Death of a child
- 10. Wanting children but unable to have children
- 11. Other
- None of the above

**11. What about being adopted has affected your ideas on whether or not to have children?**

*(please rank the **three** most important factors in order of importance. Write 1 next the most important factor, 2 next to the second most important factor etc.)*

- ..... a) Your parents' infertility
- ..... b) Doubts about your ability to mother
- ..... c) Your birth mother's decision to have you adopted
- ..... d) Your experiences within your adoptive family
- ..... e) Your birthmother's experience of being separated from you
- ..... f) The thought of being close to a baby somehow brings forward feelings of grief
- ..... g) Not knowing anything about your genetic background
- ..... h) Other.....

None of the above

***Impact on relationships***

*We are interested in your experiences within your family relationships at this time in your life.*

**12. What impact has your not having children had on your relationship with your adoptive parents?**

*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
(Please circle the most appropriate number)*

	<b>Strongly agree</b>			<b>Strongly disagree</b>		
a) <i>Our relationship has not changed</i>	1	2	3	4	5	
b) <i>They accept my situation</i>	1	2	3	4	5	
c) <i>Our relationship has improved</i>	1	2	3	4	5	
d) <i>I have felt pressure from them to have children</i>	1	2	3	4	5	
e) <i>They are fearful that if I have children they might have to share the grandparent role with my birth parents</i>	1	2	3	4	5	
f) <i>They do not seem to mind either way</i>		1	2	3	4	5

**13. What impact has your not having children had on your relationship with your birth parents?**

*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
(Please circle the most appropriate number)*

*I have not had a reunion (go on to next question)*

	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree	
a) <i>Our relationship has not changed</i>	1	2	3	4	5
b) <i>They accept my situation</i>	1	2	3	4	5
c) <i>Our relationship has improved</i>	1	2	3	4	5
d) <i>I have felt pressure from them to have children</i>	1	2	3	4	5
e) <i>They are fearful that if I have children they might have to share the grandparent role with my adoptive parents</i>	1	2	3	4	5
f) <i>They do not seem to mind either way</i>	1	2	3	4	5

**14. Has your not having children affected your decision to:**

*(please select as many as apply)*

- 1. make contact with your birth parents?
- 2. continue contact with your birth parents?
- 3. break contact with your birth parents?
- 4. never contact your birth parents?
- 5. place a veto, stopping contact from your birth parents?
- None of the above**

**15. I feel that my adoption has nothing to do with the fact that I am currently childless.**

- 1. True
- 2. False

***Thank you so much for completing this questionnaire.***

*For office use:*

- 1. From advertisement
- 2. From article
- 3. From PARC database
- 4. From other

## *Adoptees and motherhood*

### *Questionnaire 2 - for adopted women with children*

#### About you and your household

**6. Your age:** .....

**7. Your marital status**

*(please tick)*

- 1. Married
- 2. Living with partner, not married
- 3. Single, never married
- 4. Separated, but not divorced
- 5. Divorced
- 6. Widowed

**8. Who do you live with?**

*(please tick)*

- 1. Alone
- 2. Just partner
- 3. Just children
- 4. Partner and children
- 5. Extended or blended family
- 6. Friends
- 7. Other

**9. What would best describe your employment status?**

*(please tick)*

- 1. Working full time
- 2. Working part time
- 3. Unemployed, looking for work
- 4. Home duties
- 5. Student
- 6. Receiving a pension/ benefit
- 7. Self-funded retiree
- 8. Other



**10. What language do you speak at home?**

*(please tick)*

- 1. English
- 2. Other .....

**6. What level of education have you completed?**

*(please tick)*

- 1. Up to end of primary school
- 2. Some secondary school
- 3. Up to year 10 (eg school certificate)
- 4. Up to year 12 / HSC (eg higher school certificate)
- 5. Trade/ apprenticeship (eg hairdresser, chef)
- 6. Certificate/ diploma (eg childcare, technician)
- 7. University degree
- 8. Post-graduate qualifications (eg Grad Dip, Masters, PhD)

**Contact with birth parents**

**7. Contact with birth parents:**

*(please indicate which applies to you)*

- 1. Had contact since \_\_\_\_\_ (state year of first contact)
- 2. Never attempted search and reunion
- 3. Unable to locate birth family
- 4. Currently searching
- 5. Made approach but was rejected
- 6. Was contacted and accepted the contact
- 7. Was contacted and refused the contact

**Information about your children**

**8. Children**

- 1. No children
- 2. Children (list ages of children) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Number of other pregnancies \_\_\_\_\_

**9. How old were you when you had your:**

first child \_\_\_\_\_

second child \_\_\_\_\_

third child \_\_\_\_\_

further children? \_\_\_\_\_

**Your decision to have a child**

**10a. How strong is your desire to have a child now?**

*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
no desire          little desire          some desire          great desire          enormous desire

**10b. At what age did you most desire to have children? .....**

**10c. How strong was your desire to have children then?**

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
no desire          little desire          some desire          great desire          enormous desire

**11. What influenced your decision to have a child?**

*(Please rank the **three** most important factors for you in order of importance. Write 1 next to the most important issue, 2 for the second most important etc)*

- ..... a) to begin your genetic line
- ..... b) to feel a biological connection
- ..... c) natural progression in your relationship
- ..... d) always wanted to have a child
- ..... e) to please a partner
- ..... f) accidental pregnancy
- ..... g) to provide a grandchild for adoptive parents
- ..... h) to provide a grandchild for birth parents
- ..... i ) other.....
- .....

none of the above

**12. How important a factor was adoption in your decision to have a child?**  
*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	quite	very	extremely

## Fertility

We are interested in finding out about your expectations of fertility before having any children

**13. Did you have a sense that it would be easy for you to fall pregnant?**  
*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	not sure	somewhat	easy	very easy

**14. To what degree was this expectation influenced by your belief about your birth mother's experience?**  
*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	quite	very much	completely

**15. To what degree was this expectation influenced by your belief about your adoptive mother's experiences?**  
*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	quite	very much	completely

**16. Were you anxious about your ability to have children?**  
*(please circle a number on the following scale)*

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	quite	very much	extremely

**17. Were you anxious about falling pregnant accidentally?**

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	a little	anxious	very anxious	extremely anxious

## Your pregnancy

We understand that you may have had more than one pregnancy. In the following sections we would like to find out about having your **first child**.

### 18. Describe your general experience of pregnancy (please tick as many as apply)

- 1. Easy and straightforward
- 2. Medical complications
- 3. Challenging physical symptoms
- 4. Emotionally difficult

### 19. Describe your feelings during your pregnancy

#### a) How much anxiety did you experience? (please circle)

1	2	3	4	5
none	occasional	little	some	high

#### b) To what degree could you believe what was happening? (please circle)

1	2	3	4	5
strong disbelief	detachment	felt normal	acceptance	excitement

#### c) When did you feel a connection to your baby? (please circle)

1	2	3	4	5
in pregnancy	at birth	soon after birth	months later	continue to lack connection

### 20. How much did you think about your adoption during your pregnancy? (please circle)

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	occasionally	quite often	often	very often

## Birth

**21. Describe your general experience of birth**  
*(Please indicate those that apply to you)*

- 1. Natural vaginal delivery
- 2. Planned caesarean
- 3. Emergency caesarean
- 4. Full term
- 5. Premature
- 6. Induced
- 7. Still birth
- 8. Complications after birth for you
- 9. Complications after birth for baby

**22. How supported did you feel during the birth?**  
*(please circle)*

- |            |          |          |      |           |
|------------|----------|----------|------|-----------|
| 1          | 2        | 3        | 4    | 5         |
| not at all | a little | somewhat | very | extremely |

## Immediate post-natal period

**23. During the first weeks after the birth, how did thoughts of your adoption impact on your new status as a mother?**

*(Please rank the five most important factors for you, in order of importance. Eg, write 1 next to the most important, 2 next to the second most important, up to 5. Only rank items that are important to you)*

*Didn't think about my adoption and/or its impact*

- ..... a) *Anxiety about attachment to baby*
- ..... b) *Fears of losing/being separated from baby*
- ..... c) *Strong sense of own separation from birth mother as a baby*
- ..... d) *More empathy for birth mother*
- ..... e) *Less empathy for birth mother*
- ..... f) *More empathy for adoptive mother*
- ..... g) *Less empathy for adoptive mother*
- ..... h) *If no reunion, greater desire to connect with birth mother*
- ..... i) *Imagining about the birth mother's grief at separation and since*
- ..... j) *Anxiety about own mothering potential*
- ..... k) *Disbelief and doubt. Am I really a mother?*
- ..... l) *Anxiety about place of birth/adoptive grandparents in baby's life.*
- ..... m) *Other .....*

## Motherhood

**24. Has your desire to have children been fulfilled by one child?**  
(please circle)

0                      1                      2                      3                      4  
not at all          slightly          somewhat          mostly          completely

**25. How strongly would you rate your need to be a mother compared to the non-adopted mothers you know?**  
(please circle)

-2                      -1                      0                      +1                      +2  
*much less than most*    *less*                      *same as most*                      *stronger*                      *much stronger*

**26. Describe yourself as a mother.**

*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?*  
(Please circle the most appropriate number)

	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree	
a) <i>I am a calm, relaxed mother</i>	1	2	3	4	5
b) <i>I am an anxious mother</i>	1	2	3	4	5
c) <i>I am an over-protective mother</i>	1	2	3	4	5
d) <i>I find it hard to think of myself as a mother</i>	1	2	3	4	5
e) <i>I feel I've really found my role</i>	1	2	3	4	5
f) <i>I really enjoy my children</i>	1	2	3	4	5
g) <i>I fear being rejected by my children</i>	1	2	3	4	5
h) <i>I find it hard to discipline my children</i>	1	2	3	4	5
i) <i>It takes a long time for parents to develop close, warm feelings for their children</i>	1	2	3	4	5
j) <i>Child rearing is not as rewarding as I thought it would be</i>	1	2	3	4	5
k) <i>I am very strict as a mother</i>	1	2	3	4	5
l) <i>I am afraid of failing as a parent</i>	1	2	3	4	5
m) <i>I find it hard to ask for help with parenting</i>	1	2	3	4	5
n) <i>I make joint decisions with my partner about parenting</i>	1	2	3	4	5
o) <i>I rely heavily on parenting advice from others</i>	1	2	3	4	5
p) <i>I find it hard to know whether I'm doing a good job as a parent</i>	1	2	3	4	5

**27. How do your views of yourself as a mother compare to the non-adopted mothers you know?**

To what extent to you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
(Please circle the most appropriate number)

	<b>Strongly agree</b>			<b>Strongly disagree</b>	
a) I am more anxious	1	2	3	4	5
b) I am more relaxed	1	2	3	4	5
c) I am more possessive	1	2	3	4	5
d) I am more over-protective	1	2	3	4	5
e) I am more fearful of rejection by my child	1	2	3	4	5
f) I am more strict	1	2	3	4	5
g) I am more confident	1	2	3	4	5
h) I am more self-reliant	1	2	3	4	5
i) I am more of a perfectionist	1	2	3	4	5
j) I am no different to non-adopted mothers I know	1	2	3	4	5

**28. To what degree has your adoption affected your experience of being a mother?**

(Please circle)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
not at all          not much          a little          a lot          enormously

**29. To what degree has your experience of being a mother impacted your beliefs around adoption?**

(Please circle a number)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
not at all          not much          a little          a lot          enormously

**30. How have your beliefs about adoption been affected?**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
(please circle an appropriate number)

Since becoming a mother	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree	
a) I find it harder to accept my adoption	1	2	3	4	5
b) I now believe adoption to be unnatural	1	2	3	4	5
c) I now believe adoption to be a positive and workable option	1	2	3	4	5
d) I have an increased need to trace my biological history	1	2	3	4	5
e) I have a stronger belief that how you are raised is more important than biological connection	1	2	3	4	5
f) I am more able to put myself in my birth mother's shoes	1	2	3	4	5

**Impact on relationships**

**31. Has becoming a mother impacted on your relationship with your adoptive parents?**

Use the following scale to indicate to what degree the relationship has changed.  
(please circle a number on the scale that describes your relationship)

no contact

-2                  -1                  0                  +1                  +2  
*much more distant    more distant    no change            closer            much closer*

**32. Has becoming a mother impacted on your relationship with your birth parents?**

Use the following scale to indicate to what degree the relationship has changed.  
(please circle a number on the scale that describes your relationship)

no contact

-2                  -1                  0                  +1                  +2  
*much more distant    more distant    no change            closer            much closer*



## Adoption in your life

### 33. Has becoming a mother affected your view of your birth mother?

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

(please circle an appropriate number)

Since becoming a mother	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree	
a) I have more sympathy for her	1	2	3	4	5
b) I find it harder to believe that she could give me up	1	2	3	4	5
c) I feel that I understand her better	1	2	3	4	5
d) I am angrier towards her	1	2	3	4	5
e) I feel more forgiveness	1	2	3	4	5
f) I feel a greater sense of connection to her	1	2	3	4	5

### 13. As your child/children grow how is the importance of adoption changing for you?

(please circle the appropriate number)

-2                      -1                      0                      +1                      +2  
*much less important    less important    the same    more important    much more*

### 14. A) How do you view your adoption now?

(please tick one box)

- 1. No longer a part of how you see yourself
- 2. Only occasionally as important
- 3. Important
- 4. Very important

### B) In ten years time how would you like to view your adoption?

(please tick one box)

- 1. No longer a part of how you see yourself
- 2. Only occasionally as important
- 3. Important
- 4. Very important
- 5. Other .....
- .....
- .....

**Thank you so much for completing this questionnaire.**

For office use:

- 1. From advertisement
- 2. From article
- 3. From PARC database
- 4. From other

This research report is a product of the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC), a service of The Benevolent Society.

PARC was established in 1991 and offers a range of services to those affected by adoption – information; face-to-face, telephone and e-mail counselling; groups and intermediary services. Since 1991 PARC has conducted 48,000 telephone counselling calls. It remains at the cutting edge of research into post adoption issues, as well as offering a range of information and training opportunities for professionals and support groups. The centre is always looking for new ways to talk and think about the impact of adoption on the different parties. PARC works across NSW and has a national and international reputation for providing high standards of support and care.

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