

Post Adoption Information Sheet No 2

Information for adoptive parents whose adult sons or daughters are thinking of searching for parents in NSW

Many adoptive parents have questions about the rights of birth parents or adopted people over the age of 18 to access identifying information about each other. Identifying information is available in NSW under the Adoption Act (2000).

Adopted people may obtain information from their adoption file by applying to the Adoption Information Unit. They may also obtain a copy of their Original Birth Certificate (optional) from Births, Deaths and Marriages which reveals the name, age, address and birthplace of their mother at the time of their birth and in some instances (usually only if the parents were married to each other) also the name of their father. The Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, if requested, will also search for further information, such as their mother's marriage record. Similarly, birth mothers (and fathers whose name appears on the original birth certificate) may obtain a copy of their adopted son or daughter's amended birth certificate with their adoptive name and the names of their adoptive parents. They can also obtain relevant marriage records which can help them to search for, and consider making contact with, their adopted son or daughter.

Your feelings

Some adoptive parents may feel concerned about the possibility of their son or daughter seeking contact, while others may welcome it. In our experience, either way, the idea and the reality of an adopted person searching for a parent is likely to cause some emotional turbulence for all concerned.

It is quite natural for adoptive parents to experience some strong, conflicting emotions if their son or daughter decides to search for a parent, even if theoretically they can understand the need to do this. The sort of feelings that adoptive parents have described to us include fear, anger, sorrow, jealousy, betrayal, guilt and a sense of failure. These emotions quite frequently co-exist with feelings of sympathy, interest, relief and a sense of achievement.

Some of the more uncomfortable feelings are an inescapable part of being a parent to a son or daughter who has another, unknown, family; others are based on misunderstandings. It may also help to accept that any major changes in life bring advantages and disadvantages and

involve a period of readjustment. Misconceptions can be corrected by reading information about adopted adults who have sought and achieved a reunion and/or by joining an adoption support group.

Do those who search have a bad relationship with their adoptive parents?

The vast majority of adopted people who search have a positive relationship with their adoptive parents. Irrespective of this, they may have a deep desire to try to make sense of their origins and identity by finding out as much as possible about their backgrounds and perhaps meeting and getting to know their birth parents.

Most adopted people who search are extremely sensitive to the feelings and needs of their adoptive parents as well as their parents. Many have denied their own wishes for some time, giving priority to the expressed or imagined views of their adoptive parents.

Despite having a good relationship with their adoptive parents, they may still find it very difficult to talk about their interest in their birth parents and their decision to try to find them. Many are torn between wishing to confide in their adoptive parents and wanting to protect them. Perhaps the most that adoptive parents can do is try to create an atmosphere in which adoption and the possibility of searching remain an open topic of discussion, while respecting their adult children's right to privacy.

Will contact with the parents break up my family?

Research and experience have shown that access to adoption information and contact with parents does not adversely affect firmly established relationships. In fact, it seems the opposite is true - adopted people often report a strengthening of the relationship with their adoptive parents. A period of adjustment may be necessary, as with all major life events, but with goodwill and patience on all sides, the experience may well bring adoptive parents and their children closer together. Of course the outcome of a search and contact with a parent is very hard to predict. The general pattern suggests that very few adopted people or parents regret it, even if the end result turns out to be less satisfactory than might have been desired. Most adopted people say that contact with a parent, however minimal, has helped them to discover their own history and given them a better understanding of themselves.

Most mothers appear to welcome news and some form of contact with an adopted son or daughter, though for some it is a frightening thing to have their 'secret unveiled.' Many have lived with the shame and stigma that was associated in the past, with having a child while single. Many are still affected by that pain, guilt and sadness many years later. Most are very anxious not to cause distress to adoptive parents who have 'done all the hard work.'

What are the options for contact?

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Parties to an adoption that took place in NSW prior to 1990, can lodge a contact veto if they do not wish to be contacted by their relatives.

What is a contact veto?

For adoption orders made before October 1990, both adopted people and birth parents who do not wish to be contacted, are able to place a Contact Veto with Family and Community Services. Where a contact veto exists and an application is made to obtain an Adoption Information Certificate, the adopted person or the parent is required to sign an Undertaking not to make contact with the person who has registered the veto. If he or she is not willing to make such an Undertaking, the *Adoption Information Certificate* or identifying information will not be issued. The person who has registered a veto is informed in writing when an application for an *Adoption Information Certificate* is made and whether the person signs the Undertaking or not.

The penalty for breaking a veto is a fine of up to \$2750 and/or 12 months imprisonment. Experience suggests that respect for the expressed wishes of the other person ensures the honouring of the Undertaking, rather than the penalty. People are unwilling to put themselves in a situation where they will be rejected, at the same time causing possible distress or embarrassment to the other person.

What is an Advance Notice?

Adoptive parents, parents and adopted people can all request Advance Notice of the *Adoption Information Certificate* being released. By lodging an Advance Notice there is a delay of two months, unless there are special reasons requiring a longer period, before the information is released enabling the person to prepare for contact. This time could be useful to enable adoptive parents to tell their son or daughter of their adoption, to deal with another family crisis or to get past exams, for instance.

Why can't I prevent contact on my son/daughter's behalf?

Legislation recognises that adopted adults are able to make their own decision about search and contact. Adoption is regarded as just one aspect of people's lives and that as adults, adopted people can be expected, to deal with this aspect as responsibly and effectively as they do with other sensitive areas of their relationships. Adopted people have described previous adoption legislation as 'paternalistic' and as the only situation in our society in which adult people 'for their own good' were denied the right to know about themselves and their origins.

Where can I go for help?

The Benevolent Society can provide advice and support throughout the process of searching. This includes individual counselling, small group meetings and information meetings for all parties affected by adoption - adopted people, adoptive parents and parents. There are many articles and books in our library which might also help. Our 2001 research report 'At Least Now I Know' discusses the outcomes of search and reunion. Phone us for more information or for a reading list.

The Benevolent Society acknowledges the importance of your feelings and concerns around the changing face of adoption; we welcome hearing your views on the current legislation and your particular concerns about how you and your family may be affected by it.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC)

Location: Locked Bag 6002,
Hurstville BC NSW 1481
Phone: 02 9504 6788
Email: PARC@benevolent.org.au
Website: www.benevolent.org.au

Post Adoption Support Queensland (PASQ)

Location: Ground Floor, 189 Coronation Dr,
Milton QLD 4064
Phone: 07 3170 4600
Email: PASQ@benevolent.org.au
Website: www.benevolent.org.au