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Adoption Advocate

Accessing Birth and Adoption Records—A Practical Guide for Adoptees

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Introduction and Getting Ready to Search

Perhaps you are considering initiating a search for your birth or adoption records. Many different articles share lists of questions to carefully consider before initiating a search. NCFA's article, How Adoption Professionals Can Support Adult Adoptees' Search for Information shares the following list:

1. Ask yourself: What information is necessary to me at this time, and what information is desired? These are personal decisions only an adoptee can make.
2. Do I want a relationship or contact with my biological family, or do I just want to have my questions answered?
3. What questions do I have for my biological family?
4. Do I want medical history?
5. Do I want to know the specifics of my placement?
6. Know that a search and/or reunion can provide healing or closure, but can also reveal hard or complicated information. The adoptee should be open and prepared for all scenarios when deciding to search.
7. Have emotional support in place when searching. Family or friends may serve this role. Additional support may be provided by adoption professionals or a counselor to help process emotions related to new information or relationships.
8. Understand that the birth family may not want to open the door to a relationship, even if they are willing to provide more information.
9. Know that all involved parties will be more likely to be cooperative if treated with compassion and respect.
10. Store any newly obtained records or information in a safe and secure location, such as a bank safety deposit box, and scan them to a secure, cloud-based location.[1]

[1] Jarema, R. (2017). *How adoption professionals can support adult adoptee's search*. National Council for Adoption. https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-104/

Considering Adoption adds the following question, which can be challenging but important to consider before embarking on a search: "Are you prepared for the three worst-case-scenarios: 1) that you won't find the person you're searching for, 2) that the person you're searching for may not be ready for contact with you, 3) that you reunite with the person you've been searching for and the reunion isn't what you'd hoped for?"[2]

The information below is designed to provide practical information once you have decided to embark on a search. Most of the information applies to domestic adoptions, while a section at the end addresses international adoption.

TERMS TO KNOW

Original Birth Certificate (OBC): The initial birth certificate created shortly after an individual is born. For many individuals, this is their only birth certificate. For adopted individuals, a new or amended birth certificate replaces the original once the adoption is finalized.

Non-identifying information: This can include health, behavioral health, educational and social histories of the child and the child's birth parents and other relatives. This is typically provided to the adoptive parents at the time of adoption.

Identifying information: This information could lead to identification of birth parents, the adult adoptee, or other birth relatives.

Original Birth Certificates

One place to start when searching for records is with your birth certificate. This experience can vary depending on your location. Some states have open adoption records, where adult adoptees can request their original birth certificate and gain basic information about their adoption. Other states allow different levels of access. The Adoptee Rights Law Center maintains a state-by-state list and interactive map that summarizes the laws and processes for obtaining an original birth certificate in all 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia.[3]

Adoption Records/Birth Family Information

NCFA offers a resource page for individuals seeking birth records or other health and background information. We recommend that "it be done in a sensitive way for the protection of all parties involved. The use of registries, state vital records offices, placing adoption agencies, and appropriate confidential intermediary support can help this process go smoothly for everyone involved."[4] There are multiple avenues you can use in your search. Below, we outline the various steps you can take and resources available to you.

1. **Become familiar with the laws in your state**. Non-identifying information can be accessed by all parents and guardians

[2] Considering Adoption (n.d.). *Preparing for an adoption search and reunion.* Considering Adoption. https://consideringadoption.com/adopted/search-and-reunion/preparing-for-an-adoption-search-and-reunion/

[3] Adoptee Rights Law Center (n.d.). *The United States of OBC.* Adoptee Rights Law Center. https://adopteerightslaw.com/united-states-obc/

[4] National Council For Adoption (n.d.). *Adopted individuals.* National Council For Adoption. https://adoptioncouncil.org/education/adopted-individuals/#search

of a minor child who has been adopted. Almost all states allow adult adoptees to access this information, typically after they turn 18, upon written request.[5] As the Children's Bureau explains: "Statutes in nearly all States permit the release of identifying information when the person whose information is sought has consented to the release. If consent is not on file with the appropriate entity, the information may not be released without a court order documenting good cause to release the information. A person seeking a court order must be able to demonstrate by clear and convincing evidence that there is a compelling reason for disclosure that outweighs maintaining the confidentiality of a party to an adoption."[6] Compelling reasons often include medical conditions that could be more easily treated or identified by knowing more of the family history. Different states have different limitations or requirements for the release of identifying information. For example, some states require the adopted individual to undergo counseling before releasing any information.

2. **Contact the attorney or agency that facilitated your original placement**. These entities may still have information available that they can share with you. Some agencies have systems in place to help with this contact. For example, Holt International has an online form that individuals can complete if they are interested in conducting a search.[7]
3. **Use an adoption registry.** As described by Considering Adoption, registries allow adoptees and birth parents over the age of 18 (or 21 in some states) to submit their information, indicating they are willing to be contacted by biological family members. Registries run by states are typically passive (also referred to as mutual consent), in which the parties post their information, and then individuals looking for them can search. Considering Adoption lists the adoption registry information by state.[8] There are also non-governmental, privately run registries that may be helpful if an individual state registry is not available. These registries tend to be active, in which a staff member notifies an individual if someone submits a profile that matches what you are looking for. One example is adopted.com, the largest adoption reunion registry website.*
4. **Use a confidential intermediary**. Some states utilize a confidential intermediary system, in which certified intermediaries are appointed by the court to access sealed adoption records and contact family members to obtain their consent for contact.[9]

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[5] Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020). *Access to adoption records*. Child Welfare Information Gateway. https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/access-adoption-records/

[6] Ibid.

[7] Holt International. (n.d.). *Birth records search- post adoption services*. Holt International. https://www.holtinternational.org/post-adoption/birth-search/

[8] Considering Adoption. (n.d.). *Should you use an adoption reunion registry?* Considering Adoption. https://consideringadoption.com/adopted/search-and-reunion/adoption-reunion-registry/

[9] Child Welfare Information Gateway (2020). *Access to adoption records*. Child Welfare Information Gateway. https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/access-adoption-records/

Using DNA Testing

DNA testing is another tool that adoptees have used to connect with biological relatives. Research shows the popularity of this method with adult adoptees. NCFA's survey of over 1,200 adoptees, found that more than two-thirds reported having completed genetic testing, most frequently for the purpose of learning more about ancestry/relatives.[10] This article also carefully highlights the potential benefits and risks inherent in genetic testing, as highlighted in the table below.

Benefits	Risks
Learn more about biological ethnicity and origins	Accuracy in identifying extended family members can be limited
Create family trees and connect with estranged family members	Testing may lead to "false negative" or "false positive" assumptions regarding a health outcome
Learn health information and family medical history	Concerns about data sharing with government organizations and other private entities, such as insurance companies
	Submitting DNA tests may begin a path that leads to unwanted connections

Additionally, DNA results can prove to be confusing to interpret. Nonprofits such as Search Angels[11] and DNAngels can help individuals through "DNA interpretation, mapping, and extensive research."[12]*

Using Social Media

There are numerous potential benefits to utilizing social media for a search. These matches can often happen quite quickly. Individuals may feel more comfortable searching given the relative anonymity that social media can provide. Social media can also provide opportunities for support from other individuals going through similar experiences. However, it is also important to remember the potential risks associated with using social media. For example, nothing on social media can be assumed to be private. Once it is posted, information can be shared easily. This is especially important to remember when posting pictures, as they can often enable location tracking.[13]

International Adoption

Searching for records in the case of international adoption can prove to be particularly challenging.[14] The agency that facilitated the adoption is the best place to

[10] Kunz, C. (2024). *Genetic testing for adoptees: Key considerations and benefits.* National Council For Adoption. https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/genetic-testing-for-adoptees-key-considerations-and-benefits/

[11] https://www.searchangels.org/

[12] https://dnangels.org/

[13] Child Welfare Information Gateway (2018). *Searching for birth relatives.* Child Welfare Information Gateway. https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/searching-birth-relatives/

[14] Singer, S. (2019). *Preparing for search and reunion.* National Council For Adoption. https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-134/

start. There are some international registries, such as the International Soundex Reunion Registry.[15]* There may also be resources specific to the country you were adopted from. For example, Wesley Hagood, president of the Families with Children from China – Capital Area adoption group, adopted two daughters from China in 2003 and 2006. Wes and his wife helped both their daughters search for their biological families and, in 2020, found their older daughter's birth family and were able to confirm it through DNA testing. They then wrote a book, Searching for Your Chinese Birth Family, designed to help other families have a successful search.[16] They also formed the Chinese Birth Family Search Network, with the mission of acting "as a clearing house, pointing to the best resources available to plan, launch, and perform a Chinese birth family search."[17]

Support

Overall, this journey can be very fulfilling but also may be full of unexpected bumps and turns. It is especially important to find ways to take care of your mental health throughout the process.

- Seek out support from family and friends.
- Find out if there are adoption-competent therapists in your area. They will be more familiar with the emotions specific to search and reunion.[18]
- It can be helpful to learn about other people's search stories. Resources like the Center for Adoption Support & Education's webinar, entitled "Search and Reunion in Domestic and International Adoption," share stories of how searches have gone for others.[19]

Real-Life Stories

This article aims to offer practical guidance on considering and progressing with a search. While thinking about embarking on a search, it can be useful to hear the real-life experiences of individuals who have gone through the experience. We are grateful to Cory and Beth**, who graciously shared their stories with us, and we are proud to share them here.

Cory's Story

Cory was born in Ft. Worth, Texas, in 1972 and adopted via a closed adoption. He says, "I knew growing up I would never meet my biological parents, and I was fine with that." However, during COVID, Cory's mother began creating a family tree, including details about when her ancestors had immigrated from Ireland. Cory was nearly fifty, and the

15 https://www.isrr.org/

16 Hagood, W. O. (2021). *Searching for your Chinese birth family*. Heritage Books.

17 https://wesleyohagood.wixsite.com/cbfsn

18 Hill, S. (2024). *I spy helpful help: How to find an adoption-competent therapist*. National Council For Adoption. https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/i-spy-helpful-help-adoption-competent-therapist/

19 Center for Adoption Support and Education. (2018, Jan. 5). *Search and reunion in domestic and international adoption webinar* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwmuY6-yjP0

more his mother talked about this project, the more he realized that the history she was describing was not his history and these were not his ancestors. Encouraged by the recent experience of a friend who took a DNA test and found his half-sister, Cory decided to use a DNA test to learn more about his family history. Almost immediately, he found much more than that: one of his birth mother's siblings reached out and said, after some correspondence, that his sister was interested in meeting Cory. As Cory shares, "Seeing her name for the first time led me to tears. There she was. A real person—not just this imaginary person in my mind. It was my first connection to this lady who has been a mystery my entire life. I immediately felt her love. I literally stared at her name for hours." Finding his birth father proved to be a little more challenging. There were no hits from the DNA test on that side, so Cory decided to reach out to Search Angels. They agreed to take his case and, after almost two years, identified his birth father.

Cory has met and spent time with both of his birth parents. His biggest piece of advice is not to have expectations when embarking on a search. There is a reason why people place a child for adoption, so expecting to meet a millionaire or hear a glamorous story is not realistic. As Cory says, "Take the story that's given, and that's your story."

Beth's Story

Beth was adopted as an infant through Spence-Chapin. She has an older sister who is also adopted, and they both grew up knowing that they were adopted. Beth looks a lot like her mother (her sister does not), and the family discussed how family resemblance was an important criterion for her birth mother when choosing an adoptive placement. Beth did not spend a great deal of time thinking about her birth family growing up. She said that when friends would find out she was adopted, they would always ask if she was curious about her birth parents and say things like, "Oh, you have to find your birth mom," but that was not something that resonated for her.

Fast forward to ten years ago when Beth was 30 and, due to ideological differences, her relationship with her father had disintegrated. She had started therapy to deal with family and career issues, but not explicitly with adoption-related issues. At that time, Beth was also making annual donations to Spence-Chapin and, through their e-mail list, received an invitation to a (then) new group for adult adoptees called Voices of Adoption. Beth was in Boston, and the group met in NYC, which presented a fairly high barrier to entry, until COVID turned everything virtual. Joining that virtual meeting was a first step for Beth and a huge one. There have been many subsequent steps in her search, and for each one, there has been an important lesson: listen to yourself and trust your gut to know if you are ready to make that next move.

Beth learned through Voices of Adoption when New York State made it legal to request a birth certificate, and once she felt the time was right, she requested it. This helped her identify her birth mother, with whom she has had some email contact. Her next step was taking a 23andMe test, at first just to learn about her ethnic background. Later, she opened up the networking side of the site and immediately found a cousin who led her to her birth father. That part of the journey has been quite difficult; now in his 60s, he has dealt with significant mental illness since his 20s. Her relationships with her uncle and cousins on her birth father's side continue to grow.

For Beth, the most important part of searching is that you have to be in a place where you are okay, no matter what you find and no matter how things turn out. Do not undertake a search in order to fill a void; enter the journey from a place of strength. She says that at every step, she engages in self-reflection to ensure she is not starting with any assumptions. Additionally, because searching can be hard and disappointing, support is crucial. Know which individuals are "safe" to share your story with, and know who it is best to only share surface details with. Beth says that, because she has found amazing resources and support and followed her own inner timeline and listened to herself, she has been able to handle the not-so-pretty parts of her journey and take the beautiful parts and run with them.

* NCFA does not endorse any particular registry or service. This information is provided for reference only.
** Beth's name has been changed to protect her anonymity.

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About Elisa Rosman

Elisa has spent nearly two decades working as a consultant on issues around early care, education, and adoption. She has worked on a variety of projects, including grant writing, performing evaluation project management, advising on a replication of an Early Head Start model, and writing adoption-related articles. Elisa has a particular interest in translating research and information to make it most useful for families and practice. Elisa currently serves as the Evaluation Consultant for Formed Families Forward, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting foster, kinship, and adoptive families of children and youth with disabilities and other special needs in Northern Virginia. She earned her MA in infant and early childhood special education from George Washington University and her PhD in Community Psychology from New York University. She is mom to 4, including 3 children adopted from China.

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