
Introduction

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Since the mid-1970s many Western countries have introduced new laws to enable adults adopted as children to find out about and meet a birth relative. In other words to have an 'adoption reunion'. More recently some countries, such as Australia, have also given rights to birth relatives to make contact with the adopted person. In England and Wales, the new Adoption and Children Act 2002 will mean that from 2005 birth relatives will be able to ask an adoption support agency to make contact with the adopted person on their behalf.

Ever since adoption reunions have been possible they have led to enormous public interest and a lot of media coverage around the world. In the UK the reunion between the former government minister Clare Short and her son was headline news. Search and reunion have also figured strongly in magazine articles, film and soap opera plots and TV shows like 'Kilroy' and 'Oprah Winfrey'.

One of the reasons why adoption reunions are such a favourite topic in the media is that they are very dramatic and emotional. The search and reunion process is a leap into the unknown for those involved. Whatever the outcome the search and reunion process is likely to be a rollercoaster ride of highs and lows. For birth parents and children meeting for the first time in decades, or siblings seeing each other for the very first time, it is likely to be a highly charged process, often with high, sometimes unrealistic, expectations. But coverage of adoption reunions in the media does not necessarily give a clear picture of what happens in the real world with real reunions. One of the distinctive features of this book is that it is based on the real life experiences of a large number of people who have actually gone through the search and reunion process. The authors were involved in the largest UK research study of adoption search and reunion.¹ The study was based on questionnaires completed by 394 adopted adults who had searched for information about birth relatives (the 'searchers') and 78 adopted adults who had been con-

¹ David Howe and Julia Feast (2000) *Adoption Search and Reunion: The Long-Term Experience of Adopted Adults*. Originally published by The Children's Society, London, and now published by BAAF, London (2004).

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tacted by a birth relative (the 'non-searchers'). We followed up 74 of the questionnaire cases with an in-depth interview.

We have written this book as a guide for anyone who is thinking about undertaking a search and reunion and for those who are already involved in the process. We have been able to use our research findings to describe what *usually* happens in reunions, and the highs and lows to expect. We cannot, of course, predict what will happen in an individual reunion. As you read this book it will become clear that each reunion story is unique, with different people with different expectations in different circumstances. Even so, there are often common experiences that people can share and from which they can learn. There are no guarantees that a search and reunion will turn out exactly like those included here, but by describing what typically happens, as well as the sheer variety of reunions, we aim to help you to make your own decisions about whether to start your own search and reunion as well as to be as prepared as possible for the journey ahead. For those who have already embarked on the journey we hope the stories told here will give you insights to help you to negotiate and find your own way through some of the potential pitfalls and to get the support you might need. Although our research is based on reunions in the UK we are certain that many of the experiences, issues and emotions reported by our contributors will be just as relevant to people around the world.

The book also aims to give as much practical advice as possible. We include material, for example, on legal rights and on how to locate names and addresses of birth relatives. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the search process in England and Wales and the Appendix has information on searching in the rest of the UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, Canada and the USA.

Most chapters also include 'advice boxes', summarising key points to bear in mind to make the search and reunion process as good as it can be; for example, advice on how to make initial contact and where/when to arrange a first meeting. Some of this advice comes from the adopted people themselves, others from our own collective experience. The Appendix contains an annotated list of further sources of advice and information. Some chapters also include worksheets that you may find helpful to work through when making decisions about the search and reunion process.

It is important to point out that we are not seeking to either encourage or discourage anyone from taking these steps. The overall message from our study is that search and reunion is usually an emotionally challenging process requiring a lot of consideration over the years, but one that most people are glad they began. Only you can decide if you are ready to take these steps. We hope that this book will help you to make these decisions and, if you decide to go ahead, to help you to be as prepared as possible.

A word about words

One of the many tricky aspects of writing this book is deciding what terms to use. Adoption reunion is one of those areas in which it is difficult to find terms that will be acceptable to everyone. The word 'reunion' itself will be unacceptable to some people who might feel uncomfortable with the implicit suggestion that there is an existing relationship that

can be renewed. We use it simply because it is by now the most widely used and recognised term to describe the experience. There are similar problems with the term 'birth mother' or 'birth father'. Again we've chosen these as the most common terms but we know that other people would prefer 'natural' or 'blood' or 'biological' mother/father. We've also used 'adopted people' rather than 'adoptee'. We realise that this is a personal preference but adoptee to us denotes a category rather than a person.

Finally, we should point out that in this book we use many quotations from our research interviews with adopted people who have been through the search and reunion process. In order to preserve their anonymity, we have used substitute first names and place names throughout.

