

# Searching for Birth Relatives: Adoption Packet 3

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This packet is provided for birth parents, adopted persons, and others interested in learning more about the process of searching for birth relatives. Contents include:

- Searching for Birth Relatives: A Factsheet for Families
- The Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons
- The Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents

Child Welfare Information Gateway (Information Gateway) offers many other resources about issues related to adoption. For more information or to order additional publications, visit the Information Gateway website at [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov), email Information Gateway at [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov), or call Information Gateway at 703.385.7565 or 800.394.3366.



# Child Welfare Information Gateway

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FACTSHEET  
FOR FAMILIES

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## Searching for Birth Relatives



While interest among adopted persons in finding their birth families has always been high, the percentage of adult adopted persons who take action to initiate a search appears to be on the rise. This trend is accompanied by a growing interest on the part of many birth parents in searching for their (now) adult children who were placed for adoption many years earlier. The expanding number of organizations that advocate searching for birth relatives and

### What's Inside:

- The decision to search
- Steps in the search process
- Hiring a professional searcher
- International searching
- Reunion issues
- Additional resources

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



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provide advice and resources for doing so indicate both increased interest in and acceptance of this process. New legislation in some States permits more access to birth information, and new technology has the potential to make the searching process faster. A recent study shows that adopted persons are more likely to seek out information about their birth families now than in the past (Harris Interactive Market Research, 2002). And a study that reviewed estimates abroad and in the United States suggests that 50 percent of all adopted persons search at some point in their lives (Muller & Perry, 2001a).

The purpose of this factsheet is to provide some guidance on the search process and information access, as well as resources for further help in conducting a successful search. This factsheet is designed to address the concerns of both adopted persons who are searching for birth parents or other birth relatives, as well as birth parents (both mothers and fathers) who want to locate a child who was adopted. While not a complete “how to” guide, this factsheet provides general information on searching and reunion.

In addition, a list of resources is included at the end. The list includes websites on searching, books and articles, and more. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (Information Gateway) website ([www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)) is a good starting point for resource information.

## The Decision to Search

Adults who were adopted as infants or young children are the most common group

of people searching for adoption information and birth relatives. This group most often searches for birth mothers first (Muller & Perry, 2001b), but may later seek out birth fathers, siblings, or other birth relatives. An event in the life of an adopted person, for instance, the birth of a child or death of an adoptive parent, may trigger the actual search (American Adoption Congress, 2002).

Other groups that search include birth parents searching for children placed for adoption years earlier and a growing number of adoptive parents who search in order to know more about their adoptive children’s background or medical history (Freundlich, 2001). In addition, some national organizations that work with children in foster care report increased interest by siblings in finding their siblings who were placed with other families.

The question of why an adopted person or birth parent searches for birth relatives has as many answers as there are searchers. Some of the more common reasons include the following:

- **General family information.** Searchers may want to know the names of their birth relatives, where they live, and what they are like. Birth parents may want to know whether their birth children have been happy and well treated.
- **Family traits and personalities.** Many adopted persons and birth parents want to know how their birth relatives look and act and whether they share similar traits.
- **Medical history information.** Information on genetic diseases and conditions can be crucial for safeguarding

an adopted person's own health and the health of their biological children. (The desire or need for family medical history is sometimes the only reason that will compel a judge to open sealed adoption records.)

- **Circumstances of the adoption.** Often, adopted persons feel a need to know why they were placed for adoption or why the rights of the birth parent were terminated and how that decision was made. Birth parents may want the opportunity to explain the circumstances to their child.

## Steps in the Search Process

Every search is unique in its unfolding, but there are a number of steps and resources common to most searches. This section of the factsheet addresses the steps in the search process, including:

1. Emotional preparation
  2. Assembling known information
  3. Researching relevant State laws
  4. Registering with reunion registries
  5. Obtaining missing documents
  6. Filing court petitions
- 1. Emotional preparation.** Both adopted persons and birth parents should expect to prepare emotionally for the search process. Such preparation may include reading about other adopted persons' or birth parents' search and reunion experiences and talking to others who are

going through or have gone through the same process. Support groups for adopted persons or for birth parents who are searching can be extremely helpful, not only in providing emotional support, but also in sharing practical information. (For a State-by-State listing of support groups, see the Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad).)

Gathering emotional support from family and friends also can be helpful. Adopted persons may be reluctant to share their decision to search with their adoptive parents for fear of hurting their feelings. However, in many cases adoptive parents can be an enormous source of support, as well as a source of information. Adoptive parents may take some comfort from knowing that an adopted person's decision to search usually has nothing to do with dissatisfaction with the adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992).

The search process may trigger a number of different emotions at different stages for the searcher. At certain stages, some searchers may feel that they need more emotional or moral support than they are receiving from family, friends, and support groups. In these situations, they may want to talk to a professional counselor. Searchers who seek professional counseling will want to ensure that the counselor is familiar with adoption issues. (See the Information Gateway's factsheet on selecting adoption therapists at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/r\\_tips.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/r_tips.cfm).) In addition, some State laws require a meeting with a counselor before a reunion takes place.

- 2. Assembling known information.** Once a decision has been made to search, the first step involves gathering all known and easily obtainable information. For adopted persons, this may mean talking to adoptive parents to find out the name of the adoption agency, attorney, or facilitator involved in the adoption. It also means pulling together all readily available documents, such as the amended birth certificate, hospital records, and any other information, no matter how unimportant it may seem at the time. Birth, death, marriage, divorce, school, church, genealogy, health, military, DMV, and property records related to the birth kin all have potential usefulness for leading to a name and location of a birth parent or birth child. It may be helpful to organize and record all information in a central place for easy reference.
- 3. Researching relevant State laws.** Searchers may want to become informed about State laws regarding adoption and records access in the State(s) in which they were born and adopted, keeping in mind that some State laws vary according to the applicable years. Access to information about State laws as well as which States offer reunion registries can be found at the Information Gateway website ([www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)). (Other websites that maintain databases or updates on State laws are included in the Resource List at the end of this factsheet.)
- 4. Registering with reunion registries.** A number of States, as well as private organizations, offer reunion registries that allow adopted persons and birth parents to register the fact that they are searching for each other. Most of these reunion

registries are “passive,” meaning that both parties (e.g., the adopted person and the birth mother) must independently register in order for a match to be made. When both parties register at the same passive registry and a match is made, registry officials share the mutual information and help to arrange for contact. Passive registries do not actively search for the other party.

The largest passive registry is the International Soundex Reunion Registry ([www.isrr.net](http://www.isrr.net)). This is open to all adopted adults over 18 years of age, all birth parents, and all adoptive parents of adopted children under 18 years of age.

There are also a number of “active” registries that charge fees to actually go out and search for the birth relative. Some of these are State registries that will initiate a search for a fee. Others are maintained by private search and support groups.

There are few reliable statistics on the success rate of these registries; however, as expected, passive registries tend to show a much lower match rate than active registries. One study of passive State registries found an average success rate of less than 5 percent in 1998, with only two States showing double-digit success rates (Mitchell, Nast, Busharis, & Hasegawa, 1999).

- 5. Obtaining missing documents.** At this point, the searcher may want to attempt to acquire some of the missing documents that could help with the search. There are many types of documents that may lead to locating a birth parent or child or provide a breakthrough to this

information. The following is a list of potentially helpful documents:

- **Adoption agency records**—If the name of the adoption agency is known, the searcher can request nonidentifying information or even records. For instance, in her 1998 book, *Search: A Handbook for Adoptees and Birthparents*, Jayne Askin provides an extensive list of possible questions to be addressed to the agency, including questions about siblings, medical information, and consent to release information. Askin also recommends that the searcher supply a waiver of confidentiality to the agency, so that information about the searcher can be provided to the birth child or birth parent, if that individual also contacts the agency.
- **Hospital records**—Hospital records, when they can be obtained, may provide information on the birth mother, birth father, attending physician, and incidental health information. Adopted persons generally need to know their birth name, as well as the hospital's name and location. If the searcher has difficulty obtaining these records, a request made by a doctor may have a better chance for success.
- **Birth records**—Most adopted persons will not have their original birth certificate but will have, instead, an amended document listing their adoptive parents' names. However, there are a few States that allow adopted adults to have access to their original birth certificate. (See Information Gateway information on access to adoption records at [www.childwelfare.gov/adopted/obtain/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adopted/obtain/index.cfm).) In other States, the original birth certificate may be available if the adopted person petitions the court.
- **Court adoption file**—The court adoption records consist of a number of documents, including the original, unaltered birth certificate; petition to adopt; finalization papers or final decree; consent to adopt from birth parent(s), relinquishment papers, or orders terminating parental rights; and any agency or attorney papers, including information about birth parents. Many of these documents may also be available elsewhere. For instance, adoptive parents should have copies of the court proceedings finalizing the adoption, although the final court order will not provide the names of the birth parents. If this is not available, an adopted person searching for birth parents may be able to contact the attorney or law firm that handled the adoption to obtain it. A request may also be made to the court. Often, identifying information will be blacked out of the court-supplied document; however, there may be some remaining clues that are helpful. The final adoption papers should provide the name of the attorney, judge, and agency involved in the proceedings. This information may lead to discovering other useful clues.
- **Other court records**—While most or all of the court records may be officially sealed, in some cases a searcher may be able to view the court's Docket Appearance Book, a daily record of

who appeared in court and why on a particular day, or even the Minute Book log, with the results of each court appearance (Culligan, 1996). Also, local newspapers from the time of the adoption may carry a notice of the filing of the Petition to Adopt in the classified section. This normally includes the name of the couple adopting, as well as the birth name of the child/infant and the name of the social worker assigned to the case (Culligan, 1996).

- **Other types of records**—Other potentially useful records may include physician records, newspapers (for birth announcements), cemetery and mortuary records, probate records, Social Security information, records of military service, school records (including yearbooks), marriage licenses, divorce or annulment papers, DMV documents, and death certificates.

**6. Filing a court petition.** If none of the above have been successful, adopted persons may petition the court to have the sealed adoption records opened. Whether this is successful may depend on the State, the particular judge, the reason given for the request, and any number of other factors. Petitioning the court does not require an attorney's services, but a petitioner may choose to hire an attorney.

The judge may deny the petition completely or agree to release only nonidentifying information or a summary. In some States, the judge may appoint an intermediary, such as the original adoption agency or a professional searcher, to locate the birth parents and determine whether or not they want to release information or be

reunited with the adopted person. In other cases, the petitioner may be able to request the appointment of a confidential intermediary, who will conduct a search (for a fee) and determine if the birth parents are willing to be contacted.

Following these steps may lead the searcher to enough identifying information that birth relatives can be located. In cases in which the search seems to be leading nowhere, the searcher may want to review information or begin to research such things as alternative spellings of names or places. In some cases, information may have been falsified, making it difficult or impossible to continue the search without new information.

## Hiring a Professional Searcher

Adopted persons or birth parents searching for birth relatives have the option of hiring a professional searcher. In some cases, it may be useful to hire a professional searcher if specific information needs to be located in another State. For instance, a professional searcher may be able to search courthouse or church records in a faraway locality. This limited professional help may be enough to allow the adopted person or birth parent to continue his or her own search.

Individuals who choose to hire a professional searcher should research the reputation of the searcher or company. There are some searchers who have a certification from Independent Search Consultants ([www.iscsearch.com](http://www.iscsearch.com)), a nonprofit organiza-

tion that trains in adoption searching. Other searchers may be licensed as private investigators by a particular locality. Individuals should ask whether private investigators have specific adoption search experience before making a decision to hire them. Other professional searchers may be experts in a particular locality or a particular field but may not have a certification. Before hiring anyone, it is crucial to call references and to check with the Better Business Bureau. In addition, support groups can be a ready source of information about professional searchers.

In some cases, a court or agency may refuse to open sealed records or provide full information in response to a petition or request; however, the court or agency may appoint a professional searcher. In such cases, this professional searcher serves as an intermediary whose job is to locate and contact the birth parents (or birth child) and to find out whether they want to have their name and address revealed and whether they want to resume contact. The professional is given access to sealed records, but the petitioner (who generally receives no access to records) pays the fee of the professional searcher. If nothing is found, or if the found person refuses to release information or agree to contact, there is generally no recourse (except that the adopted person or birth parent can continue to search on his or her own).

## International Searching

People who were adopted from outside the United States (through intercountry adoptions) face unique challenges in locating

birth parents. Each country has its own laws governing information access. In addition, there is great variation in record-keeping practices across countries and cultures, and in many cases, searchers will find that no information was ever recorded, that records were misplaced, or that cultural practices placed little emphasis on accurate record-keeping. However, in a very few cases, it may actually be easier to gain access to an original birth certificate in a foreign country than in the United States, since some countries do not seal their vital records.

The child-placing agency is the best beginning point for an international search. The U.S. agency should be able to share the name and location of the agency or orphanage abroad and, perhaps, the names of caregivers, attorneys, or others involved in the placement or adoption. The agency, or its counterpart abroad, may be able to provide specific information on names, dates, and places. They also may be able to offer some medical history, biographical information on parents, and circumstances regarding the adoption.

Some other resources for international searchers include the following:

- Adopted persons seeking documents (such as a birth certificate) that the U.S. or foreign child-placing agency is not able to provide may want to apply to government agencies in the birth country. Mailing addresses of offices of vital records in foreign countries can be found on the U.S. State Department website at [www.travel.state.gov/visa/reciprocity/index.htm](http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/reciprocity/index.htm).
- Searchers adopted from another country can contact the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (<http://uscis.gov/>

graphics/index.htm) to receive copies of their immigration records.

- An international agency that may offer help is International Social Services, which provides a broad range of social work services, including helping adopted persons find birth families abroad. Their U.S. branch has a website at [www.iss-usa.org](http://www.iss-usa.org).
- Support groups for adopted persons from particular countries may be able to offer help and information on searching. Countries that have placed a large number of children with families in the United States, such as Korea, have support groups and organizations with websites and search information. (See the Resource List at the end of this factsheet.)

In general, searching overseas is more difficult than searching in the United States. In cases in which the search for the birth parent is unsuccessful, some adopted persons may derive some satisfaction from visiting their birth country and experiencing their birth culture. Many agencies and support groups have begun to organize homeland tours for adopted persons and adoptive families. These tours generally provide an introduction to the country and culture. Visiting the birth country for the first time as part of such a group may provide searchers with some emotional security, because the people in the tour group are often looking for answers to similar questions. (The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory lists groups that offer homeland tours: [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad).)

## Reunion Issues

Reunions between long-lost birth family members have been the subject of books, articles, and television shows. Two important themes emerge from these accounts:

- 1. Participants should be emotionally prepared for the reunion experience.** Adopted persons and birth parents may carry a picture in their mind of the perfect family, but the reunion experience may not live up to that ideal. In preparing for contact and reunion, adopted persons (and birth parents) should prepare for a whole range of realities, including rejection. Although most birth parents are agreeable to further contact, research indicates that a minority, perhaps 9 to 15 percent, reject any contact (Muller & Perry, 2001b).
- 2. Pacing the contact can be key to having a successful reunion and relationship.** In a small study of adopted women who experienced reunions with birth kin (Affleck & Steed 2001), it was found that successful reunion experiences were associated with (1) preparation with a support group and (2) a slower pace between initial contact and actual meeting, involving letters and phone calls. This interval between contact and meeting allowed information to be exchanged and gave the “found” relatives some time to become accustomed to the idea. Such an interval can also give the found relatives time to share the news with spouses and children in their family, if they desire.

Some factors that may increase the possibility of a successful longer term relationship include (Muller and Perry, 2001b):

- The establishment of limits regarding each others' lives
- Support from adoptive parents
- Minimal expectations
- Similar lifestyles and temperaments
- Acceptance by other family members

In many cases, a successful reunion with a birth mother may prompt the adopted adult to continue the search process for the birth father. Meeting with birth siblings also may occur, and each reunion experience requires preparation and time to evolve.

## Conclusion

Each search for a birth relative is guided by a unique set of circumstances. The outcome is uncertain and, even when the birth relative is located, the reunion experience does not always turn out as expected. Nonetheless, many adopted persons and birth parents have conducted successful searches and built successful relationships with their new-found relatives. For those who are just beginning the search, the best preparation may be finding out about the search experiences of others. To that end, a list of resources has been included below. In addition, support groups for adopted persons and birth parents across the country can be found in the online National Foster Care & Adoption Directory on the Information Gateway website at [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad).

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## Additional Resources

### Books and Articles

- Bailey, J. J., & Giddens, L. N. (2001). *The adoption reunion survival guide: Preparing yourself for the search, reunion, and beyond*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- Byrne, M. (2000-2001). Search and reunion etiquette: The guide Miss Manners never wrote. American Adoption Congress (Winter/Spring), 11-13. Retrieved April 14, 2004, from [www.americanadoptioncongress.org/articles-archives/search-etiquette.htm](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/articles-archives/search-etiquette.htm)
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Strauss, J. A. (1994). *Birthright: The guide to search and reunion for adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents*. NYC: Penguin Books.

## Websites

### Resources for beginning the search:

- The ALMA Society (Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association) at [www.almasociety.org](http://www.almasociety.org)
- American Adoption Congress's Beginner's Search Checklist [www.americanadoptioncongress.org/search.htm](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/search.htm)
- International Soundex Reunion Registry at [www.isrr.net](http://www.isrr.net)
- Family Search Internet Genealogy Service (sponsored by the Church of the Latter Day Saints) at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

### Resources for international searches:

- International Social Services at [www.iss-usa.org](http://www.iss-usa.org)
- Korean Adoptee Adoptive Family Network at [www.kaanet.com](http://www.kaanet.com)
- U.S. State Department at [www.travel.state.gov/visa/reciprocity/index.htm](http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/reciprocity/index.htm)

### Resources on State adoption laws:

- American Adoption Congress at [www.americanadoptioncongress.org/legislation.htm](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/legislation.htm)
- Bastard Nation at [www.bastards.org/activism/access.htm](http://www.bastards.org/activism/access.htm)
- Child Welfare Information Gateway at [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/state/adoption.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/adoption.cfm)
- The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute at [www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/polreg.html](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/polreg.html)
- National Adoption Congress at [www.americanadoptioncongress.org/legislative-updates.htm](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/legislative-updates.htm)
- National Center for Adoption Law and Policy at [www.adoptionlawsite.org](http://www.adoptionlawsite.org)
- The White Oak Foundation at [www.whiteoakfoundation.org/mappage.htm](http://www.whiteoakfoundation.org/mappage.htm)

**The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory** on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad) contains information on State adoption officials, State reunion registries, adoption agencies, and support groups.

Other information on the Information Gateway website includes resource lists ([www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/organizations/index.cfm)) on such topics as organizations that provide adoption research and factsheets ([www.childwelfare.gov/search/pubs\\_search.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/search/pubs_search.cfm)) on such topics as intercountry adoption.



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## Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons



As discussion of the adoption process becomes more open and accepted in American society, and as more Americans have experience with adoption, there is also more attention focused on those involved in adoption—the adopted person, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents (often referred to as the adoption triad or, more recently, the adoption constellation). People who have experienced adoption firsthand are coming forward

### What's Inside:

- Adoption issues
- Managing adoption issues
- Resources

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to talk or write about their experiences, and researchers are conducting scientific studies to find out about the impact of adoption on all members of the adoption triad.

This factsheet examines the impact of adoption on adopted persons who have reached adulthood. While it is difficult to make sweeping statements about such a large and diverse group as adopted persons, it can be said that adopted persons generally lead lives that are no different from the lives of nonadopted persons; however, they have experiences that are unique to being adopted, and these experiences may have an impact on their lives at various times.

There are several themes that emerge from both the personal accounts of adopted persons and from the studies of academic researchers. This factsheet addresses these themes, which include loss, the development of identity and self-esteem, interest in genetic information, and managing adoption issues.

- The **Adoption Issues** section looks at some of the issues that adopted persons may face, including developmental and emotional issues and the need for genetic or medical information.
- **Managing Adoption Issues** reviews some of the ways that adopted persons handle adoption-related issues.
- **Resources** for adopted persons includes books, articles, websites, and more.

## Adoption Issues

### Loss and Grief

The loss of the birth parents as a result of adoption sets the stage for the feelings of loss and abandonment that many adopted persons may experience at some point in their lives. Even those who are adopted as newborns at times experience a loss of the early bond to the mother, although this loss may not become apparent until the child is older and able to understand the consequences. In the book *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, authors Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Marantz (1992) suggest that dealing with the loss of the birth parents, coupled with a search for self, are two processes that can contribute to shaping the psychological development of adopted persons. These authors outline developmental tasks that an adopted person should address at each stage of life in order to make a healthy adaptation and to cope with the feelings of loss and the search for self.

Loss, as well as feelings of rejection and abandonment by the birth parents, are frequent themes throughout the books and articles written by adopted persons about their experiences. Adopted persons, as children and as adults, may wonder why they were placed for adoption or what was “wrong” with them that caused their birth parents to give them up. Grief is a common reaction to the loss of the birth parents, and grieving may begin when the child is old enough to understand what being adopted means. Young children who are able to comprehend that they have gained adoptive

parents are also able to understand that they have lost birth parents, and comprehension of this loss may trigger grief. The adopted child or adult may have a difficult time finding an outlet for this grief, since grieving for birth parents is not a reaction that society acknowledges. If the adoptive family is a generally happy one, the adopted child or adult may even feel guilty for grieving.

Along with grief and guilt, the adopted person may react to the loss through the normal feelings of anger, numbness, depression, anxiety, or fear. These feelings may occur during childhood and adolescence, as well as during later points in life, especially during emotionally charged milestones, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or the death of a parent. In addition, new losses may trigger memories of the loss of the birth parents. For instance, some adopted persons who face divorce or death of a spouse may find the experience especially difficult, because this new loss reawakens the old fears of abandonment and loss. Adopted persons who experience feelings of loss or abandonment during adulthood may or may not recognize a connection between their current feelings and their old feelings about the initial loss of the birth parents.

Adopted persons may also suffer secondary losses. For instance, along with the loss of birth mother and birth father, the adopted person may experience the loss of brothers and sisters, as well as grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. There may be a loss of cultural connection or language (in cases of intercountry or transracial adoption). For those who were adopted as older children, there may be a loss of siblings, friends, pets, foster families, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings. All of these losses

may trigger grief and may require some outlet or some form of resolution.

## Identity Development and Self-Esteem

Adopted persons' questions about identity often occur first during adolescence. The task of identity development during adolescence is often more difficult for the adopted teenager because of the additional adoption issues. The adopted adolescent's identity development includes questions about the biological family, why he or she was placed for adoption, what became of the birth parents, whether the adolescent resembles the birth parents in looks or in other characteristics, and where the adolescent "belongs" in terms of education, social class, culture, peer group, and more. The question of the influence of nature (inherited traits) versus nurture (acquired traits) may become very real to the adopted adolescent, who is trying to determine the impact of all of these influences on his or her own identity.

Identity issues may continue into adulthood. The birth of a child to an adopted person may bring up some of these issues, as the new parent may experience a biological connection to a family member for the first time. For this person, there is now someone who "looks like me." This new connection may cause the adopted adult to revisit earlier issues of identity. The new parent may also be prompted to think about what his or her birth mother experienced in giving birth and what the birth mother and father may have experienced in making the decision to place the child for adoption. Adopted adults who become new parents may be sympathetic to the difficulties of their birth parents, or they may wonder

how their birth parents could ever have placed them for adoption.

Accompanying these issues of identity are issues of self-esteem—that is, how the adopted person feels about him or herself. A number of studies have found that, while adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in most ways, they often score lower on measures of self-esteem and self-confidence (Borders, Penny & Portnoy, 2000; Sharma, McGue & Benson, 1996). This result may reflect the fact that some adopted persons may view themselves as different, out-of-place, unwelcome, or rejected. Some of these feelings may result from the initial loss of birth parents and from growing up away from birth parents, siblings, and extended family members; some may also result from an ongoing feeling of being different from nonadopted people who do know about their genetic background and birth family and may be more secure about their own identity as a result.

### Genetic Information

Adopted persons often lack genetic and medical history, as well as other family information. A routine visit to the doctor's office, where the adopted person is asked to supply medical history information, may make adopted persons acutely aware of how they differ from those who were not adopted. Those who find out only later in life that they were adopted as infants are sometimes put at risk by their long-held assumption of a family medical history that they later find is completely incorrect.

When an adopted person plans to get married or become a parent, the need for genetic information may become more

important. Adopted persons have different questions about the child they will produce, such as what the child will look like, and if the child will inherit any genetic disorders that were unknown to the adopted person.

In many cases, nonidentifying information, such as medical history, may be placed in the adoption file by the birth parents or agency at the time of the adoption. Adoption agencies or attorneys may allow adopted persons to have access to this nonidentifying information. In some States, adopted persons can petition a judge to have their adoption records opened, and some judges will agree to do so in order to provide urgently needed medical information. (See the Information Gateway legal factsheet *Access to Family Information by Adopted Persons* at [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm)). However, obtaining access to information provided by the birth parents at the time of the adoption may not be sufficient to provide a full medical history. It is more useful if birth parents, over the years, have updated the file that is kept with the adoption agency or attorney. In that way, an adopted person may learn if a birth parent or grandparent later developed a genetic disease or condition.

### Managing Adoption Issues

Research shows that most adopted persons are similar to nonadopted persons in their adult adjustment (see research papers by Kelly, Towner-Thyrum, Rigby, & Martin; Borders, Penny, & Portnoy; Feigelman; and

Smyer, Gatz, Simi, & Pedersen). However, there is also significant research, along with the personal accounts of adopted persons, that suggest that many adopted persons struggle with issues of loss, identity, and self-esteem. There are a number of ways that adopted persons manage these issues.

- **Support Groups.** Many adopted persons are helped by support groups where they can talk about their feelings with others who have similar experiences. The support group may provide a long-needed outlet for any lingering feelings of loss or grief. Adopted persons may also find support for new losses that occur during their adult years. In addition, support groups may provide help for the adopted person with the decision of whether to search for birth relatives or other issues. Listings of support groups by State may be found in Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad).
- **Counseling.** Some adopted persons may need more help than they find from family and friends or through a support group. In these instances, adopted persons may seek professional counseling. It is important to identify a counselor who has experience with adoption issues. Sometimes, the original adoption agency may be able to provide a referral. Also, support groups may have experience with local counselors and be able to make a recommendation. The Information Gateway website carries a factsheet, *Tips on Selecting an Adoption Therapist*, that can be accessed at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/r\\_tips.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/r_tips.cfm).

- **Education.** For many adopted persons, reading about the experiences of others can be a helpful coping mechanism. Knowing that there are others who have gone through similar experiences can provide reassurance that these feelings and experiences are normal. A growing number of books and websites deal with adoption, and the adopted person who has the time to seek these out should be able to find stories and information about people with similar experiences. These may include information about persons adopted domestically as infants or as older children from foster care or persons adopted from another country.
- **Searching.** More and more adopted persons are acting on their desire to search for their birth families. This is reflected in the number of websites and books about searching and even in the change in some State laws that regulate access to adoption records. Reports of adoption reunions are mixed; some lead to happy new relationships, and some do not. Regardless of the result, most searchers report that they are content to have found the truth about themselves and that the truth has filled a void for them.

The searching process actually encompasses a number of steps, from making the decision to search for birth parents or other birth kin, to conducting the search, and, if successful, arranging the reunion and establishing a postreunion relationship with birth family members. The decision to initiate a search is a personal one, and many adopted persons never search. For those who do, the decision may be triggered by a life event, or it may be the culmination of many years of unanswered

questions. The search process itself can be stressful and time consuming; however, the rewards can be great when it results in a reunion that is desired by both parties. Adopted persons who are interested in searching should refer to the Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* ([www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_search.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm)).

- Searchers will find that there is no Federal law that governs whether an adopted person can access information about birth parents, the adoption, or an original birth certificate. Instead, access to adoption information is regulated completely by the laws of the State in which the adop-

tion took place, and these State laws vary dramatically. Information about access to birth family information and documents can be found in the Information Gateway legal factsheet *Access to Family Information by Adopted Persons* ([www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm)); a search about access can be conducted on a State-by-State basis at the Information Gateway website at [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/search/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/search/index.cfm). Support groups for adopted persons may also be a good source of practical information about searching.

## Resources

The following list of resources is designed to be a starting point for adopted adults who are interested in further information about the impact of adoption. The resources include books and articles by members of the adoption triad, studies by researchers, and websites. A brief description of each resource is included.

### Books

Brodzinsky, D. M., & Schechter, M. D. (Eds.). (1990). *The psychology of adoption*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

*The various chapters of this book are written by leading researchers in the field of adoption, and they cover such topics as theoretical perspectives on adoption adjustment, outcomes in adoption, identity formation, interracial adoption, family therapy, social policy, and open adoption.*

Brodzinsky, M. Schechter, M. D., & Henig, R. M. (1992). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

*This book outlines developmental tasks at each of seven stages throughout the life of an adopted person.*

Eldridge, S. (2003). *Twenty life-transforming choices adoptees need to make*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press.

*The author, a reunited adopted person, interviewed 70 adopted persons for this book, which addresses some of the hard questions that adopted persons face, and offers advice about taking control through making choices.*

- Freundlich, M. (2001). *The impact of adoption on members of the triad. Volume 3 in the Adoption and Ethics Series*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.  
*This volume examines impact on all members of the adoption triad; for adopted persons, the topics of adjustment and well-being for children and adolescents, identity formation, and search and reunion are addressed.*
- Lifton, B. J. (1998). *Lost and found: The adoption experience*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.  
*The author draws upon her experience as an adopted person and upon her work with all members of the adoption triad to explore the psychological issues faced by adopted people before, during, and after their search for their birth family.*
- Pavao, J. M. (1998). *The family of adoption*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.  
*The author, an adopted person and an adoption therapist, describes the developmental stages and challenges for adopted people, and includes real-life examples to illustrate these stages.*
- Rosenberg, E. B. (1992). *The adoption life cycle: The children and their families through the years*. New York, NY: Free Press.  
*Written by a clinical professor in psychiatry, this book draws on case examples to show how the different members of the adoption triad influence each other and to describe developmental tasks for those in the adoption circle.*
- Schaefer, C. (1991). *The other mother: A true story*. New York, NY: Soho Press, Inc.  
*The author tells her story of being a birth mother and of later searching for and finding her son.*
- Schooler, J. (1995). *Searching for a past: The adopted adult's unique process of finding identity*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press.  
*This book was written by an adoption coordinator and discusses the emotional and psychological issues that adopted persons face in the different phases of searching for birth parents.*

## Articles

- Borders, L. D., Penny, J. M., & Portnoy, F. (2000). Adult adoptees and their friends: Current functioning and psychosocial well-being. *Family Relations*, 49, 407-418.  
*The authors of this study found more similarities than differences when they compared 100 middle-aged persons who had been adopted as adults with 70 nonadopted adults.*
- Feigelman, W. (1997). Adopted adults: Comparisons with persons raised in conventional families. *Marriage and Family Review*, 25(3/4), 199-223.  
*This research article compared adult behavior patterns of 101 adopted persons with those of 3,949 adults raised in broken families and 6,258 adults raised with both biological parents. Results showed that adopted persons resembled nonadopted persons raised in intact families on most measures; however, adopted persons did have a higher incidence of adolescent identity crisis issues.*

- Grotevant, H. D., Dunbar, N., Kohler, J. K., & Lash Esau, A. M. (2000). Adoptive identity: How contexts within and beyond the family shape developmental pathways. *Family Relations*, 49, 379-387.  
*This paper discusses the development of the adoptive identity in terms of the intrapsychic component, family environment, and contexts beyond the family; implications for practitioners are included.*
- Kelly, M. M., Towner-Thyrum, E., Rigby, A., & Martin, B. (1998). Adjustment and identity formation in adopted and nonadopted young adults: Contributions of family environment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 68(3), 497-500.  
*Adopted college students were compared with nonadopted college students on measures of adjustment and identity formation, and the two groups were found to be largely similar.*
- Lifton, B. J. (2001). Shared identity issues for adoptees. In V. Groza & K. F. Rosenberg (Eds.), *Clinical and practice issues in adoption: Bridging the gap between adoptees placed as infants and as older children*, (pp. 37-48). Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.  
*The author discusses the identity issues common to children adopted as infants, those adopted as older children, and those adopted from a foreign country.*
- Sharma, A. R., McGue, M. K., & Benson, P. L. (1996). The emotional and behavioral adjustment of United States adopted adolescents: Part I. An overview. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18(1/2), 83-100.  
*In a comparison of adjustment and family functioning in over 4,000 adopted adolescents and over 4,000 nonadopted adolescents, small but significant differences were found between the groups, with one finding showing lower self-confidence and optimism in adopted persons.*
- Silverstein, D. N., & Kaplan, S. (1988). Lifelong issues in adoption. In L. Coleman, K. Tolbor, H. Hornby, & C. Boggis (Eds.), *Working with older adoptees* (pp. 45-53). Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine. Retrieved April 23, 2004, from [http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong\\_issues\\_in\\_adoption.html](http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong_issues_in_adoption.html)  
*The authors describe seven issues that all members of the adoption triad must address.*
- Smyer, M. A., Gatz, M., Simi, N. L., & Pedersen, N. L. (1998). Childhood adoption: Long-term effects in adulthood. *Psychiatry*, 61, 191-205.  
*Researchers studied adult outcome variables in 60 pairs of twins who had been separated as infants or children, so that one was raised in the biological family and one was raised in an adoptive family; results emphasize the impact of socioeconomic status on adult outcomes, such that adopted adults were better educated but also showed greater psychological distress.*

## Support Groups

Child Welfare Information Gateway compiles the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, which lists support groups on a State-by-State basis. Go to [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad).

## Websites and Other Resources

American Adoption Congress: [www.americanadoptioncongress.org](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org)

*The American Adoption Congress (AAC) is an international network of individuals and organizations committed to adoption reform. Through education and advocacy, they promote honesty, openness, and respect for family connections in adoption, foster care, and assisted reproduction. Membership is open to adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals, and all others who share a commitment to the AAC's goals.*

Child Welfare Information Gateway: [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

*Information Gateway offers information on all aspects of adoption for professionals, policymakers, and the general public. Information Gateway develops and maintains a computerized database of books, journal articles, and other materials on adoption and related topics, conducts database searches, publishes materials on adoption, and gives referrals to related services and experts in the field. Information Gateway also maintains a database of experts knowledgeable in various areas of adoption practice.*

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: [www.adoptioninstitute.org](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org)

*The Adoption Institute seeks to improve the quality of information about adoption, to enhance the understanding and perceptions about adoption, and to advance adoption policy and practice.*

Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network: <http://www.kaanet.com>

*This organization links adopted persons, adoptive families, and other Korean-Americans, providing resources, a newsletter, and a conference.*

Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project: <http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/>

*This site provides research findings from this major study of variations in openness in adoption and the effect of openness on all members of the adoption triad.*

National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning's packet on Searching:

[http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/information\\_packets/birthright\\_adoptees\\_right\\_to\\_know.pdf](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/information_packets/birthright_adoptees_right_to_know.pdf)

*This packet for adopted persons includes a factsheet on searching, a list of references and websites, and a summary of the debate about searching.*

Stars of David International, Inc.: <http://www.starsofdavid.org/>

*This is a Jewish adoption information and support network for all members of the adoption triad.*

Information on the issues facing birth parents can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents*, which can be accessed at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_impact/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_impact/index.cfm). The Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* can be accessed at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_search.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm). Information on open adoption can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Openness in Adoption*, which can be accessed at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadopt.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm).



September 2004

Disponible en español  
[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/  
impactobio/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/impactobio/index.cfm)

## Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents



This factsheet discusses some of the emotional issues that parents face after making the decision to place an infant for adoption, in surrendering the child, and in handling the feelings that often persist afterwards. In addition, it addresses some of the emotional issues of parents whose children are permanently removed from them and whose parental rights are terminated. This factsheet may be a helpful resource for birth parents, as well as

### What's Inside:

- Responses to adoption placement
- Gaining control and resolution
- Resources



family members, friends, and others who want to support birth parents. It may also provide some insight to adopted persons and adoptive parents who want to understand the struggles faced by birth parents.

It is difficult to generalize about the feelings or experiences of all birth parents. Each has faced a unique experience and coped in his or her own way. A number of birth parents have written personal accounts of their experiences in placing their children for adoption; there are also a few research studies of the experiences of birth parents and the emotions that often linger long after the adoption. Certain themes emerge in both types of literature, including themes of loss, guilt, and resolution. As a framework for this discussion, this factsheet explores the experiences of birth parents by exploring some of these themes:

- The **Responses to Adoption Placement** section looks at feelings and experiences that birth parents often describe, including grief over the loss, shame and guilt, identity issues, and long-term emotional issues.
- The **Gaining Control and Resolution** section explores ways of gaining control of these feelings that have been useful for some birth parents.
- The **Resources** section includes a list of resources to help birth parents find further information and to locate support groups of individuals with similar experiences.

## Responses to Adoption Placement

### Grieving the Loss of the Child

Placing a child for adoption can cause a sense of loss that is all-encompassing. This sense of loss begins with the pregnancy itself as the expectant parents come to accept the reality of the unplanned pregnancy and the loss of their own immediate life plans. Most struggle with the decision to place the child for adoption; those who decide to do so begin to plan for a great loss in their own lives with the hope that placing the child for adoption will result in a better life for their baby and for themselves.

The actual physical separation generally occurs soon after the birth. Many circumstances can have an impact on the birth parent's feelings at the time, including mixed feelings about the adoption placement, support from other family members and the other birth parent, and whether the planned adoption is open (i.e., allowing some later contact with the child). The actions of the agency personnel (if an agency is involved), as well as those of the adoption attorney, adoptive parents, hospital personnel, and physician can all affect the feelings of the birth mother and father as they proceed through the process of the adoption and the termination of their own parental rights.

The birth and the actual surrendering of the baby may prompt feelings of numbness, shock, and denial, as well as grief, in the birth parents. All of these feelings are normal reactions to loss. This particular type of loss is different from a loss through

death, however, because there is rarely a public acknowledgment, and friends and family of the birth parents may attempt to ignore the loss by pretending that nothing has happened. In some cases, the secrecy surrounding the pregnancy and adoption may make it difficult for birth parents to seek out and find support as they grieve their loss. In addition, the lack of formal rituals or ceremonies to mark this type of loss may make it more difficult to acknowledge the loss and therefore to acknowledge the grief as a normal process.

When birth parents first deal with their loss, the grief may be expressed as denial. The denial serves as a buffer to shield them from the pain of the loss. This may be followed by sorrow or depression as the loss becomes more real. Anger and guilt may follow, with anger sometimes being directed at those who helped with the adoption placement. The final phases, those of acceptance and resolution, refer not to eliminating the grief permanently but to integrating the loss into ongoing life.

### **Grieving Other Losses**

Placing a child for adoption may also cause other (secondary) losses, which may add to the grief that birth parents feel. No one fantasizes about having a baby and then giving it up, so expectant parents who are planning to place the child for adoption may grieve for the loss of their parenting roles. They may grieve for the person their child might have become as their son or daughter. These feelings of loss may re-emerge in later years, for instance, on the child's birthday, or when the child is old enough to start school or to reach other developmental milestones.

Additional losses may occur as a result of the pregnancy and placement. In some cases, the birth mother loses her relationship with the birth father under the stress of the pregnancy, birth, and subsequent placement decision. The birth parents may also lose relationships with their own parents, whose disappointment or disapproval may be accompanied by a lack of support. In extreme cases, the birth mother may need to leave her parents and her home. The birth mother may lose her place in the educational system or in the workplace as a result of the pregnancy. Birth parents may also lose friends who are not supportive of either the pregnancy or the decision to place the child for adoption.

### **Guilt and Shame**

Birth parents may experience guilt and shame for having placed their child for adoption, since societal values reflect a lack of understanding of the circumstances that might prompt birth parents to make an adoption plan for their child. At first, there may be shame associated with the unplanned pregnancy itself and with admitting the situation to parents, friends, co-workers, and others. Shame about the pregnancy may lead to feelings of unworthiness or incompetence about becoming a parent. Once the child is born, the decision to place the child for adoption may prompt new feelings of guilt about "rejecting" the child, no matter how thoughtful the decision or what the circumstances of the adoption.

The shame and guilt felt by birth parents is often supported by the secrecy surrounding the adoption process. Thus, keeping the pregnancy a secret, maintaining secrecy throughout the adoption proceedings, and

then treating the experience as unimportant may promote a feeling of shame in birth parents, since the pregnancy and adoption are not even discussed. Birth parents who can discuss their feelings with supportive friends, family members, or professional counselors may more easily come to terms with their decision over time and be able to integrate the experience into their lives.

### Identity Issues

Placing a child for adoption may trigger identity issues in some birth parents. They may wonder, “Am I a parent?” Some birth parents may experience a sense of incompleteness, because they are parents without a child. Generally, their status as parents is not acknowledged among family and friends. If the birth parents go on to have other children whom they raise, this may also affect how the birth parents view their own identity, as well as that of all their children.

These questions about identity may also extend to the relationship with the child when the adoption is open. Birth parents who participate in open adoptions may initially wonder how they will fit into that new relationship with their child once the adoptive parents become the legal parents. However, this relationship with the child and adoptive family in an open adoption may evolve so that the birth parents maintain an agreed-upon role in the life of the child. Still, there are few role models for birth parents to help clarify this issue of identity. (For more information about open adoptions, see the Information Gateway factsheet *Openness in Adoption* at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadopt.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm).)

### Long-Term Issues

Many birth parents continue to mourn the loss of their child throughout their lifetime, but with varying intensity. For instance, birth parents may continue to track the milestones of their child’s life by imagining birthday parties, first days of school, graduation, and more. Some birth parents experience longstanding grief, that is, grief that lasts a very long time and may continue to actually interfere with a birth parent’s life many years later. Some of the factors that have been found to be associated with longstanding grief include:

- A birth parent’s feeling that she was pressured into placing her child for adoption against her will
- Feelings of guilt and shame regarding the placement
- Lack of opportunity to express feelings about the placement

The personal stories of some birth parents, as well as studies with birth parents in therapy, have indicated that some birth parents experience difficulties beyond longstanding grief (see, for example, Winkler & van Keppel, 1984). For instance, some birth parents may have trouble forming and maintaining relationships. This may be due to lingering feelings of loss and guilt, or it may be due to a fear of repeating the loss. Other birth parents may attempt to fill the loss quickly by establishing a new relationship, marrying, or giving birth again—without having dealt with the grief of the adoption placement. A few birth parents report being overprotective of their subsequent children, because they are afraid of

repeating the experience of separation and loss (Askren & Bloom, 1999).

For some birth parents, the ability to establish a successful marriage or long-term relationship may depend on the openness with which they can discuss their past experiences of birth and adoption placement. Some birth parents never tell their spouses or subsequent children of their earlier child. Others are comfortable enough with their decision to be able to share their past.

## Gaining Control and Resolution

Acceptance of the loss and working through the grief does not mean that birth parents forget their birth child and never again feel sorrow or regret for the loss. Rather, it means that they are able to move forward with their lives and to integrate this loss into their ongoing lives. For those in an open adoption, this may mean developing a new relationship with the child and the adoptive parents. For birth parents whose child was adopted in a closed adoption, it may mean learning to live with uncertainty about whether the parent will ever see the child again.

A number of birth parents have written about their experiences (for example, see the books by Brenda Romanchik listed in the resource section at the end of this paper). These authors describe a number of different ways of dealing with loss and grief:

**Entrustment ceremonies.** Some birth parents describe a ritual or ceremony that took place when they entrusted their child

to the adoptive parents. In many cases, these entrustment ceremonies took place in the hospital. These ceremonies allowed the birth parents to say good-bye to their child and to maintain a sense of control over the placement. Such ceremonies may help with the later grieving process.

**Ongoing rituals and traditions.** Birth parents may find it helpful to create a tradition that honors the child and the decision that was made. For instance, planting a tree or writing a letter to the child (whether it is sent or not) are ways of acknowledging the loss. On special days, such as the child's birthday, birth parents may want to continue with that type of ceremony or tradition.

**Taking time.** Both birth parents and counselors advise that birth parents must allow themselves time to grieve and recover (Roles, 1989). There is no timetable that predicts when the grief will be resolved, and there may be occasions, even many years later, when the grief may resurface. Birth parents who allow themselves time to grieve and to accept the loss may be better able to move on.

**Finding Support.** Birth parents should seek out friends, support groups of other birth parents, or understanding counselors in order to have a safe place to communicate their feelings. Being able to openly share feelings can be helpful in moving through the stages of grief and achieving some resolution.

**Education.** There are a number of books and articles about adoption and the birth parent experience, as well as a growing number of websites that carry information on the topic. Many of these include

first-person accounts from birth parents, which can provide some context for what some other birth parents experience. These can be helpful to birth parents who may feel that they are essentially alone in their loss.

**Writing.** Birth parents may find it useful to keep a journal or diary of their experiences and feelings. This may serve as an outlet for grief or other emotions, and it can also serve to provide some perspective over time. Keeping a journal also allows birth parents to remember details that might otherwise be forgotten over the years.

**Counseling.** Birth parents may find that they need more support than family and friends can offer, or they may be unable to move forward in the grieving process. In such cases, professional counseling may help the birth parent make progress

in dealing with the grief or may reassure the parent that such feelings are normal. A counselor should be able to help a birth parent replace unrealistic fantasy with reality, to acknowledge what has happened, and to heal.

Birth parents should look for counselors who have significant experience with adoption and with bereavement. Referrals for counselors may come from friends, birth parent support groups, or from the adoption agency or attorney who helped with the adoption.

While the birth parent will never forget the child, it is important that the birth parent adapts to the new circumstances and comes to terms with any regret. When birth parents are able to integrate the loss into their lives and gain some feeling of control, they can then move on to deal with whatever else life presents to them.

## Resources

### Books

Clapton, G. (2003). *Birth fathers and their adoption experiences*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

*Interviews were conducted with 30 birth fathers to relay information about their reactions and emotions during the pregnancy and postadoption periods.*

Foge, L., & Mosconi, G. (1999). *The third choice: A woman's guide to placing a child for adoption*. Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book Company.

*Written by two adoption counselors, this book takes birth mothers through the periods of pregnancy, adoption planning and placement, and grief and recovery.*

Gritter, J. L. (1997). *The spirit of open adoption*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

*A pioneer in open adoption practice, the author gives a realistic look at the pain, joy, and beauty that open adoption holds for all members of the triad.*

- Jones, M. B. (1993). *Birthmothers: Women who have relinquished babies for adoption tell their stories*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.  
*The stories of a number of birth mothers are told throughout this book, which addresses all of the issues birth mothers encounter, including the pregnancy, placement, dealing with grief, marriage, later children, searching, and reunion.*
- Mason, M. M. (1995). *Designing rituals of adoption for the religious and secular community*. Minneapolis, MN: Resources for Adoptive Parents.  
*This handbook describes religious and nonreligious ceremonies, such as entrustment ceremonies, that might be used in adoption.*
- Mason, M. M. (1995). *Out of the shadows: Birthfathers' stories*. Edina, MN: O.J. Howard Publishing.  
*The stories of 17 birth fathers are told to highlight the situation of this often forgotten group.*
- Pavao, J. M. (1998). *The family of adoption*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.  
*The author, an adopted person and an adoption therapist, describes the developmental stages and challenges for adopted people, and includes real-life examples to illustrate these stages.*
- Roles, P. (1989). *Saying goodbye to a baby. Volume I: The birthparent's guide to loss and grief in adoption*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.  
*Written by a social worker and birth mother, this book covers all of the issues faced by birth parents, including the pregnancy, adoption decision, loss, later issues, and reunion.*
- Romanchik, B. (1999). *Being a birthparent: Finding our place*. Royal Oak, MI: R-Squared Press.  
*This handbook, written by a birth parent, discusses the role of the birth parent in an open adoption.*
- Romanchik, B. (1999). *Birthparent grief*. Royal Oak, MI: R-Squared Press.  
*This handbook, written by a birth parent, discusses the different phases of grief, counseling, and dealing with difficult times.*
- Romanchik, B. (1999). *Your rights and responsibilities: A guide for expectant parents considering adoption*. Royal Oak, MI: R-Squared Press.  
*This handbook, written by a birth parent, discusses the responsibilities and rights of birth parents at each phase of the adoption plan.*
- Rosenberg, E. B. (1992). *The adoption life cycle: The children and their families through the years*. New York, NY: The Free Press.  
*Written by a clinical professor in psychiatry, this book draws on case examples to show how the different members of the adoption triad influence each other and to describe developmental tasks for those in the adoption circle.*

Schaefer, C. (1991). *The other mother: A true story*. New York, NY: Soho Press, Inc.  
*The author tells her story of being a birth mother and of later searching for and finding her son.*

## Research Articles

Askren, H. A., & Bloom, K. C. (1999). Postadoptive reactions of the relinquishing mother: A review. *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing*, 28(4), 395-400.

*The authors identified 12 studies with a total of 625 birth mothers, and they report the studies show that mothers are at long-term risk for repercussions; grief reactions, long-term effects, efforts to resolve, and influences on the relinquishment experience are discussed.*

Connelly, M. (2002). *Given in love: For mothers who are choosing an adoption plan*. Omaha, NE: Centering Corporation.

*This booklet describes some of the emotions that many birth mothers experience when making an adoption plan and addresses such topics as naming the baby, keeping mementos, writing letters, and spiritual grief.*

De Simone, M. (1996). Birth mother loss: Contributing factors to unresolved grief. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 24(1), 65-76.

*The authors surveyed 264 birth mothers an average of 25 years after placing their infants for adoption to solicit information on such topics as unresolved grief, extent of social support, moderating variables, and reunion experiences. Higher levels of grief were correlated with the mother's perception that she was coerced into the placement and with feelings of guilt and shame.*

Deykin, E. Y., Patti, P., & Ryan, J. (1988). Fathers of adopted children: A study of the impact of child surrender on birthfathers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 58(2), 240-248.

*Questionnaire data provided by 125 birth fathers indicated long-term unresolved issues related to the adoption.*

Fravel, D. L., McRoy, R. G., & Grotevant, H. D. (2000). Birthmother perceptions of the psychologically present adopted child: Adoption openness and boundary ambiguity. *Family Relations*, 49, 425-433.

*Interviews with 163 birth mothers in the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project show that the child placed for adoption remains psychologically present.*

Portuesi, D. (1996). Silent voices heard: Impact of the birthmother's experience—then and now. *Adoption Therapist*, 7(1), 1-4.

*The author, a birth mother and psychotherapist, describes some of the emotional reactions of the birth mother, as well as ways that therapists can aid in the healing process.*

Silverstein, D. N., & Kaplan, S. (1988). Lifelong issues in adoption. In L. Coleman, K. Tolbor, H. Hornby, & C. Boggis (Eds.), *Working with older adoptees* (pp. 45-53). Portland, ME: University of Southern Maine. Retrieved April 23, 2004, from [www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong\\_issues\\_in\\_adoption.html](http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong_issues_in_adoption.html)

*The authors describe seven issues that all members of the adoption triad must address.*

Winkler, R., & van Keppel, M. (1984). *Relinquishing mothers in adoption: Their long-term adjustment*. Melbourne, Australia: Institute of Family Studies.

*The authors studied 213 birth mothers who had placed children up to 30 years earlier and found that many had continuing experiences of loss, which were often worse for women who lacked social support and opportunities to discuss their loss.*

## Support Groups

Child Welfare Information Gateway compiles the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory, which lists support groups on a State-by-State basis. Go to [www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad](http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad).

One well-known national organization that also has some local chapters is Concerned United Birthparents (CUB). Their website can be found at [www.cubirthparents.org](http://www.cubirthparents.org).

## Websites

American Academy of Adoption Attorneys: [www.adoptionattorneys.org](http://www.adoptionattorneys.org)

*AAAA is a national membership association of attorneys who practice, or have otherwise distinguished themselves, in the field of adoption law. AAAA works to promote the reform of adoption laws and to disseminate information on ethical adoption practices. Their Membership Directory, including members from the United States and Canada, lists attorneys who are well versed in the complexities of adoption law as well as interstate and international regulations regarding adoption.*

American Adoption Congress: [www.americanadoptioncongress.org](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org)

*The American Adoption Congress (AAC) is an international network of individuals and organizations committed to adoption reform. Through education and advocacy, they promote honesty, openness, and respect for family connections in adoption, foster care, and assisted reproduction. Membership is open to adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals, and all others who share a commitment to the AAC's goals.*

Child Welfare Information Gateway: [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

*Information Gateway offers information on all aspects of adoption for professionals, policymakers, and the general public. Information Gateway develops and maintains a computerized database of books, journal articles, and other materials on adoption and related topics, conducts database searches, publishes materials on adoption, and gives referrals to related services and experts in the*

*field. Information Gateway also maintains a database of experts knowledgeable in various areas of adoption practice.*

Concerned United Birthparents (CUB): [www.cubirthparents.org](http://www.cubirthparents.org)

*CUB's mission is to provide support to birth parents who have relinquished a child to adoption, to provide resources to help prevent unnecessary family separations, to educate the public about the life-long effects on all who are touched by adoption, and to advocate for fair and ethical adoption laws, policies, and practices.*

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute: [www.adoptioninstitute.org](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org)

*The Adoption Institute seeks to improve the quality of information about adoption, to enhance the understanding and perceptions about adoption, and to advance adoption policy and practice.*

Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support: [www.openadoptioninsight.org](http://www.openadoptioninsight.org)

*This site provides resources for all parties interested in open adoption, including expectant parents, adopted persons, adoptive parents, and birth parents.*

Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project: <http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/>

*This site provides research findings from this major study of variations in openness in adoption and the effect of openness on all members of the adoption triad.*

Information on the issues facing adopted persons can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons*, which can be accessed at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_adimpact.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adimpact.cfm). The Information Gateway factsheet *Searching for Birth Relatives* can be accessed at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_search.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm). Information on open adoption can be found in the Information Gateway factsheet *Openness in Adoption*, which can be accessed at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadopt.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm).