



# Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES



Use your smartphone to access this factsheet online.

FACTSHEET  
FOR FAMILIES

December 2011

Disponible en español

<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/buscando/index.cfm>

## Searching for Birth Relatives



Changes in recent years have influenced the field of adoption and the way adopted people, birth parents (also called first parents), adoptive parents searching on behalf of their children, and other birth relatives search for one another. New legislation in some States permits more access to birth information, and efforts to open adoption records are in process in many others.

### What's Inside:

- The Decision to Search
- Steps in the Search Process
- Hiring a Professional Searcher
- International Searching
- Social Media and Searching
- Reunion Issues
- Conclusion
- Additional Resources



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



Child Welfare Information Gateway  
Children's Bureau/ACYF  
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Eighth Floor  
Washington, DC 20024  
800.394.3366  
Email: [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov)  
<http://www.childwelfare.gov>

The vast body of information available through the Internet can make accessing public records easier, which can make some aspects of the search process faster. With the advent of social networking, people are connecting in new ways, and this is impacting the way searchers are finding and reuniting with one another. Although statistics are not yet available to document the number of adopted people, adoptive parents, and birth parents who find each other through these sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that it is a growing trend, with the potential to lead to more openness in adoption in the future.

The purpose of this factsheet is to provide some guidance on the adoption search process and information access, as well as resources for further help in conducting a successful birth family search and, if desired, reunion. This factsheet is designed to address the concerns of both adult adopted people who are searching for birth parents, siblings, or other birth relatives, as well as birth parents (both mothers and fathers) who want to locate a child who was adopted. It can also help adoptive parents who wish to locate information on the birth family of their child or adolescent. While not a complete “how to” guide to searching, this factsheet provides information on:

- The decision to search
- Steps in the search process
- Hiring a professional searcher (versus doing it yourself or using a grassroots group)
- International searching
- Social media and searching

- Reunion issues
- Conclusion
- Additional resources

## 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, 2001) 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, 2007).

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). Additionally, siblings separated by adoption may have a strong desire to find each other and reconnect.

The question of why an adopted person, birth parent, or adoptive 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, whether they have birth siblings, and what they are like. Birth parents may want to know

whether their birth children are alive and have been happy and well treated.

- **Family traits and personalities.** Many adopted people 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 his or her biological children.<sup>1</sup>
- **Circumstances of the adoption.** Often, adopted people 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.
- **Establish connections for adopted children.** Some adoptive parents wish to find and reunite with their child's birth family to preserve these connections for their children until they are old enough to maintain a relationship on their own, if desired. Adoptive parents may also contact birth relatives to help their children with specific issues of grief and loss and to reassure birth relatives that their child is doing well.

## Understanding the Difference Between Search and Reunion

It is often assumed that birth family searches automatically involve a reunion. In fact, ambivalence about a possible reunion has

<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services launched the Surgeon General's Family Health History initiative to encourage all Americans to learn more about their family health history: <http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory>

sometimes deterred people from searching. Many professionals believe that it is a basic human right to search and learn about oneself. The reunion however, is not a right, but a privilege. All people have a right to their own boundaries and to decline if they do not want to have a relationship or even a reunion.

## Steps in the Search Process<sup>1</sup>

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.** Preparing emotionally and psychologically for the search process is an important first step for both adopted people and birth parents. Such preparation may include reading about other adopted people's 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 people or for birth parents or adoptive 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 search support groups, see Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>

Gathering emotional support from family and friends also can be helpful. Adopted people 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 (Grand & Bryne, 2009). Understanding that the decision to search is generally not about the adoptive parents may offer reassurance to concerned adoptive family members.

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 and competent to support all parties in the search process.

(See Information Gateway's *Selecting and Working With an Adoption Therapist*: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_therapist.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.cfm))

- 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 people, 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.

Issued after an adoption is finalized, an amended birth certificate lists the names of the adoptive parents as if the adopted person had been born to them.

Birth, death, marriage, divorce, school, church, genealogy, health, military, motor vehicle, 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 in *Access to Adoption Records* on Information Gateway's website: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm)

#### 4. Registering with reunion registries.

A number of States, as well as private organizations, offer reunion registries that allow adopted people 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 (also called mutual consent registries) 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 (<http://www.isrr.org>). This free service 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. Because this useful resource is not widely advertised, people may not know about the service it provides, but registering with the ISRR is generally

recognized as a good place to start a birth relative search.

There is 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). Recent data provided by Illinois's passive registry reveals a match rate of 7 percent (Illinois Department of Public Health, 2010).

5. **Obtaining missing documents.** 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. *Shea's Search Series* includes two articles with specific advice for compiling documents: *Initiating a Search* (<http://www.bastards.org/search/init.html>) and *Documents: What They Are, Where They Are, What They Mean, and How To Get Them* (<http://www.bastards.org/search/docu.html>).

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. Experts recommend 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.
- **Birth records**—Most adopted people will not have their original birth certificate but will have, instead, an amended document listing their adoptive parents' names as their parents by birth. However, there are a few States that allow adopted adults to have access to their original birth certificate, which provides the names of the adopted person's birth parent(s). In other States, the original birth certificate may be available if the adopted person petitions the court. (See Information Gateway's *Access to Adoption Records* for State-specific information regarding obtaining an original birth certificate: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/infoaccessap.cfm))
- **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 people 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.

- **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
  - Any agency or attorney papers, including information about birth parents

Many of these documents may also be available elsewhere. For instance, the attorney or law firm that handled the adoption may be able to supply a copy of the final court order. 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 (Culligan, 1996). Some court dockets may be accessible through free, online public records database searches. 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 adoptive parent(s), 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, records from religious institutions (e.g., baptismal certificates), motor vehicle documents, and death certificates.

There are many databases and websites that are available to the general public (both fee-based and free) on the Internet. Emergency Medical Search Locators provides an extensive list of these resources at <http://adoption-free-search.org/state.htm> (the left menu of the site provides links to many other helpful sites, including adoption-related links, State tax and property websites, and more).

6. **Filing a court petition.** If none of the above has been successful, adopted people 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.

Depending on State laws and the discretion of the judge, he or she may agree to release only nonidentifying information (which should be available by asking any agency) or a summary of information, or the judge may deny the petition completely. 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 to locate birth relatives. 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.

Additional resources to aid in the search process are provided in the Searching for Birth Relatives section of Information Gateway's website: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/search/searching.cfm>

## Hiring a Professional Searcher

Adopted persons or birth parents searching for birth relatives have the option of hiring a professional searcher. Individuals who choose to hire a professional searcher should research the reputation of the searcher or company. Searchers may have a variety of backgrounds and training:

- Some searchers have a certification from Independent Search Consultants (<http://www.iscsearch.com>), a nonprofit organization that trains in adoption searching.
- Other searchers may be licensed as private investigators by a particular locality and may or may not have adoption search experience.
- Other professional searchers may be experts in a particular locality or a particular field but may not have a certification.

Support groups and online forums can be a ready source of information about professional searchers. Reputable professional searchers will always respect

the pacing and boundaries established by the person who has hired them. These professionals will not move beyond search into reunion unless this step is requested by the searching adopted person or birth relative.

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).

In addition to these fee-based search services, there is a growing community of volunteers called "search angels" who will conduct adoption searches free of charge. Search angels are individuals with experience conducting searches for birth relatives, not private detectives or paid professional searchers. Adoption search blogs, social networking sites, search support groups, and other online forums are places where search angels or recommendations for such help can be found. See this article on search angels for more information: <http://reunion.adoption.com/adoption-records/search-angels.html>



## International Searching

In the past, intercountry adoptions were almost exclusively closed, and it was believed that there was little to no possibility of locating and reuniting with birth parents. Although in many cases it is still quite difficult to locate birth relatives abroad, searching internationally has been more common since the 1990s. Many of the resources discussing international birth parent search are targeted toward adoptive parents searching for their child's birth relatives, but some of the tips for adoptive parents are also relevant to adult adopted people. Country-specific articles, blogs, and support groups may be the best sources of information for those interested in beginning an international search. An online search for information addressing the unique issues and tips relevant to the birth country may help point international searchers in the right direction to get started.

People who were adopted from outside the United States (through intercountry adoptions) face unique challenges in locating birth parents for a number of reasons:

- Each country has its own laws governing information access.
- Language barriers can complicate communication.
- Cultural attitudes and laws regarding unwed mothers, child abandonment, and other issues may influence the willingness and ability of birth family members to

reunite or maintain a relationship with people who have been adopted.

- Record-keeping practices vary greatly across countries and cultures. 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.

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 may be 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. It also may be able to offer some medical history, biographical information on parents, and circumstances regarding the adoption. Some agencies provide search services abroad, in partnership with overseas child placing agencies. After getting in touch with the agency, cultivating a relationship with a contact in the birth country is often the next step for international searchers. Building relationships can take time, but can be the best link to finding the crucial pieces of information necessary to move forward with a successful search.

In some countries, those searching for birth relatives report meeting some success with hiring a professional searcher in

that country to conduct the search. It is important that professionals helping with the search are knowledgeable and sensitive and kind when contacting birth relatives. Translators should also be schooled in the complexity of adoption and should be caring in their translations for both sides. Checking references and investigating the background of any potential candidates before making payments or providing any personal information is vital to ensuring the searcher is a reputable professional.

Some other resources for international searchers include the following:

- Adopted people 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: [http://travel.state.gov/visa/fees/fees\\_3272.html](http://travel.state.gov/visa/fees/fees_3272.html)
- Searchers adopted from another country can submit a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (<http://uscis.gov/graphics/index.htm>) to receive copies of their immigration records (Click on About Us, then select Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIA) in the left menu to find instructions for how to submit a FOIA request).
- An international agency that may offer help is International Social Services, which provides a broad range of social work services, including helping those who were adopted find birth families abroad. See the Tracings section of the

U.S. branch website: <http://www.iss-usa.org/site.asp?PageId=3&SubId=9>

- 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 Additional Resources on page 15 of this factsheet.)
- Blogs by adopted people and adoptive parents who have conducted successful birth parent searches can be a source of country-specific information and ideas.

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 people may derive some satisfaction from visiting their birth country and experiencing their birth culture. Some agencies and support groups organize homeland tours for adopted people 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: <http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>)

## Social Media and Searching

“Social media” refers to forms of communication that use the Internet, including social networking sites, text messaging, blogs, podcasts, and RSS feeds. As of March 2011, there were over 200 active social media sites (Fitch, 2011), and this number will likely continue to grow. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace allow people to connect to each other by inviting others to join their network or become their “friend,” making it easier to find people and reconnect. With over 500 million active users on Facebook alone (Facebook, 2011), social networking sites can be useful tools to those involved in a birth relative search. Although there is no research documenting the number of adopted people, birth parents, and birth relatives who have reunited through social networking sites, anecdotal evidence suggests that birth family members who have been separated by adoption are finding each other through Facebook and other social media channels. This section addresses the benefits and considerations of using social media when searching.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The considerations and tips provided in this factsheet are designed for adults (age 18 and older) who are searching for other adults. Considerations for adoptive parents of children under 18 are reviewed extensively in *Facing up to Facebook: A Survival Guide for Adoptive Families* by Eileen Fursland (2010). Birth parents are encouraged to discuss the implications of using social networking sites to search for and reunite with a child who is under 18 with a social worker, counselor, or other professional before proceeding with a search.

### Benefits of Social Media in Search and Reunion

Social networking sites and other forms of social media can be powerful tools to bring people together. It can be beneficial to use social media in searching because:

- It is free to join sites like Facebook, so searching for birth relatives through these channels can be done free of charge and without the intervention of a professional intermediary.
- If the person being sought is a member of a social networking site and uses their real name on the site (rather than a pseudonym or alternate spelling), it can be possible to find birth relatives very quickly. Sometimes searching social networking sites can end in a successful connection when other methods have failed. Facebook answers some general questions about using its search feature to find people at <https://www.facebook.com/help/?page=762#!/help/?page=762#!/help/?faq=13320&tq>
- Social networking sites offer a way to bridge distances and maintain a relationship without the need for travel and expense. Many of these sites are international.
- Depending on privacy settings, it can be possible to view and access another person’s entire network of connections or “friends.” Through this network, it can be possible to connect with multiple birth family members. Some searchers have been reunited with birth fathers, siblings, and others through social networking sites.

- Some people may prefer the relative distance that is afforded through online interaction to the intensity of face-to-face contact.

## Considerations When Using Social Media for Searching

Due to the complex nature of adoption, some professionals suggest that part of the preparation process may include thinking through the implications of contacting a birth relative before using these tools to connect.

Considerations when using social media sites to search for and contact birth relatives include:

- **Pacing of contact.** Research suggests that reunions are more likely to be successful in the long term when initial contact is made gradually (Affleck & Steed, 2001). The nature of communication through social media sites and online tools like instant messaging create situations where contact proceeds very quickly and can evolve into an intense relationship before all parties are ready (Fursland, 2010).
- **Making contact.** Instant conversations initiated through social media sites and other online tools can bring up issues that either party is not prepared to face right away (Fursland, 2010). Reuniting with birth relatives can bring new information that requires time to process before responding. Instant messaging does not allow time for well-thought-out responses. See Making Contact ([http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/making\\_contact.pdf](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/making_contact.pdf)) for guidance on what to say when reaching out for the first time.
- **Privacy.** Privacy can be a concern, particularly when using social media sites with ever-changing privacy policies. Do not assume that any communication on social networking sites is private. Comments made on someone's Facebook page on their "wall" may be visible to their entire network—or yours—depending on privacy settings. Even with high privacy settings, communications can be forwarded to others and shared in other ways. Facebook profiles also appear in search results on Google and other search engines. There are many sources that address protecting privacy while online. See the articles included in the Additional Resources section on page 15 for more information.
- **Safety.** As with any online activity, keep safety in mind. People are not always honest on the Internet. Be aware that sometimes people are not who they say they are.
- **Posting pictures.** Photos of birth relatives can hold special significance to adopted people who may not have had a previous connection with a relative who looks like them. Before posting photos on the Internet, educate yourself about geotagging. Some photos taken with smartphones may be embedded with a geotag that reveals the latitude and longitude of the location where the photo was taken. This geotag can be accessible to the public when the photo is posted online. More information about geotagging and the steps to disable this feature on smartphones is available in About Geotagging: <http://icanstalku.com/how.php#geotagging>

See the Additional Resources section on page 15 for specific sites that can assist in the search process.

## Reunion Issues

Some, but not all, successful searches will end in a reunion between the adopted person and birth relative. Reunions of long-lost birth family members have been the subject of books, articles, and television shows. Two important themes emerge from these accounts:

### 1. Emotional preparation before the reunion experience is beneficial.

Adopted people 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 people (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, around 7 percent in one recent study, reject any contact (Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005). Additionally, a recent analysis of data from four States that have implemented legislation allowing adopted adults access to their original birth certificate revealed a very low rate of birth parents requesting no contact (.05 percent) (New Jersey Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education, 2009).

### 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 reunited birth relatives suggest letting the person who did not search lead the pace of contact. This may help establish boundaries as the found person processes the experience of reuniting.

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

- 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 people 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 on page 15.

### Suggested Citation:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2011). *Searching for birth relatives*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

## References

- Affleck, M. K., & Steed, L. G. (2001). Expectations and experiences of participants in ongoing adoption reunion relationships: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 71(1), 38-48.
- American Adoption Congress. (2007). Frequently asked questions. Retrieved from <http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/faqs.php>
- Culligan, J. J. (1996). *Adoption searches made easier*. Miami, FL: FJA, Inc.
- Facebook Pressroom. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>
- Fitch, D. (2011). *Child welfare meets technology & social media: Help or hindrance?* Retrieved from [http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/events/SocialMedia/PDFs/Dale\\_Fitch\\_PPT.pdf](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/events/SocialMedia/PDFs/Dale_Fitch_PPT.pdf)
- Freundlich, M. (2001). *Access to information and search and reunion in Korean American adoptions: A discussion paper*. El Dorado Hills, CA: Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network. Retrieved from the Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network at <http://www.kaanet.com/whitepaper.pdf>
- Fursland, E. (2010). *Social networking and contact: How social workers can help adoptive families*. Great Britain: The Lavenham Press.

- Grand, M. P., & Bryne, M. (2009). *What every adoptive parent should know about search and reunion*. Retrieved from the American Adoption Congress website at <http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/mgrand.pdf>
- Illinois Department of Public Health. (2010). Illinois Adoption registry statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.idph.state.il.us/vitalrecords/vital/adoptstats.htm>
- Mitchell, M., Nast, J., Busharis, B., & Hasegawa, P. (1999). Mutual consent voluntary registries: An exercise in patience and failure. *Adoptive Families* 32(1), 30-33, 63.
- Muller, U., & Perry, B. (2001). Adopted persons' search for and contact with their birth parents II: Adoptee-birth parent contact. *Adoption Quarterly* 4(3), 39-62.
- New Jersey Coalition for Adoption Reform and Education. (2009). Statistics for States implementing access to original birth certificate (OBC) laws since 2000. Retrieved from the American Adoption Congress website at [http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/or\\_al\\_nh\\_me\\_contact\\_stats.pdf](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/or_al_nh_me_contact_stats.pdf)
- Triseliotis, J., Feast, J., & Kyle, F. (2005). *The adoption triangle revisited: A study of adoption, search, and reunion experiences*. London: Skyline House.

## Additional Resources

### Books and Articles

- Askin, J. (1998). *Search: A handbook for adoptees and birthparents, 3rd edition*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.
- Ayers-Lopez, S. J., Henney, S. M., McRoy, R. G., Hanna, M. D., & Grotevant, H. D. (2008). Openness in adoption and the impact on birth mother plans for search and reunion. *Families in Society*, 89(4), 551-561.
- 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 from [http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/search\\_byrne\\_article.php](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/search_byrne_article.php)

- Cox, S. S.-K. (2001). *Considerations for international search*. Retrieved from <http://www.holtintl.org/reunionsearcharticle.html>
- Howard, J., Smith, S., & Deoudes, G. (2010). *For the records II: An examination of the history and impact of adult adoptee access to original birth certificates*. New York, NY: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Retrieved from [http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/7\\_14\\_2010\\_ForTheRecordsII.pdf](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/7_14_2010_ForTheRecordsII.pdf)
- Jacobs, D., Ponte, I. C., & Wang, L. K. (Eds.). (2011). *From home to homeland: What adoptive families need to know before making a return trip to China*. St. Paul, MN: Yeong and Yeong Book Company.
- Liedtke, J. (2010). Finding birth parents. *Adoption Today*, 13(2), 18-19.
- Lifton, B. J. (2009). *Lost and found: The adoption experience, 3rd edition*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Pavao, J. (2011). Facing Facebook. *Fostering Families Today*, (March/April).
- Schooler, J., & Norris, B. (2002). *Journeys after adoption: Understanding lifelong issues*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Strauss, J. A. (1994). *Birthright: The guide to search and reunion for adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

## Websites

### Resources for beginning the search:

- Adoptees Have Answers: Search and Reunion at <http://www.aha.mn/resources/search-reunion>
- The ALMA Society (Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association) at <http://www.almasociety.org>
- American Adoption Congress's Beginner's Search Checklist at [http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/beginners\\_search\\_checklist.php](http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/beginners_search_checklist.php)
- International Soundex Reunion Registry at <http://www.isrr.org>
- Family Search Internet Genealogy Service (sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) at <http://www.familysearch.org>
- Online Guide to Adoption Search and Reunion at <http://reunion.adoption.com/adoption-records/search-reunion-ebook.html>



**Resources for international searches:**

- Adopted Vietnamese International Search Guide at <http://www.adoptedvietnamese.org/searching/roots-tracing-guide>
- Columbian Adoptees Search and Support at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ColombianAdopteeSearchandSupport>
- International Social Services at <http://www.iss-usa.org>
- Korean Adoptee Adoptive Family Network at <http://www.kaanet.com>
- Find Families in Mexico at <http://www.FindFamiliesInMexico.com>
- Searching for Birth Parents—How It Can Be Done at <http://research-china.blogspot.com/2007/12/searching-for-birthparents-how-can-it.html>

**Resources for social media and search:**

- Facebook's Data Use Policy at <http://www.facebook.com/about/privacy>
- Facebook Security Best Practices at <http://www.sophos.com/en-us/security-news-trends/best-practices/facebook.aspx>
- Get Safe Online at [http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a\\_id=1132](http://www.getsafeonline.org/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=1132)
- How to Disable Photo Tagging in Facebook at <http://internet-safety.yoursphere.com/2011/04/how-to-disable-photo-tagging-in-facebook.html#tp>
- List of social networking websites at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_social\\_networking\\_websites](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites)
- Risk Reduction Strategies on Facebook at <http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2010/11/08/risk-reduction-strategies-on-facebook.html>
- Social Networking Privacy at <http://epic.org/privacy/socialnet>
- Social Networking Website Reviews at <http://social-networking-websites-review.toptenreviews.com>

**Resources on reunion:**

- Planning and Approaching a Reunion at <http://www.adoptionmattersnw.org/pdf/Planning%20and%20Approaching%20a%20Reunion.pdf>
- Writing to a Birth Mother at <http://www.bensoc.org.au/uploads/documents/writing-to-birthmother-nov20061.pdf>

**Resources on State adoption laws:**

- Adoption & Child Welfare Lawsite at <http://www.adoptionchildwelfarelaw.org>
- American Adoption Congress at <http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/state.php>
- Child Welfare Information Gateway at [http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/state/adoption](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/adoption)
- State Adoption Disclosure Laws at a Glance at <http://www.bastards.org/activism/access.htm>