

Post Adoption Information Sheet No 47

Finding a relative through DNA

How using DNA has changed the search process

Increasingly more people impacted by adoption are trying to find birth relatives by submitting DNA samples to both genealogy companies and private testing providers. The growing popularity of family history research and the desire to find birth relatives via DNA testing has meant DNA databases are expanding, increasing the likelihood of an adopted person or parent finding a match.

DNA testing can also help to confirm parentage or the nature of a relationship if two parties submit a sample to a laboratory. This is particularly the case in proving or disproving paternity now that names of putative fathers (named in government records but not registered on the birth certificate) are being released.

These changes raise exciting possibilities for those who may have exhausted every other search avenue of finding birth relatives. However, there are some things to bear in mind if you are going to search in this way.

Manage your expectations

As with any other search process, using DNA can be an emotional roller coaster and it is important to have realistic expectations. It is still quite rare for people impacted by adoption to be instantly matched with close blood relatives. Some people may only receive information about their ethnicity while others might be matched with second, third, or fourth cousins.

If for example, you are matched with a second cousin, you have found someone who shares the same great grandparent as you. It can certainly be a clue in piecing together a family tree. However, various surveys have shown that the average person may have between 28 and 62 second cousins, or between 175 and 312 third cousins. The chances of that person knowing anything about your birth parent may be limited.

Considerations in Approaching a Match

While PARC/PASQ do not offer expert advice about DNA, our long history in mediations and outreaching to potential matches for our clients has informed the way we make our initial approach. The PARC/PASQ intermediary service, for example, seeks to contact the

parent or adopted person privately and confidentially, so that they can be supported to respond to contact without their “secret” being exposed.

In demonstrating respect for a person’s privacy, that person may feel safe to engage in a connection. That person may then choose to have contact, or tell their children or other family members at their own pace. In our experience, this process has been the most successful in bringing parties together. If the person being sought has died, the closest relative might then be approached, and potentially siblings. Each approach would still be private and confidential.

In DNA tracing, the opposite process takes place. For example, your match may be a distant relative of a parent, who then becomes privy to a secret the parent has kept over many decades. The effect can be devastating, like a kind of public shaming. In those circumstances, the approach by the adopted person may be automatically rejected or appropriate support for people involved is not available. There have also been instances where contact occurs through a DNA match and they “gate-keep” the process, dictating what information is provided to you. Many of our clients have experienced these disappointing effects and then approached the PARC/PASQ intermediary service to intervene. Unfortunately, it can be very difficult at that stage to undo the damage.

When making an approach online, it is probably best to make it general, being careful not to reveal too much straight away. The letters that PARC/PASQ send as an initial outreach do not mention adoption. This is because we try to protect the confidentiality of the person being sought as their situation may not be safe or supportive.

With all of the above said, there are clients who have managed very successful reunions with their families through DNA tracing.

If you are new to this kind of searching, it may be helpful to talk through the issues with a PARC/ PASQ counsellor. There are also online groups and volunteers that assist with searching using DNA.

DNA Genealogy Service Providers

Note: PARC/PASQ do not endorse any particular provider listed below.

The most popular genealogy companies are AncestryDNA, MyHeritage, 23andMe, LivingDNA and FamilyTreeDNA. Kits can be purchased for around \$150 but look out for deals around public holidays for around \$90. These kits allow you to take a simple cheek swab at home with postage included.

You will need a subscription on some of these company sites in order to view your matches. The costs of these subscriptions vary widely. If you can visit the NSW or QLD State Library in person, you can access Ancestry for free.

Once you have the results, there are various “DNA crunching” tools to assist you make sense of the information you receive.

Additional information and resources that may be helpful:

PARC held a Speakers Forum in 2018 on DNA tracing and the event was filmed, with segments of the film accessible on the PARC Facebook page. Speakers talked about their personal experiences but also gave general information.

You can access the clips via the following links:

Part 1: Kerri – when paper records aren’t enough and DNA provides answers.

<https://www.facebook.com/benevolentsocietyNSW/videos/267178540855603/>

Part 2: Peter – when reality isn’t like the Ancestry.com advertisement

<https://www.facebook.com/benevolentsocietyNSW/videos/1125368844301010/>

Part 3: Ken – when persistence pays off

<https://www.facebook.com/benevolentsocietyNSW/videos/2264775470472673/>

Websites which may be helpful:

<https://www.australiandnahun.org.au/>

<http://familyhistoryresearch.com.au/index.htm>

www.DragonGenealogy.com

www.DNA-Central.com

Consider joining the Society of Australian Genealogists (SAG)<https://www.sag.org.au/> SAG has webinars online which show you how to research and build a family tree and they can give individual consultations. Some clients have worked with SAG successfully to build their family trees and have then approached family members carefully and tactfully.

We are very happy to hear from you if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

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