

For Women Who Have Placed More Than One Child For Adoption

Adoption legislation in NSW/ACT and Queensland now makes it possible for parents to seek identifying information on, and make contact with, the child they placed for adoption more than 18 years ago.

It has become increasingly apparent to adoption workers in the field, and mothers' support groups, that many parents have more than one child who was placed for adoption. Many of these women believe that to admit to family and friends that they have more than one child who was adopted will suggest or confirm to others that they were "bad, irresponsible, and promiscuous." This strong sense of guilt and shame can affect a mother's ability to share the fact of the other adoption(s), with the adult child who has found her. Her fear is that a new and sometimes troubled relationship will be greatly harmed by this disclosure and may shatter the adoptee's image of her as a young naive girl. It may suggest that she did not care for either child as well as conjuring up all the negative stereotypes associated with "irresponsible sexual behaviour."

If you are reading this, you may be experiencing the great loneliness and isolation that many women in your situation have expressed. Others have said: *"I feel like a monster with two heads"* and *"nobody could be as bad as me."*

It may be hard for you at your current stage in life to understand or relate to yourself as "the younger woman" who placed her children for adoption in this way. Some women have said how hard it is to forgive that younger woman to whom they can no longer relate. One wrote *"Why wasn't I stronger at 17 and 19 and how can I forgive myself for not standing up to those around me?"* It may be that anger now features dominantly in your life - anger towards social attitudes at the time, parents who gave little support and men who gave promises they didn't keep. Some women have said it is helpful to express and consider the nature of this anger, to put it outside themselves rather than turn it inwards and so continue the guilt and self-blame.

Factors leading to the adoptions

The reasons for placing more than one child for adoption are many. For some women the loss of the first child was so traumatic that the second pregnancy was in a sense an attempt to replace that lost child. However, the mother may then have found herself in the same situation as before and had to place the second child for adoption as well. In fact, the advice given by the family was often *"you've done it once and you coped, so why not do it again."* Unfortunately, the emotional effects of the first adoption may not have been evident to members of the family in the early years after the adoption as the mother may have been told by the same family members, hospital staff and the adoption agency to *"put it behind you and get on with your life."* It is often only some years later that the mother who suppressed the grief and pain associated with the adoption begins to unravel and reflect upon how these events have actually affected her life. Of course this may be many years after the adoption of the children.

For other women, the right to mother a child is felt to be lost with their first child's adoption. Often women speak of a prevailing sense of failure, shame and lack of entitlement to be a mother which influences the choice they made in regard to the second or third pregnancy. In fact, the sense of having no choice is often expressed. It is also possible that a mother may have had her children removed from her care during a particularly difficult stage of her life.

Relationships with the adult adopted children

For various reasons many women find that they feel closer to one child than another. This can be confusing and distressing for the adoptee, but also reinforces for the birth mother her story of failure as a mother, guilt and shame.

It may be that the pregnancies occurred in vastly different circumstances and that a woman feels closer to one child because of the feelings towards that child's birth father. It may also be that one pregnancy symbolises a particularly sad and painful time in a woman's life and so she feels less able to accept the adult child in his/her own right. Sometimes it is the first born child who is the easiest to accept, sometimes a male child. There are many variations. However, it is important to note that it is the experience of many women that one adult child is easier to accept into their lives than the other(s). Unfortunately, after reunion this can create rivalry between the adopted children which the birth mother often finds distressing, even overwhelming.

It may be that you are feeling so emotionally drained after meeting one of your adopted children that you need more time and support or counselling before being able to think about searching for the other/s. In addition, you may have been 'found' by an adult child brings back painful memories relating to the births and placement of the other children which you may not feel ready to cope with.

Breaking the secrecy and isolation

Many women have "told" a friend, family member or partner about one adopted child, and find themselves so immobilised by shame and grief that they have great difficulty in "telling" about a second child. Their fear is that they will be condemned for "making the same mistake twice."

The experience of women who have overcome this hurdle is that they are accepted by those close to them and that they sympathise with the extreme pain the women have lived with. Mothers of more than one child placed for adoption seem to experience the negative effects of isolation more than most other groups, as maintaining secrecy and protecting oneself remains crucial. However, it is the experience of many women that breaking the secrecy, particularly through meeting with other women in the same situation can actually allow a new story of themselves to develop. Participants in groups have spoken of being helped by meeting other "brave" women and learning to identify themselves with courage and fortitude in the face of great pain rather than with badness and failure.

It may be that you'd like to discuss the issues raised here in more detail. We would welcome hearing from you and encourage you to call us.

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