

THE ROLE OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS IN BIRTH SEARCH

Posted on June 12, 2019 by Sunday Silver, MA, Director of Post Adoption Svcs-Admin

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Through the years, I have received a number of calls from adoptive parents asking for advice on how to handle conversations with their child about their birth parents. They ask if they can search on behalf of their child; how they can support their child's desire to reconnect with their birth family; will this process negatively affect their child or their relationship.

But before I discuss birth search and how to support your child, I first want to discuss one key step that should occur long before your child can ever begin a search: sharing their background information.

Even when their child is near adulthood, I often hear from adoptive parent that they still have not shared all of their child's background information with their child. They either didn't know how, they say, or were afraid their child couldn't handle the information. And it's true: adopted children often have a past that includes difficult and sensitive information. But waiting until your child is "old enough to handle the information" is rarely a good idea. By waiting, you run the risk of damaging your relationship with your child and betraying their trust.

If you wait too long, you should prepare for them to say, "You had this information. Why did you not share it sooner?"

Begin telling them their story early on. Some of the information that may be appropriate for an 8-year-old may not be appropriate for a 3-year-old, of course. But as they get older, and can understand more, you can begin to share more specific details. If it is difficult information, involving such highly sensitive issues as rape or a history of mental illness in your child's birth family, let them know that some of their information may be difficult and let them guide you as to how much detail they want you to share.

Always be open and honest about your child's history. There should be no secrets or withholding of information. Don't wait until they are older and you feel they are ready to hear the information. It is their

information and every Adoptee should know their history early on. Also, keep in mind that when your son or daughter turns 18, they will have full legal access to their file and background information. It is far better for them to hear a painful history from their parents than from a social worker they barely know. (See additional resources on this topic below.)

When your child comes of age and is ready to start a birth search, it will also be much less anxiety-inducing if they already know their background — and you will be in a much better position to support them.

The Complexity of Birth Search

To initiate a birth search, you will need to find out the laws in your state. Every state has their own search and reunion laws that dictate who can search and when a search can be initiated. Agencies are also restricted by each state's laws as to what services they can provide. In most states, Adoptees can only initiate a search once they turn 18 and only Adoptees are allowed to search. A few states will, however, allow adoptive parents of a minor to search. This is also the case in the Adoptee's birth country. Not all countries will allow adoptive parents to search.

Aside from the legal issues that dictate when an Adoptee can search, you should also prepare for the emotional complexities of birth search and reunion. This process doesn't just affect the Adoptee, but it can affect his or her adoptive parents as well — regardless of the age of the Adoptee at the time they choose to search.

For adoptive parent of minors, you will be more involved in the search. For adult Adoptees, the adoptive parents may or may not be involved — this will depend on the Adoptee and how involved they want you to be. It is not uncommon for us to work with adult Adoptees whose adoptive parents are not at all involved or may not even be aware that their son or daughter is searching. This can be for several reasons, but the most common ones we hear are that the Adoptee is either estranged from his or her adoptive parents or they don't want to hurt their adoptive parents — and it's easier on the Adoptee not to have them involved.

Things to Keep in Mind

Regardless of whether you are directly involved or not, there are a few things you should keep in mind if your child initiates a birth family search:

- Before you can support your child in their decision to search, you must ask yourself how you feel about it. An open and honest relationship is vital to creating a trusting relationship between you and your child. We cannot support our children, whether minors or adults, unless we ask ourselves how we feel about their actions and choices. Ask yourself, 'How does it affect me? Is my response because I want what is best for them, or am I responding out of fear and my own insecurities?' Until you deal with your own issues, you cannot be present for your child when they need you. Adoptees of any age can also sense when you are not 100% in support of their decision to search. So, if you want to be a part of the process, you must be honest with yourself as to how you feel about it. Do the work you need to do so you can be present and support your child when they need you the most.

Through the years, I have talked with several adoptive parents that start off supporting their child in their search — even encouraging them to search. However, when the search is positive, they are surprised that they feel uncertainty and concern. They often ask, "How can I be feeling these negative feelings, when I am the one who encouraged him to search?" This is not uncommon — especially when the search is positive and your child begins a relationship with their birth parents. It is normal to feel uncomfortable and to worry about how this will affect your relationship with your child.

Talk to your spouse and/or a trusted friend. If this does not help, consider talking with an adoption-competent therapist. Don't push these feelings aside. They are real and need your attention. While tending to your feelings, however, be sure not to impose these feelings on your child. It is not their job to take care of you and reassure you. You need to find a way to reassure yourself and trust your relationship with your child. It's okay to feel what you are feeling; it's not okay to pass on those feelings to your child.

- Be careful not to insert yourself into the process. Your son or daughter may not want you to be involved for one reason or another. Regardless of the reason, it will be important for you to support your child and not push your way in. All you can do is let them know you support their decision to search and are there for them should they need you.

- In a perfect world, adoptive parents would always be involved in a search. If a reunion occurs, then the birth parents may become a part of your child's life — and, therefore, a part of yours. This can only happen if you have cultivated a trusting relationship with your child so they feel comfortable enough to have you be a part of the process. Here, again, the importance of being open and honest about your child's background becomes paramount; a trusting relationship with your child truly hinges on whether you have shared all you know about their background before they were adopted. With that said, everyone is different in how they handle and choose to share their emotions. Even though you have a great relationship, your child may decide they are not ready to share this process with you. Give them space and let them guide how involved they want you to be.

While the above applies to all adoptive parents — whether your child is an adult or a minor — if you do live in a state where you can initiate a search for your minor child, there are a few additional things to keep in mind:

- Most important: **Do not** search without your child knowing about it. It is normal to want to protect your child, but going through this process without your child knowing about it will hurt them more than whatever the outcome of the search may bring. This is their information, not yours. By doing this behind their back, you can lose your child's trust. We have heard from many Adoptees through the years and they have all said the same thing; this is their decision, not their adoptive parents'. You can grow more as a family by going through this process together, but the Adoptee needs to guide this process. You need to listen and be open to whatever your child is comfortable with.
- Don't assume that just because your child brings up their birth parents, they are wanting or ready to search. I can't tell you how many adoptive parents I talk to who start the conversation saying "my child wants to search," but at the end of the conversation, it becomes apparent that the Adoptee was just asking questions or just curious and not actually ready to search. It's important to hear what your child is saying. Are they just asking questions? Did they clearly express a desire to search for their birth parents? As parents, we have a strong need to "fix it" for our kids so they don't feel any pain. We don't like it when we don't have all the answers to their questions about their history. You will not — and may never — have all the answers to their questions about their birth parents. As an adoptive parent, you need to come to terms with this so you can help your child understand and accept that the answers may not be there.
- Having realistic expectations is vital for both you and your child. It is important for you and your child to think about why you are searching. Why now? What are you wanting to get out of this? If you locate your child's birth mother and she wants contact, how will you handle this? How will you nurture the relationship? Will you be open to ongoing communication between your child and his or her birth family? What kind of relationship do you want to have with the birth family? If the search does not result in contact or answers to questions, how will you handle that? What if you don't get all the questions answered, or what if the answers are different than the information you had initially?
- Think about motivation. If you or your child want to search because you both think that this will fix whatever issues your child is facing, you and your child need to think about whether you are truly ready. Searching will not fix everything. It will more than likely create new questions and intense feelings. While a successful search will answer some of their questions and give them a connection to their biological family, it will not make all their problems go away. This can be an emotional roller coaster. It can be both positive and negative, depending upon the situation. It is not black and white.

I do believe that there are advantages to adoptive parents being more a part of the process than just being on the sidelines of a birth family search. For adoptive parents of minors, being a part of the process is easier since they need your help to initiate the search. You will have the opportunity to also develop a relationship with your child's birth parents if the search is successful. However, for adoptive parents of an adult Adoptee, it can be more complicated.

Searching for birth parents can give your child the connection they are missing. It can be life altering. It can be complex and filled with different emotions for you and your child. And whether your child is a minor or an adult, you do have a place in this process. But the degree to which you are involved depends on the circumstances and, most importantly, is up to your child.

Resources — Talking about Adoption with Your Child

Not in Front of the Children: How to Talk to Your Child About Tough Family Matters,

by Lawrence Balter and Peggy Jo Donohue

Talking to Your Child About Adoption – a Heart of the Matter online course

Can We Talk? When Kids Start Asking About Adoption. Adoption Learning Partners webinar.

Tackling Tough Adoption Talks. Adoption Learning Partners webinar.

Talking with Young Children About Adoption, by Mary Watkins & Susan Fisher

Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child: Making Sense of the Past, by Betsy Keefer and Jayne E. Schooler

Adoptive Families magazine has several articles on this topic. Contact Sunday Silver at sundays@holtinternational.org for the code to receive a discount on the subscription.

Resources for Adoptive Parents on Birth Family Search

Books and Websites

Supporting your Adopted Child's Search article

Searching for a Past: Why Adopted Children Seek Their Roots and How Parents Can Respond. (Chapter 13 in *The Whole Life Adoption Book: Realistic Advice for Building a Healthy Adoptive Family.*) Schooler, Jayne E. Atwood, Thomas.

Reasons why adopted children search for their biological parents are discussed. Possible outcomes as a result of the search are explored, and strategies that parents can use to respond to the need to search are discussed.

Articles from real life people about their experiences.

Articles on Birth Search

Synchronicity: The Sparks of Reunion, by LaVonne Stiffler

Two Stories of Reunion A Review by Susan Ito

Once They Hear My Name; Korean Adoptees and Their Journey, by Marilyn Lammert, Ellen Lee and Mary Anne Hess. Reviewed by Lynne Connor

What Every Adoptive Parent Should Know About Search and Reunion, by Michael P Grand, PHD and Monica Bryne

What Every Adoptive Parent Should Know About Search and Reunion — Do's and Don'ts, by Michael Grand, PhD, C. Psych

Adoptive Parents and Adoption Reunions