

Searching for Birth Relatives

Methods for searching for birth relatives or an adopted child have changed dramatically in recent years. Previously, many adoptions were closed, meaning no contact occurred between the birth and adoptive families, and no identifying information was made available to the adoptive family or the person who was adopted. A social shift in the 1980s and 1990s toward open adoptions led to various levels of connection between the adoption triad (adoptee, birth parents, and adoptive parents), as well as extended family members and other important connections—sometimes called the adoption constellation. Today, adoption exists along a continuum from shared information to regular contact between the child and the birth parents or other family members.

Social networking can be a useful tool for anyone on the adoption continuum to identify, search for, or reunite with birth relatives. Youth who were adopted are also using social networking sites to find their birth parents or relatives and to establish relationships with birth families.

This factsheet provides an overview of the process of searching for birth relatives, including activities common to birth relative searches, information access, and resources for conducting a search and/or reunion, if desired. This information may be useful whether you are an adult searching for your birth parents, siblings, or other birth relatives; a birth parent searching for a child who was placed for adoption; or an adoptive parent searching for your child's birth family.

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The Decision to Search

Questions about personal identity may drive people to search for birth relatives. Searching also may help to satisfy curiosity about birth families and genetic and medical histories. Common reasons why people search for birth relatives include the following:

- **General family information.** Those who decide to search may want to know the names of their birth relatives and where they live. They may also want to know whether they have birth siblings and what they are like.
- **Family traits and personalities.** Many people who were adopted and birth parents want to know how their birth relatives look and act and whether they share similar traits.
- **Medical history information.** Genetic information can be crucial for safeguarding one's health and the health of biological children.¹
- **Reason for the adoption.** People who have been adopted often feel a need to know why they were placed for adoption, 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.
- **Connections for your 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. Adoptive parents may also contact birth relatives to help their children with specific issues of grief and loss.
- **Birth parent reassurance.** Birth parents may search for their children out of concern over whether they are safe and well cared for.

Conducting a Search

No one is fully prepared for what they may find when beginning the search for a birth relative. Some may have more awareness than others about the person for whom they are searching and the relative's feelings about a

¹ 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 at <https://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory>.

possible reunion. You may use a variety of ways to make possible connections, including investigating public documents, hiring professionals, conducting Internet searches, and using social media.

Activities common to birth relative searches include:

- Preparing emotionally
- Assembling information and documents
- Researching relevant State laws
- Filing court petitions
- Registering with reunion registries

Preparing emotionally. Adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation for both people who were adopted and birth relatives before searching for birth family members. Preparing may include reading about search and reunion experiences and talking with others who are going through or have experienced the search process. Support groups for all members of the adoption triad can help by providing emotional support and sharing practical information.

For more information about emotional preparation and to hear about experiences of others who have searched for birth relatives, including information about searching internationally and preparing for a reunion, watch "Search and Reunion in Domestic and International Adoption," a webinar produced by the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.), at <https://youtu.be/cwmuY6-yjP0>.

Access State-specific Birth Family and Adoptee Search Support Groups using Child Welfare Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>.

Seeking and accepting emotional support from family and friends also can be helpful. If you are adopted, you may be reluctant to share your decision to search for fear of hurting your parents' feelings. If you're an adoptive parent, you might be reassured to know that the decision

to search is generally not about you or your family but about your child's need to understand and know where she came from. Open communication from both sides about goals is important.

Teens who were adopted and are searching for birth relatives may need emotional support from their adoptive parents through active involvement in the search, help with setting realistic expectations about birth families, and preparing for the range of possibilities they may encounter, including reactions of birth family members.

If you would like support beyond family and friends, such as help from a professional, see Information Gateway's *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>, and access the C.A.S.E. Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals at <http://adoptionssupport.org/member-types/adoption-competent-professionals/>.

Assembling information and documents. Gathering known and easily obtainable information may involve speaking with adoptive parents to find information on the adoption agency they used or talking to an attorney or facilitator involved in the adoption. Compiling information also means pulling together readily available documents, such as the amended birth certificate, hospital records, and other identifying and nonidentifying information.

An amended birth certificate, which is issued after an adoption is finalized, lists the names of the adoptive parents as if the child had been born to them. Most people who were adopted will not have their original birth certificate but will have an amended birth certificate. About half of all States allow adults to have access to their original birth certificates, which provide the names of their birth parent(s). In other States, an original birth certificate may be obtained through a court petition. More information about adoption records is available in the Researching Relevant State Laws section of this publication.

Many online databases and websites are available to help you locate important documents. Some of these resources are free of charge, and some are not. For more on gathering information and documents, see Information Gateway's Obtaining Birth and/or Adoption Records webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/search/records>.

Filing a court petition. If you were adopted, you may petition the court to open sealed adoption records. Whether this is successful may depend on the State, the judge, the reason given for the request, and other factors. Petitioning the court does not require an attorney's services, although attorneys may be helpful. Depending on State laws, the judge may agree to release only nonidentifying information (which should be available by asking any agency), agree to release a summary of information, or 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 they want to release information or be reunited.

Researching relevant State laws. Laws related to adoption and access to adoption records often vary by State. It's important to be informed about your State's adoption laws. Below are resources from Information Gateway to help you find State-specific information.

- *Access to Adoption Records* outlines State laws related to accessing information from adoption records by adoptive parents and adult adoptees: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/infoaccessap>
- *Providing Adoptive Parents With Information About Adoptees and Their Birth Families* outlines State laws pertaining to information that adoptive parents are provided about the background of the child they plan to adopt: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/collection>
- The State Statutes Search database provides State-specific information about a range of adoption-related topics, including consent to adoption, the rights of unmarried fathers, and more: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state>

For a general overview of the court system, including definitions of key court terms, see Information Gateway's *Understanding Child Welfare and the Courts* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/cwandcourts>.

Registering with reunion registries. Many States, as well as private organizations, offer reunion registries for people who were adopted and birth parents. "Passive" registries (also known as mutual consent registries) do not initiate a search or actively search for the other party. Both the person who was adopted and the birth relative must register independently on the same passive registry for a match to be made, indicating they are searching for each other. When both parties register on the same passive registry, registry officials share their information and help to arrange contact. "Active" registries, managed by private search and support groups, actively search for the birth relative for a fee.

- To search for State Reunion Registries/Confidential Intermediary Services, see Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at <https://childwelfare.gov/nfcad>.
- The largest passive registry is the International Soundex Reunion Registry at <http://www.isrr.org>. This free service is open to adoptee adults over 18 years of age, birth parents, and adoptive parents of children under 18 years of age.
- Responsible Father Registries, also called Putative Father Registries, are passive registries that exist in as many as 32 States. For more information on Responsible Father Registries, see <http://www.adoptionattorneys.org/aaa/birth-parents/putative-father-registry>. For a list of State Putative Father Registries, including addresses and contact information, see <https://www.courts.state.nh.us/probate/registrylist.pdf>.

Additional resources to aid in the search process are provided on Information Gateway's Searching for Birth Relatives webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/search/searching>.

Hiring a Professional Searcher

Professional searchers include certified independent search consultants, licensed private investigators who may or may not have adoption experience, nonprofit organizations that train in adoption searching, and experts in a field who may or may not have a certification (e.g., confidential intermediaries). If you choose to hire a professional searcher, you should research the reputation of the searcher or company before obtaining their services.

Support groups and online forums can be a ready source of information about professional searchers. Reputable professional searchers will always respect your pacing and boundaries. These professionals will not move beyond search into reunion unless you request this step.

For help finding a professional searcher, click on Birth Family and Adoptee Search Support Groups in Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>.

"Search Angels" (<https://www.searchangels.org>), a service available in all States, consists of individuals who have experience conducting searches for birth relatives and will conduct adoption searches free of charge. Search angels are not private detectives or paid professional searchers. They can also be found on adoption search blogs, social networking sites, search support groups, and other online forums.

International Searching

The child-placing agency may be the best beginning point for an international search. The U.S. agency that initiated your adoption may 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 your adoption. It also may offer medical history, biographical information on parents, and circumstances of the adoption. Some agencies provide international search services in partnership with overseas child-placing agencies. After communicating with the agency, cultivating a relationship with a contact in the birth country is often the next step. Building relationships can take time but can be the best link to finding crucial pieces of information for a successful search.

Detailed information about intercountry adoption, including the name and contact details of specific countries' adoption authorities, is provided on the U.S. State Department's webpage on intercountry adoption at <http://adoption.state.gov>.

The following resources provide useful services for international searchers:

- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services may provide copies of immigration records if you submit a Freedom of Information Act request (<https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/freedom-information-and-privacy-act-foia/uscis-freedom-information-act-and-privacy-act>).
- International Social Service offers a range of social work services, including help if you were adopted and wish to find your birth family abroad (<http://www.iss-usa.org>).
- If you wish to visit your birth country and experience your birth culture, the National Foster Care & Adoption Directory lists groups that offer homeland tours (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>).

Social Media and Searching

The wide use of social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MyLife, Classmates.com, and Instagram as well as commercial genealogy and DNA testing sites may help you find information about birth relatives. This section addresses the benefits and considerations of using social media when searching.²

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. Using social media for search and reunion is beneficial in a variety of ways:

- **Ease and efficiency.** It is possible to find birth relatives quickly. Sometimes searching social networking sites can lead to a successful connection when other methods have failed. Because many platforms allow access to another person's network of connections, social media also makes it possible, depending on privacy settings, to connect with extended birth relatives.
- **Social gatherings.** Certain social networks allow for the creation of events and sending invitations for scheduling reunions or meetups with family members.
- **Anonymous approach.** Some people prefer the distance that searching online provides. It can feel less personal than a phone call or face-to-face visit. Using social media, you can often search anonymously and learn about your birth family while maintaining your privacy.
- **Online community.** Social media and online forums provide opportunities to engage with other searchers to learn more, find support for a search, ask questions, and discuss with others your interest in searching.
- **Self-empowerment.** The ease and efficiency of using the Internet and social media allow you to be proactive

² 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 (2013). 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.

and conduct the search at your own pace, which can create a feeling of self-empowerment.

Considerations for Using Social Media for Searching

Although social media sites provide tools to search for birth relatives, it is important to consider the implications and possible risks of using these tools:

- **Preparing for contact.** Because search and contact with birth relatives can take place quickly, you may lose opportunities for pacing, self-reflection, conversations with friends and family, or thinking through the consequences of reconnecting with relatives. Plan for gradual communication with birth relatives to allow both parties time to develop a relationship and prepare for contact, if desired.
- **Making contact.** Reaching out through social media can lead to ongoing communication or in-person meetings with birth relatives, but contact can also be complicated or distressing. Family members may not want to be found, and contact does not always lead to immediate acceptance, love, or a relationship.
- **Maintaining privacy.** Social media sites offer a variety of privacy settings, but you can't assume that anything posted on social media is private. Frequently changing default privacy settings make maintaining privacy increasingly difficult. These default settings could allow any member of the public to view some or all information from your account. Also, once posted, information can be forwarded or shared with others.
- **Staying safe online.** As with any online activity, keep safety in mind. People are not always honest on the Internet. Several resources for learning about staying safe online include:
 - Facebook Security Best Practices: For more information on protecting your information on Facebook and reporting safety concerns (<https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/best-practices/security>)
 - Online OnGuard: For tips from the Federal Trade Commission on keeping your devices and information safe (<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/features/feature-0038-onguardonline>)

- Staying Safe on Social Networking Sites: For tips from the United States Computer Emergency Readiness Team on protecting yourself online (<https://www.us-cert.gov/ncas/tips/ST06-003>)
- **Posting pictures.** Before posting photos on the Internet, educate yourself about location tagging. Some photos taken with smartphones may be embedded with a tag that can provide GPS information, revealing your location. (Learn how to manage location services at <http://download.cnet.com/blog/download-blog/location-services-101/>)

Reunion Issues

Not all searches will end in a reunion between the searcher and the birth relative. Below are some considerations to keep in mind when attempting a reunion.

Difference between search and reunion. People often assume that birth family searches end in a reunion. In fact, ambivalence about a possible reunion has sometimes deterred people from searching. All searches may not be successful, and birth relatives or those who were adopted may not always be interested in connecting. Everyone has a right to their own boundaries and to decline if they do not want to have a relationship or even a reunion. Many adoption professionals believe it is a basic human right to search and learn about oneself. The reunion, however, requires mutual consent from both parties.

Emotional preparation. If you are adopted, you may have concerns and complex feelings related to meeting your birth parent(s) or other birth relatives for the first time. You may fear being rejected, feel anger toward your birth parents, resent other siblings, worry about your adoptive parents' reaction, and/or experience confusion about painful feelings from the past. Reunion can be emotional for birth parents as well, potentially tapping into strong feelings of separation, guilt, and loss, in addition to confronting issues that may have been long-buried or kept secret from spouses or other family members. Adoptive parents also may have reservations about their child reuniting with his or her birth parents. Preparation will help you think through your expectations

and prepare for a range of potential outcomes specific to your situation.

Communication. For a successful reunion to occur, both parties should set and respect boundaries and approach the situation with empathy for the other person(s) involved. You may feel apprehensive about communicating with your birth family member or biological child for the first time, which can raise issues if the two of you have different expectations for the exchange of information. It is important to manage expectations and respect boundaries regarding what information the other person does or does not want to hear or share.

Conclusion

Increased openness in adoption and the prevalence of social media make it easier than ever to locate family members. This ease comes with new considerations for how to protect your privacy and the privacy of your birth relatives, and how to prepare for contact or a possible reunion. Still, each search is guided by a unique set of circumstances. For those who are interested in making contact with a birth relative, the reunion experience may turn out differently than expected. Many people who were adopted and birth parents have conducted successful searches and built meaningful relationships with their new-found relatives.

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