

# ADOPTION, SEARCH AND REUNION:

## The Long Term Experience Of Adopted Adults

### Summary

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**Adoption, Search and Reunion** is the first major British study to compare the characteristics and experiences of adopted people who search for birth relatives (searchers) with those who do not (non-searchers) but where birth relatives have made an enquiry about them. The study examines the reasons why people search, and contrasts their experiences with adopted people who were contacted by a birth relative. Equally important, the research also looks at the long-term nature of adopted people's restored relationship with their birth relatives and their continuing relationship with their adoptive family.

Information was gathered from 394 searchers and 78 non-searchers. In-depth interviews were carried out with 74 of the 472 adopted people who completed the detailed questionnaire.

The findings report the widespread need of many adopted people to meet their birth relatives. They help answer universal questions of who we are and where we belong. They address issues of nature and nurture; the biological ties of blood and the social bonds of parenting.

### Searching for a birth relative

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Most searchers set off to find their birth mother. There was a widespread hope that a successful search would improve feelings of happiness. Sixty five per cent of adopted people began their search immediately after visiting The Children's Society where they received information from the adoption records. Feelings of anxiety, nervousness and excitement typically accompanied the search process.

Sixty per cent of searchers found their birth mother within three months. In many cases, finding the birth mother also meant having contact with birth siblings and birth grandparents. However, one in ten people failed to find or make contact with their birth relative.

*"I didn't ever have a burning thing to find her... it just happened so quickly actually. I mean I found her so incredibly quickly. It was like, 'Oh, I'll start thinking about this, maybe start looking,' and then in about a day I'd found her."*





## Non-searchers

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Amongst non-searchers, there was an even split between those who said that they had not thought about searching and those who said they had actually thought about searching but had done nothing about it. About half of non-searchers said that they felt that their adoptive parents were their 'real parents' and that they did not wish to upset them by contemplating a search. A third also felt worried that further information about their adoption might either be unpleasant or upsetting.

Three quarters of non-searchers felt that it was right for adoption agencies to let them know that a birth relative had made an approach seeking contact. The most likely birth relative to try and make contact was the birth mother (71%). About a quarter of contacts were made by a birth sibling. One in ten non-searchers did not wish to have contact with the approaching birth relative. Some non-searchers who had never thought about searching found dealing with the approach of a birth relative an unsettling experience. Three quarters of non-searchers had not heard of the Adoption Contact Register.

## Gender and age

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In terms of adopted people's broad biographical and adoptive family characteristics, there were few differences between searchers and non-searchers. The only significant difference between those who searched and those who did not was related to their gender.

- Adopted women were twice as likely as men to initiate a search.
- The mean age at which women first began their search was significantly lower than that for men (29.8 years v 32.3 years).
- In contrast, those who were contacted by a birth relative were as likely to be men as women but the relatives searching were predominantly women.

## Growing up adopted

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The majority of adopted people in the survey had thought about one or more of their birth relatives when growing up. Over 80% of both searchers and non-searchers had wondered what their birth relatives looked like, and whether they might look like their birth relative. Seventy percent of searchers and 74% of non-searchers said they did not feel comfortable asking their adoptive parents for information about their birth families and their origins. Searchers (70%) were more likely than non-searchers (48%) to wonder why their birth mother placed them for adoption.

*"I think that everybody who is adopted, it always crosses their mind" "I wonder if this bit's like her, or I wonder if that bit's like her?" I was about five or six months when I was adopted and I wanted to know what happened in that part of my life that nobody knew. Or just to ask the question, "Why did you have me adopted? Why didn't you struggle?"*

Fifty percent of searchers said they felt different to their adoptive family when they were growing up compared to 27% of non-searchers.

*"It was when I was a teenager I became very aware of being adopted. Particularly not looking like anyone in my family. I wish I looked like somebody."*

Non-searchers (85%) were more likely than searchers (68%) to say that they felt they belonged in their adoptive families when growing up.

*"I think I was made to feel quite special in a way. My father used to say, 'You were chosen – we always wanted a girl.' I always felt part of the family. I never felt different as such... I have very happy memories of my childhood."*

Seventy four per cent of non-searchers evaluated their experience of being adopted as a positive experience compared to 53% of searchers.

## Contact and reunion with birth relatives

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When they first met their birth relative, most adopted people said their feelings were either cautious ones of interest and friendship, or powerful ones of instant family bond and connection. Searchers (29%) were more likely than non-searchers (11%) to feel an instant family bond.

*"I went into this room and there was this little woman, five foot three and I'm nearly six foot, and I gave her the flowers and she started crying and I started crying. We just threw our arms round each other... I was so much like her, everything, mannerisms, the way I move my hands, the way I talk... two peas in a pod and we bonded totally, straight away, absolutely no doubt. I'm part of her and that bond was just instantly there."*

- One year after first contact, 15% of searchers and 15% of non-searchers had either ceased contact with, been rejected by or rejected further contact with their birth mother.
- Five years or more after the initial reunion, searchers (63%) were more likely than non-searchers (55%) still to be in contact with their birth mothers.

For most adopted people, relationships established in childhood with adoptive parents appear to be more enduring than those restored with birth parents in adulthood. For example, most adopted people were not only more likely to remain in contact with their adoptive parents than with their birth relatives, but in cases where there was contact with both sets of parents, they were also more likely to see more of their adoptive parents than their birth parents.

## Evaluating the contact and reunion experience

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Whether or not the contact with the birth relative was short-lived and difficult, or comfortable and long lasting, **the majority of searchers (85%) and non-searchers (72%) said the reunion had been a positive experience.**

Over 80% of both searchers and non-searchers said that the contact had answered important questions about their origins and background. Half of all searchers and a third of non-searchers said that they had an improved sense of identity and wellbeing as a result of the contact. People talked about feeling 'more complete as a person'. They had found the 'missing bits' of their story.

*"I'm a lot more complete – I was very incomplete before. There was this section of me that was missing. It was just emptiness. There was no conscious thinking, 'Oh, this is the way I feel.' It was just this emptiness somewhere in me. I have a history now. It's not that I have to take on somebody else's history. It's my own and my children have a history now. I am, as far as I can be, complete."*

## The experience of being placed transracially

In many respects, adopted people who had been placed transracially reported similar experiences and outcomes to those who had been in matched same-race placements. They were as likely to be still in contact or to have ceased contact with their birth relatives, and to feel positive about the outcome of the reunion.


However, a number of significant differences were observed across a range of measures. For example, 71% of people who had been placed transracially felt different to their adoptive families when growing up compared to 48% of those raised in white matched placements. Transracially placed people were more likely to begin their search at a younger age.

*"Most of the time I felt I belonged and other times I felt quite clearly that I wasn't part of the family. Physically, definitely physically. When I was younger it was just mainly the physical differences when I didn't feel I belonged, because my interests were different, my capabilities very different. I was singing and dancing and doing all those kind of things. My family, they were very white, blue-eyed, very pinky. Overweight a little bit – and what I can do is nothing that any of them can do."*

## Making sense of the findings


- More searchers than non-searchers describe relationships with their adoptive family and their overall experience of being adopted with mixed or, or in a few cases negative feelings. This suggests that feeling ambivalent or negative about one's adoption might be one factor that motivates some people to search.
- However, as 53% of searchers evaluated their adoption as a positive experience, negative feelings clearly cannot be the only factor.
- Half of non-searchers said they had no curiosity about their origins or background, and consequently they did not feel a need to search for their birth relative. The other half of non-searchers did express some interest and curiosity but they worried that searching might seriously upset either their adoptive parents or themselves.



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- The decision to search turns out to be a complex interaction between a number of factors. A distinction can be made between those who search on the basis of dissatisfaction with their adoption experience, who appear to be looking for both a fuller sense of self and a relationship; and those who describe their adoption experience as very positive, whose interest in searching appears mainly to do with issues of self and identity and not the need to develop an alternative filial relationship with a birth parent.
  - Adopted people who search are looking for answers to questions about **identity**: (Who am I? Who do I look like? Who do I take after?); and **self-worth**: (Why was I given up? Was I rejected? Where do I belong?). They seek a sense of connectedness.
  - Contact and reunion experiences – whether achieved actively in the case of searchers, or passively in the case of non-searchers – proved extremely good at helping people answer questions of identity and self-worth. However, they did not necessarily imply the desire for a second or alternative set of family relationships.

## Implications for policy and practice

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- Recognition that adoption is a life-long experience and that people's need to access counselling and support services is not time-limited.
  - The need for improved advice, guidance and support during adolescence for adopted children and adopters when thinking about birth relatives is likely to be particularly strong.
  - The value of adoptive parents feeling comfortable talking with their children about their origins, background and history.
  - The value of information about the birth family, including photographs, being available to adopted people during their childhood.
  - The need for increased publicity for the Adoption Contact Register.
  - The need for expert and informed counselling and support throughout the search and reunion process.
  - The provision of intermediary services for birth relatives that is consistent across the country.
  - The need for an active debate about the provision and character of intermediary services provided for birth relatives.
  - The value of same-race, matched placements for minimising adopted children's sense of difference and enhancing their sense of self-identity.
  - The need of policy makers, placement workers and adopters to consider the identity and self-worth needs of children adopted inter-country by providing as much background information as possible about origins and history.
  - The value of the search and reunion process for many adopted people to help them complete their story, and improve their sense of identity, self-worth and sense of connectedness.
  - The need to recognise that issues of identity, worth and connectedness raised by adopted adults are likely to be raised by adults born as a result of donated gametes and embryos.
  - The need for parents of children born as a result of donor assisted conceptions to have access to counselling, information and advice to help support them tell their children and discuss with them their origins, background and genetic make-up.

The Children's Society is one of the country's leading children's charities working with approximately 40,000 children and young people in around 100 projects throughout England and Wales. The work includes help for child runaways, work with children in some of the country's most deprived and isolated communities, and projects working in prison with young teenagers on remand and in schools with young people at risk of exclusion. As well as our direct work with these young people, we aim to influence practitioners and decision-makers to improve the systems that have such an impact on children's lives.

In the past the Society was one of the largest adoption agencies in the country. Though today adoption and fostering is a very small part of our work, we take our role in providing post adoption counselling, information, advice and intermediary services for those who were adopted through us very seriously. The Children's Society's Post Adoption and Care Project is at the forefront of developing this field of work and pressing for greater understanding and rights for those whose lives have been touched by adoption.

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