

Post Adoption Information Sheet No 38

Discovering you are adopted later in life

Discovering late in life that you are adopted can be a tremendous and devastating shock. Some of the common ways people find out are:

- Being told after the death of a parent.
- When applying for a passport (in some states of Australia).
- Accidental disclosure by a relative or friend who knew.
- Being approached by a member of the birth family.
- Coming across the adoption papers.
- Being told by parents because of the changes in adoption legislation.
- Being told by a spouse or family member during an argument.

Reactions to finding out

Whichever way the disclosure occurs, it almost invariably gives rise to a mix of intense feelings, including:

- **Disbelief:** you may think that there has been a mistake, that you could not possibly be adopted; that there has been a mix-up of identities.
- **Confusion:** you may feel as though "the carpet has been pulled out from under your feet". There may be a feeling that you don't know who you are any more, that you have no real identity and that nothing makes sense.
- **Anger:** you may feel that you have been living a lie and that your family and others around you have deceived you. This can result in a loss of trust in your adoptive parents or other family members and a feeling of bitterness and hostility towards them.
- **Sorrow and Loss:** you may feel that all your relationships are irretrievably altered by the knowledge that you will never be able again to relate to people, nor they to you, as in the past.
- **Relief:** you may feel that things "make sense" and that you'd always felt that there was "something" you didn't know or that you were "different" to your family. You may even have asked if you were adopted.

Some of the things people have said to describe the experience are:

- *"I've just been a mess since I found out."*

- *"I don't know who I am anymore."*
- *"I feel as if there has been a conspiracy of silence."*
- *"I feel like a fool."*
- *"I can't believe everyone knew except me."*
- *"I feel as if I have been betrayed."*
- *"What does this mean?"*
- *"What is my life all about?"*
- *"A lot of things make sense to me now."*
- *"Now I just want more information about who I am"*

You may expect to experience some or all of these feelings.

You are reacting to finding out something vital about yourself that has been concealed from you. This can lead to an extended period of adjustment whilst you come to terms with this whole new perspective on who you are; how you began your life, how secrecy in your family may have impacted on you, how you feel about those who kept the secret and the long term implications of this revelation for your own identity. Experiencing feelings of sorrow, disbelief, confusion and anger can be seen as part of this process.

Why wasn't I told?

One of your biggest questions after finding out might be "How come I was the last to know?" The reasons why you weren't told are often complex and vary from family to family.

Part of the answer might be in the social attitudes prevailing at the time of your adoption. These days there is an increasing awareness within the community of the adopted person's right to know the truth about their early life. However, in years gone by the whole issue of adoption tended to be enveloped in secrecy. At some stages in the past, social workers, doctors and ministers often advised adoptive parents not to tell their child. This attitude originated in a desire to protect the child from the social stigma of being born out of wedlock. The childless couple was also often the subject of gossip and pity of friends and acquaintances. In such a climate, the problem of childlessness was frequently not openly acknowledged. Such social pressures accentuated the tendency towards secrecy, a natural reluctance to face difficult truths.

There was also a well-intentioned belief that it was better for the child to see themselves as part of a 'natural family' i.e. to ignore the fact of adoption. Your adoptive parents may have been afraid that if you knew you were adopted you would no longer see yourself as part of the family. They may have feared that your relationship with them would be changed, or, that it would be hurtful to you to be told that you weren't their child by birth - that you would feel different from other children. A desire to protect you from such hurts may have formed part of the decision not to tell you.

Despite all of these reasons, it is now recognised that this practise of secrecy is harmful. Such changed attitudes have resulted in major changes in all Australian State's adoption laws.

If you have found out from a source other than your adoptive parents

If you have found out about your adoptive status from others, it may be difficult to discuss your discovery with your adoptive parents, particularly if they are elderly. You may feel that they would be 'devastated' and 'the shock may kill them'. You may want to protect them from the guilt and hurt they may feel once they know that their long guarded secret has been unveiled. You may be surprised that some adoptive parents are relieved that they no longer need to bear the burden of the secret and have always felt they should have 'told' you.

Alternatively, you may feel at this stage that you are too angry towards your parents to discuss the matter in a constructive manner. It is possible, however, that talking with your parents may help you to understand their position and to resolve some of your feelings.

If you do talk with your adoptive parents, it is important to be prepared for a variety of reactions, some of which may include denial and anger. These reactions can trigger even stronger feelings of anger and hurt in you. If you are unsure about their reaction it may be appropriate to wait until you feel more prepared, or to have a support person as a back-up.

Similarly, if you have found out as a result of being contacted by a member of your birth family, you may need time to come to terms with the fact that you are adopted before feeling ready to meet your birth relatives. Once again, it is important to gather as much information as possible and to have a support person as back up.

Confirming your adoption

If you can't or don't want to approach your parents directly, you can confirm your adopted status through the relevant government department.

QLD	NSW/ACT
Adoption and Permanent Care Services Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women Locked Bag 3405 Brisbane, QLD 4001 Phone: 1800 647 983 (QLD only) or 07 3097 5100 Website: https://www.qld.gov.au/community/caring-child/contact-adoption-services Email: ads@csyw.qld.gov.au	Adoption Information Unit Family and Community Services Locked Bag 4001 Ashfield NSW 1800 Phone: 1300 799 023 or 02 9716 3005 Website: www.community.nsw.gov.au Email: adoption.information@facs.nsw.gov.au

Since 1990 in NSW and under the QLD Adoption Act 2009, adopted persons and birth parents are able to have access to original birth records and so can locate each other, if they wish. It is recommended that you do not engage in this process in haste, without support, or without some understanding of the complex issues and feelings you are facing.

If you would like more information about tracing and contacting your birth family, please feel free to contact Post Adoption Support Queensland (PASQ) or the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC).

Managing your feelings

It is important to acknowledge how overwhelming your feelings can be and that these feelings are natural and to be expected. Your identity, your existing relationships and whole world view has been fundamentally shaken. Handling your angry and confused feelings on your own can be difficult and may even be impossible. Talking about what you are experiencing with someone else can be an important part of the adjustment process. It usually helps to share your feelings with someone you can trust, someone who is close to you.

Finding someone you trust may be particularly difficult at first, as those who kept the secret may be the same people you would previously have turned to for support. Linking up with other persons who discovered their adoption later in life, reading accounts by other late discoverers or about late discovery experiences can be a positive first step to lessen your sense of aloneness.

Additionally, you may wish to speak to a professional counsellor who has an understanding of adoption issues, including late discovery issues and who can help you reach an understanding of your reactions and feelings. Here at *The Benevolent Society Post Adoption Support Queensland (PASQ)* and *Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC)* we have experienced Counsellors who can provide support by phone, Skype or individual appointments.

Beyond the shock

Working through the initial shock and hurt is painful and difficult. Over time many people move on to a realisation of the benefits of knowing the truth about themselves. Vague or confusing things overheard about yourself, feelings of always being treated differently by other family members, a mother's lack of knowledge of your birth, all now begin to make sense. You may always have felt intuitively that there was something different about you and that you never really fitted into your family. Some people have reported feeling relieved, with their knowledge of adoption being the piece of the jigsaw that finally produced a coherent picture. Some even describe the experience as enriching their life in the long term.

As you get used to this new knowledge you will start to build a new life that includes the missing information. You will renegotiate your relationships with family and friends who kept the secret, usually successfully but sometimes not. You will build a new relationship from a position of knowledge and control. You may need to reach out for help and support more than once during this journey.

The most important thing is to know that you are not alone, that others have also experienced late discovery and that there is information and support available to you.

The Benevolent Society has researched this sensitive area of the adoption experience and the resulting paper "*Why wasn't I told*" is available from PARC or PASQ.

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