

What every adoptive parent should know about search and reunion

Michael P. Grand, PhD, C.Psych and Monica Bryne

Department of Psychology, University of Guelph
and
Parent Finders, National Capital Region Ottawa

For more than 30 years, the two of us have helped to facilitate a myriad of reunions and reconnections between adoptees and their birth families. During this time, we have learned many things that adoptive parents must consider when their adult child begins the journey to discover the first chapter of life that took the adoptee from one family and lead to the formation of a second family. We offer these lessons in the spirit of fostering closer ties between adoptees, and their birth and adoptive families.

For most adoptees, search is experienced as an expansion of a sense of self and not as a rejection of the adoptive family.

The first rule of search and reunion is that search is not about dissatisfaction with the adoptive family. The need to know about oneself and one's roots is primal. In order to have a niche in the world we need to know, first of all, who we are. And if we are 'shadowed' by an unknown background, by an unseen set of truths that we know little if anything about, then we may not develop to our fullest potential. If the adoptive family understands the importance of search for an adoptee's sense of self, they will not fall victim to the myth that the adoptee is substituting one family for another. In most cases, adoptees draw closer to the family that raised them and with whom they have had many years of shared experience and love

Adoptive parents should support but not direct a search.

There is always a huge temptation for adoptive parents to move from showing support to taking control of a search. Searching can be exciting and will certainly bring out the detective in all of us, but the fact remains, this is the adoptee's search and must follow the adoptee's pace. Adoptive parents may assist by providing information such as the Adoption Order, the social history of the birth family, papers from the agency, and communications from social workers, lawyers and doctors involved in the placement. Adult adoptees are able to obtain identifying information from ministry/public agencies. In addition to gathering facts, adoptive parents are encouraged to support the adoptee through the emotional highs and lows of this process. We also strongly recommend the use of search and reunion support groups whose leaders are well versed in the dynamics of this process. Their skills and experience are invaluable.

Adoptive parents withholding information from an adoptee is not a sign of love and protection. It is a sign of disrespect, indicating the adoptive parents' lack of trust

that the adoptee can make adult decisions. Openness is the foundation of a secure and loving relationship.

There are too many examples of adoptees who learn late in life that they were adopted. Perhaps their parents withheld the truth out of kindness, perhaps out of fear of rejection, perhaps out of fear of public scrutiny. Whatever the reason, this is a very difficult thing for an adult adoptee to discover and to come to terms with. Sometimes they find out at the death of their parents and are completely devastated believing that their whole life has been a lie. All their medical history is incorrect, all their family history has been fabricated. They truly feel as though the rug has been pulled out from under them. In the end, openness trumps secrecy every time, no matter what the adoption story.

Speaking ill of the birth family does not discourage adoptees from searching. In fact, the more an adoptive parent disparages the character or actions of the birth parent, the more adoptees desire to make contact with birth parents.

Some adoptive parents are prone to speak of birth family in negative tones in an attempt to bring the adoptee closer to the adoptive family. However, the message heard by adoptees is "the source of your DNA is bad and thus, so are you." If adoptive parents wish to keep their children close, respectful conversation about origins is a necessity.

In search and reunion, "no" often means "not yet" or "I can't tell you."

The dynamics of search and reunion are very complex. Sometimes adoptees publically reject a search for fear of hurting their parents. For some, this means searching out of the view of the adoptive parents. For others, it means delaying the search, even though the adoptee has a pressing need to discover more about origins. In neither case does this serve the best interests of either the adoptee or adoptive parents. To delay search or to engage in a clandestine search denies the adoptee the opportunity to receive the emotional support from adoptive parents that will help to mediate the stress of coming to terms with one's history. Search is a normal developmental part of the process of adoption. Adoptive parents abrogate their responsibilities as parents if they are not available to assist their adult adopted children in this task.

Immediately following reunion, adoptees may become emotionally over-involved with the birth family, to the exclusion of the adoptive family. They may quickly retreat to the adoptive family for support and reassurance. They may have major changes in mood, particularly depression or anger which may be directed to anyone in the inner rings of the constellation. In response to these possibilities, adoptive parents may play many important roles.

This is where the adoptive family can really be helpful and supportive, not by being directive or analytical, but by being comforting and present. Sometimes the adoptee just needs time to assimilate new information or deal with a birth family far different than the one they fantasized about. There can be huge feelings of being let down. Alternatively,

they may wish to spend every waking moment with the new found relatives. If adoptive parents recognize these responses as an attempt to normalize what is so unique, and can be emotionally available for their children, they will do much to cement their relationship together.

If adoptees desire, adoptive parents may join adoptees in reconnecting with the birth family. Successful integration of the two families requires stepping carefully through several minefields.

Adoptive and birth families may differ in social class, ethnic and life experiences, resulting in awkwardness in reading social cues. In some cases, adoptive and birth mothers make a quick and strong connection, leaving the adoptee to the side as the two mothers pursue their relationship. In the end, successful integration of the two families requires that each family recognize that search and reunion is about the adoptee feeling connected to the two families. Cognizance of this will help lead all to find a way to live together at an agreed upon pace.

All parties to the adoption must face and respond to loss across time. For birth parents, there is loss of the child they did not get to raise. For adoptive parents, there is the loss of the child that they never had. For adoptees, there is the loss of the self they might have been if circumstances had been different. Without search and reunion, adoptees also lose a full historical, medical and genetic history that links them to their origins.

All participants in an adoption must face issues of loss which are accompanied by disenfranchised grief, the grief that is neither socially recognized nor whose amelioration is socially supported. For reunion and reconnection to work, there must be mutual recognition of such losses and attempts by all to support each other during the grieving process. At this pivotal point of transition in the two families, competition over who has experienced the greatest loss will not serve anyone well. However, expressions of empathy will go a long way to achieving improved relationships.

A vast majority of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents, rate search and reconnection as successful.

One of the most common questions asked of search and reunion specialists is "How many reunions are successful?" And the answer is "All of them". That is, they are all successful because the initial effort was to find and know the missing family of origin. Whether the reunion develops into a warm, positive relationship that grows over time is another question and depends on many things. It depends on the willingness of the participants to work at it. It depends on their patience, their willingness to accept differences and change and on their willingness to expand their horizons. How could an adoptive parent, with the best interests of their child at heart, not wish for such potential riches?