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# The Road to Finding Your Roots

Jenna Bowman

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The Road to Finding Your Roots

By

Jenna Bowman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
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University Honors Program  
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St. Petersburg, Florida

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Honors Thesis

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This is to certify that the Honors Thesis of

**Jenna P. Bowman**

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
on August 1, 2003  
as satisfying the thesis requirement  
of the University Honors Program

Examining Committee:

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Thesis Director: Dr. Vikki Gaskin Butler  
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences

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Thesis Committee Member: Dr. Susan Allen  
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences

### Abstract

Finding birth parents can be an emotional time for everyone involved. This includes the birth parents, the adopted children, and the adopted parents as well. Much research has been conducted on how children and birth parents find each other. But what about the psychological effects finding birth parents has on the minds and well being of those involved? Is the experience positive or negative? Could there be a negative effect on the well-being of the family? What happens if the birth family accepts the child and continues to keep in touch? In the following pages, I will attempt to answer these questions along with others in order to complete a summary of possible paths taken by an adopted child in the process of finding his or her birth parents. As I research this process, I will also be attempting to find my birth parents, documenting my own thoughts and feelings regarding my adoption.

## The Road to Finding Your Roots

### **The Background**

#### **Why I Want to Find my Birth Parents**

For several years, I have been extremely passive about finding my birth parents. Finding them was never really a high priority for me. I had a general medical history from them. I knew their ethnicities, and I had made a marvelous story in my head about how they had met and conceived me. I never needed the truth about my birth parents because I had already developed my own “truth” about them and was quite content.

As I began thinking more about the issue of finding my birth parents, I could not think of a good reason to find them. They gave me up; I was their mistake. My adoptive parents are the only parents I will ever need and ever consider my parents. They reared me to be the person I am today, and I can attribute all of my successes to them. As these thoughts continued in my mind, I remembered something my mother told me years ago: I have a brother from my birth mother!

This sparked my interest because I grew up as an only child. I have half sisters, but they are much older than I am and I never had a sibling with whom to identify. There has always just been me. As I remembered this fact, a little hope ran through me. Maybe if I can find my birth parents, I can meet my brother and have a sibling with whom I can identify because we are about the same age. He is five years older.

I think it would be great to meet the woman that gave birth to me. I would love to have a general idea of how I am will look as I grow older. I would love to know her personality and determine how much we are alike. I think that if I ever found her, I could solve some of the nature-versus-nurture debates within my own life.

This journey is not made without fear. What if my birth mother rejects me? What if she turns me away and says she does not want to meet me? What if my birth father is in jail as my adoptive mother says she thinks he may be? What if my birth brother does not know anything about me and I just seem to be an intrusion on his life? All these thoughts circle about in my head when I considered finding my birth family. But after much thought, I have come to the realization that if I can find my birth mother, I will be content. If I can reach out to her, just to let her know that I am doing well in life and have parents that truly care about me, I will be happy. I think it is a journey I want to take sooner in life, rather than waiting and possibly never finding my birth parents.

### **Who This Research Benefits**

This research and this story could benefit anyone involved in an adoption. It explains types of adoptions; feelings, emotions, and psychological effects associated with adoptions; and ways to begin the search process. It could encourage birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted children during their journey to reuniting with one another.

In the following pages, I often refer to the adopted child as “she”. The adopted child does not have to be female, but within this paper, the adopted child is often referred to in a female context.

## **The Adoption Process**

### **People Typically Involved in Adoptions**

Every year, thousands of babies in the United States are relinquished by their birth parents. Adoption occurs less often today than it did thirty years ago. Despite the decreasing number of adoptions, research is still being conducted regarding the effects of adoption on all parts of the adoption triad- the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the adopted child.

There are many types of adoptions available to individuals and couples seeking to become adoptive parents. These individuals can choose from open or closed adoption, domestic or international adoption, and agency or private adoption. Each choice allows people to become parents without giving birth to a child.

### **Types of Adoptions**

**Open adoption.** In open adoption, birth parents and adoptive parents are allowed to meet each other and remain in contact throughout the child's life. The birth parents are given a list of prospective parents, accompanied by detailed biographies about the parents wishing to adopt their child (Gray, 2009). This makes it possible for the birth parents to select the family with whom they feel most comfortable. Throughout the adoption process and throughout the child's life, both the adoptive parents, as well as the birth parents, participate in the child's life. However, the birth parents must relinquish all of their rights to the child, making the adoptive parents the legal parents. Sometimes open adoptions mean that, during the pregnancy, the

adoptive parents accompany the birth parents to doctor's visits; exchange their names, numbers and addresses; or even possibly move in together.

***Types of open adoption.*** Demick and Warner (1988) describe four types of open adoption: restricted open adoption, semi-open adoption, full open adoption, and continuing open adoption. In restricted open adoption the adoptive parents may not meet the birth parents but agree to periodically send pictures and updates regarding the child to the birth parents through the adoption agency. This allows the birth parents to keep updated on their child without actually seeing and bonding with the child. In semi-open adoption, both sets of parents meet, but no identifying information is exchanged. Full open adoption goes a step further than the semi-open adoption: the parents meet each other and exchange information about themselves. Continuing open adoption, the most open of the adoptions, allows the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the adopted child to keep in contact with each other throughout the child's life (Demick & Warner, 1988).

***Advantages of open adoption.*** Open adoption allows the child to know the birth parents from the beginning so that as she grows older and begins to have questions regarding her birth parents and reasons for her relinquishment, she is able to ask her biological parents (Gray, 2009). Another advantage is that it alleviates many of the fears of both the birth parents and the adoptive parents. Birth parents can have the first-hand experience of asking the prospective adoptive parents questions and raise any concerns they may have about the placement of their child. This, in turn, allows them to feel comfortable knowing their child is going to a good home (Siegel, 2012). Another positive aspect of an open adoption is that in the future, the birth parents do not have to worry about finding their child (Demick & Warner, 1988). They already know exactly where their child has gone and with whom the child resides.



In open adoption, the adoptive parents are able to talk to the birth parents about their medical histories, personalities, and any complications involved during the pregnancy (Siegel, 2012). This can reassure them about the future of the child. The adoptive parents will also be able to answer their children's questions about their ethnicity, where they came from, their nationality, and their birth parents' histories. Open adoption also allows parents to know whether the birth mother relinquished her child for adoption freely or if she was resistant to the whole idea (Siegel, 2012). This can give the adoptive parents some relief from the fear that the birth parents would fight to get their child back after the child has been adopted.

For the child, many positive outcomes are associated with open adoption. Being able to know one's birth parents allows the child to see them in a better light (Demick & Warner, 1988). The child does not feel abandoned because she is able to see that her birth parents are still keeping up with her and following her life. She also sees that her birth parents wanted her to have a better life and their choice to place her for adoption was not to get rid of her, but rather to make sure she had a great life (Demick & Warner, 1988).

***Disadvantages of open adoption.*** On the negative side, though, adoptive parents may worry about the birth parents interfering with the process of rearing their child (Gray, 2009). Adoptive parents may fear that the birth parents may overstep their boundaries when it comes to rearing the child. They may also feel that after the parents have relinquished rights to the child and the child has been adopted, they may fight to gain their child back (Gray, 2009). Biological parents' attempts to regain custody may happen after the child has been living with the adoptive parents for some time, begun to form attachments, and become acclimated to the adoptive parents' way of life. If after time has elapsed, the birth parents fight to get their child back, the child may be forced to move into an unfamiliar place with strangers - the birth parents - and the

process of attachment and bonding may be disrupted at a crucial point in the child's development (Howe, 2001).

Adoptive parents can feel pressured and anxious when they are around the birth parents. Some adoptive parents feel pressured to be the "perfect parent" (Siegel, 2012). They may believe they need to prove themselves to the birth parent, or even to the birth parents' family. Adoptive parents may also have problems setting boundaries between their family and the birth family (Siegel, 1993). After the child is placed into the adoptive parents' care, the adoptive parents must explain to the birth parents how often they can visit or call the child. Some adoptive parents worry about the emotional attachment that forms between the child and the birth parents.

Some arguments against open adoption are the same arguments favoring it. For instance, Gray (2009) reports that adoption reduces the possibility of an identity crisis because the children are able to ask questions of their birth parents. On the other hand, Siegel (2012) reports that open adoption will "exacerbate the uncertainty about his or her identity" (p. 16). Having both sets of parents around may have the child wondering who he or she is supposed to be. Another argument that is used both for and against open adoption is the issue of helping birth parents through the depression and grief of relinquishing their child. Gray (2009) states that open adoption will help birth parents better deal with the issues; while Siegel (1993) argues that open adoption will not help with the issues of grief and depression because it may interfere with the grieving process.

There may be other problems associated with open adoption, but these arguments are not empirically supported. Since infants cannot tell us how they feel and thus no empirical data has been collected, these thoughts and ideas "remain abstract and laden" (Siegel, 2012, p.16). Open adoption is a relatively new process. This means longitudinal studies on open adoption have yet

to be completed and the arguments, whether pro or con, cannot be backed up by research findings (Siegel, 1993).

Siegel (1993) surveyed adoptive parents who had chosen open adoption. She reports that while they had their lists of negatives about open adoption, none of the parents surveyed reported regretting their choice of open adoption. These parents described the open adoption process as “‘very comfortable,’ and ‘right’ and added such statements as ‘I love it, I really do’” (p. 20). According to this research, parents involved in open adoptions seem to accept the choice they made and are happy that their child’s life is the way it is in regards to their adoption.

**Closed Adoption.** Closed adoptions were once the norm, where the child is relinquished for adoption, but the original birth certificate and records regarding the adoption are inaccessible and kept closed by the court. Only a court approval can reopen the records. Both sets of parents may know of each other during the initial stage of the adoption process, but once the adoption papers have been signed and the child has been handed over to the adoptive parents, birth parents and adoptive parents do not stay in touch. Recently, though, the occurrence of closed adoptions has decreased.

***Advantages of closed adoption.*** There are some positives for those involved in the closed adoption process. For the birth parents, the fact that closed adoptions are private is appealing. “Some pregnancies are unwanted or accidental” (Gray, 2009, p. 28). Some birth parents want to keep their pregnancy and adoption quiet so they can alleviate unwanted stress from outside sources. Also, this kind of adoption allows for birth parents to have closure and be able to move on with their lives. Proponents for closed adoption believe that a closed adoption aids in the grieving process. They believe that in open adoptions, birth parents tend to hold onto their

children, or to the idea of their children, which lengthens their process of adjusting to the adoption (Gray, 2009).

Adoptive parents may favor this strategy most, as they would not have to worry about sharing their child with the birth parents. They have the child completely to themselves, which may alleviate their need to be the “perfect parent”, as discussed earlier. This situation also eliminates a third party being involved in the child’s life. It allows the adoptive parents to remove the possibility of the interaction between child and birth parents, which may be especially helpful if the birth parents are mentally or emotionally unstable (Gray, 2009).

***Disadvantages of closed adoption.*** Some researchers who have written about closed adoptions tend to view a closed adoption as a negative experience. In these adoptions, adoptive parents worry more about the child’s medical history. Since records are sealed by the court, they are not able to review problems within the birth family in regards to their mental or physical health. Also, as years pass, the adoptive family may blame some of the bad behaviors of the child on “bad blood” (Demick & Warner, 1988, p. 230). A child hearing this, may begin to feel “insecure and inferior” (Demick & Warner, p. 230) and begin to blame the birth parents and her “bad blood” for the bad choices she makes.

The adopted child may experience a decrease in self esteem. She also may lack a solid identity role for herself. She may feel as if she does not know who she is because of the differences between her birth parents and her adoptive parents. The child must realize and understand that she was given birth to by one set of parents, yet raised by another. As the child ages, the occurrence of psychologist visits is two to five times more likely in children involved in closed adoptions, compared to children who were not adopted (Demick & Warner, 1988).

“Impulsive, provocative, aggressive, and antisocial behavior(s) toward others” (Demick & Warner, p. 231) were the referral concerns which necessitated psychological care.

**International adoption versus domestic adoption.** Domestic adoption, the more traditional type of adoption, is where parents adopt a child from within their country. Sometimes, however, a couple seeking a child will choose to adopt a child from another country.

International adoption is a service for couples who want to adopt a child from a country that is suffering economically, socially, or politically (Levy-Shiff, Zoran, & Schulman, 1997).

***Advantages of international adoption.*** There are reasons for international adoption. Some parents want children so desperately that they will examine all possibilities. Within the United States the ability to adopt a child domestically has recently decreased because of increased “medical technology, greater contraceptive use, the legality of abortion, and society's increased acceptance of single parent families” (Liu, 2012). When parents cannot adopt domestically, they will explore all the options, including traveling across the world in an effort to find a child.

The main argument that is made for international adoption is that in the end it means a saved life for a child (Liu, 2012). While some people say that adopting a child from parents who cannot raise them properly in a foreign country is beneficial, social services says that it may not be in the best interests of the child to be uprooted from all she knows and with which she has grown comfortable (Liu, 2012). Another argument in favor of international adoption is that children's rights deserve a special kind of protection. This is made evident in the United Nation's (UN) Declaration of the Rights of the Child. This was the UN's attempt to tell the world that every child deserves to grow up in a place where she can be supported financially, emotionally, mentally, psychologically, and religiously (Liu, 2012). Even so, children all over the world still

wander the streets unfed, unclothed and uncared for. This is why it is believed that international adoption is considered to be in the best interest of the child.

***Disadvantages of international adoption.*** There are problems, though, with international adoption. Not only does the child in international adoptions have to adapt to being adopted and placed within a new family, she also has to adapt to a new culture and parents whose ethnicity is different from her own. The child may not blend well with the new family because of differences in culture and ethnicity (Levy-Shiff, Zoran, & Shulman, 1997). She may lose her identity within her new culture and be subjected to racism from her peers. These issues can be more problematic when factoring in that most internationally adopted children are older and have already established identities that includes their culture and heritage when they are adopted. Some children, unfortunately, grow up in environments that have negative impacts on them, whether it be mentally, emotionally, or even physically. This, in turn, follows the children from their original birth parents in the original culture over to their adoptive parents in the new culture. The original, negative environment may leave scars the children, with the support of their new family, must learn to work their way through when adapting to the new culture.

Another problem with international adoption is that the high demand for children has encouraged black markets to begin finding and selling children (Liu, 1994). Where the people in the black market find these children is unknown to the adoptive parents, and because their motives are financial, the black market does not take into consideration whether moving the child is going to be in the child's best interest. People in developing countries worry that at first the people within the United States want their labor, and now US citizens want their children as well (Liu, 2012). Opponents of international adoption counter the pro-international adoption idea

of saving children by saying that the purpose of adoption should not be an effort to save a child, but rather to gain a wanted child in one's home (Liu, 2012).

**Agency adoption.** Many adoptions are handled by agencies. These agencies, whether public or private, are child welfare agencies in which a trained group of people do research on the needs of a child and the prospective family to ensure that each child is taken care of throughout her life (Emery, 1993).

Advocates of agency adoption do not approve of independent adoptions. They believe that both the new parents and the child need to be counseled and prepared for the task ahead of them. Advocates believe that one single policy should provide guidelines to all adoptions and that this policy should be able to assist everyone throughout the adoption process, including interventions and counseling for everyone involved. These policies should remain the same for an infant, a young child, or even a child with special needs (Emery, 1993).

***Advantages of agency adoption.*** Agency adoptions deal with every part of the adoption triad: the adoptee, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents. They offer help to the family before, during, and after the adoption. Agency staff are trained to gather medical, social, and psychological history about the birth family. The staff gathers lists of parents wanting children and allows the birth mother to select a family for her child. This process ensures the birth mother knows her child is going home with someone she was able to choose. This also helps her understand that she is not limited to her original choice of adoptive parents. If she changes her mind prior to the placement of the child, she is able to go back and choose a new set of adoptive parents from the initial list given to her. Private adoptions may not allow the birth parents to change their minds (Emery, 1993).

Agencies offer many different services to each part of the triad. Birth parents tend to be young, so agencies will begin by counseling these people on all possible options, including adoption. Birth parents do not have to choose adoption in order to receive the services that the agency offers (Emery, 1993). At times the adoption agency may refer the birth parents elsewhere if they do not plan to adopt, but registering with the agency does not force the birth parent to relinquish their child (Emery, 1993). In counseling sessions, birth parents are advised of their legal rights and their responsibilities, and they receive support about whatever decision they make. Agency staff explain to the birth parents that if they do choose adoption, there are now new degrees of openness in regards to their adoption. Complete confidentiality is not guaranteed in any adoption (Emery, 1993). Because laws about privacy are constantly changing, confidentiality cannot be promised whether the adoption is done independently or through an agency.

In regard to the children being placed for adoption, the agency tries to find the best possible fit for them. Agency staff match a child with a family based on the child's needs. Agency staff also search for families who have the time and financial stability to support a child (Emery 1993). Agency staff and the birth parents need to agree that the best route is adoption. Once the staff and birth parents decide in favor of adoption, the staff will research the child's specific needs in order to give the adoptive parent a general overview of the child (Emery, 1993).

Adoptive parents are also considered within the agency. When finding a child for the adoptive parents, the agency counsels them on the child's needs. "Social, medical, family history and legal information" (Emery, 1993, p.142) are gathered on the child and given to the new parents in as much detail as possible. Agency professionals then explain the processes that occur



with the adoption before, during, and after placement. Independent adoptions often do not provide all of these services for all members of the triad.

***Disadvantages of agency adoption.*** Adoption agencies are strict about who they will allow to adopt a child. While this may eliminate unfit parents, it may also eliminate some parents who may be fit, but are excluded from the potential pool of adoptive parents due to minor issues. McDermott (1993) reports that some agencies will not allow parents who live outside of a certain geographical area to adopt a child. Others have clear age restrictions for adoptive parents. Adoptive parents must be at least 18 to 21 years of age or older, and no older than 35 to 40 years old. Often, the older limit is more of a problem than the younger limit. Another negative aspect about agency adoption is that a child may be placed into foster care while waiting to be adopted, or after leaving the birth parents and before going to live with the adoptive parents (McDermott, 1993). Some parents do not want their child involved in any type of foster care and would rather the child go directly into the adoptive parents' custody rather than an agency's custody.

**Independent adoption.** Independent adoption on the other hand, is handled by the birth parents. No agency, public or private, is involved. The birth parents, themselves, will find a family that wants to adopt their child. When they find the future family, they relinquish rights to the child and sign the child over to the new family without the help of an agency. Unlike an agency, where parental rights are first given to the agency and then to the new family, independent adoption cuts out the middle man so the birth parents assign parental rights directly to the adoptive parents (McDermott, 1993). Many times this involves the use of a lawyer. Some lawyers may specialize in adoption and can help prospective parents and parents looking to relinquish their child find each other.

As McDermott (1993) reports, independent adoptions are becoming more frequent than agency adoptions within the United States today. More birth parents choose the independent route rather than the agency route. Reasons for this choice include: 1) the belief that agencies are profit-oriented (private agency), 2) agencies are run by state officials rather than by elected officials (public agency), 3) birth parents want to become more active in the search for and selection of the adoptive parents, and 4) the birth parents want to avoid foster care for their children and they want a direct transfer from birth parent to adoptive parent.

*Advantages of independent adoption.* Those are not the only reasons for parents choosing independent adoption. Some parents want to avoid the long waiting periods. With agency adoptions, there is often a waiting period where the agency must gather information about all parts of the adoption triad. Some birth parents want to give their child to a specific couple that does not meet the requirements, such as a geographic requirement, set out by an agency. “In fact, some agencies will not work with prospective adoptive parents who reside outside an arbitrarily designated geographical area” (McDermott, 1993, p. 147). If birth parents want to give their child to a family that lives outside of those restrictions, the adoption agency will not allow them to transfer their parental rights and the birth parents have to seek options outside agency adoption (McDermott, 1993).

Another reason for private adoption is the increased encouragement of openness within the relationship. Since the birth parents must seek out and choose a family on their own, they are able to meet the prospective family and do their own kind of interview to make sure they are comfortable with their choice (McDermott, 1993). In some states, independent adoption laws are enforced to make sure birth parents and adoptive parents have one or more meetings in person during which both sets of parents gather and share pertinent information regarding their

backgrounds and their dreams for the child (McDermott, 1993). This allows for a two-way sharing of information. As discussed earlier, openness in adoptions may allow for a smoother grieving process for the birth parents. It may also alleviate the adoptive parents' fears about the child being taken away as well as help them answer questions the child may eventually have about the birth parents (McDermott, 1993).

***Disadvantages of independent adoption.*** When a lawyer or attorney is involved in the process of independent adoptions, money can become an issue, especially for the adoptive parents. When a birth parent decides to keep the baby instead of relinquishing the child, the adoptive parents lose the money they paid to hire an attorney. This is not the only financial cost placed on the adoptive parents. When adoptive parents find the birth parents (or vice versa), many times the adoptive parents will pay for medical bills and other needs the birth parent has during the pregnancy. When a birth mother decides to keep the child, the adoptive parents may lose this money because many times the birth mother does not pay the family back (McDermott, 1993)..

Other disadvantages include the emotional scarring involved. Adoptive parents in these cases get to know the birth parents and may become emotionally involved in the entire process. If the birth mother decides to keep the child, it is as if the adoptive parents are losing a child. It leaves them suffering emotionally. Even if the mother has not given birth to her child, the adoptive family has already begun to become attached to the child. Some agency adoptions serve to eliminate this problem by placing the child into state foster care until the rights of the child have been irrevocably taken away from the birth parents (McDermott, 1993).

### **Psychological Effects of Adoption**

Silverstein and Kaplan (1986) identified seven main psychological challenges associated with adoption. These issues include loss, rejection, guilt/shame, grief, identity, intimacy, and control. Each of these issues can affect any part of the adoption triad, whether it is the birth parents, the adoptive parents, or the adoptee.

#### **The Birth Parents**

**Psychological issues.** One of the biggest challenges birth parents may face when relinquishing their child for adoption is that of dealing with a sense of loss. A child who was a part of them has been given to another family and is no longer theirs. According to Silverstein and Kaplan (1986), this problem often leads the birth parents to isolate themselves from society. They lose their relationships with family and friends because they spend time dwelling on what they have lost.

Birth parents have reportedly experienced grief for up to 10 years after the child is given up for adoption (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). Many times friends and family may try to

encourage the birth parents that the child is better off living with the other family. The grief may subside, but it may not truly disappear (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

Loss also contributes to issues of rejection and intimacy. Birth parents may deem themselves irresponsible for having a child for which they cannot properly provide. Also, as time goes on, adoptive parents may encourage rejection of the birth parents by telling the children that the birth parents have married and had other children (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). In this case, the adopted child may find that the birth parents do not welcome the reunion. Also, after the child has been adopted, the birth parents may abstain from having any intimate/sexual relationships (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). They may equate the loss of their child to the potential loss of an intimate relationship with someone else. The birth parent(s) may try to avoid intimate relationships so they do not have to worry about having to lose another child to adoption.

Another psychological concern experienced by the birth parents during the adoption process is guilt or shame (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). They realize the unplanned pregnancy may go against societal norms. Once they realize these implications, they have to explain their situation to those around them, whether it be friends, family, or coworkers (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b). They feel a sense of shame in admitting they had sexual relations which resulted in a child for whom they were unable to provide (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). Silverstein and Kaplan report these feelings can be subconscious. They are not in the forefront of the birth parents' minds, but deep inside, the guilt and shame overwhelms them (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b).

Many times, this feeling leads birth parents to try and keep the pregnancy, as well as the adoption process, a secret (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b). They would rather

not tell those around them their thoughts and feelings about the process. This, in turn, may encourage feelings of shame, because they deem the issue as unimportant to those around them and have no one to talk with about their thoughts and feelings about giving up the child to whom they will give birth (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b).

Another problem birth parents may have with relinquishing a child for adoption is that they may lose their sense of identity. When people ask them whether they have children, they may be unsure whether to answer yes or no (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). Yes, they have had a child. But they do not have any legal rights over the child, so perhaps the answer is no. “They state that they lack feelings of well-being, integration, or solidity associated with a fully developed identity” (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). As these feelings creep into the birth parents’ minds, the feeling of loss of control may arise. They cannot control what happens to their child after the adoption papers are signed. They may view themselves as victims of the situation. The birth parents may believe they were forced into giving their child up for adoption because they had no other choice (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). This may be less of an issue now since single parenting has become more acceptable.

**Combating the psychological issues.** The United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), suggests a couple of ways to help birth parents to ameliorate psychological challenges associated with the adoption process for birth parents. One idea that DHHS recommends is birth parents keep in mind is that recovery takes time (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b). There is no set time table to which they must adhere in order to find comfort again. DHHS encourages birth parents to seek counseling, as well as support, from other birth parents that chose to put their children up for adoption (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b). Sometimes support from friends and family is not enough, but with a good

counselor, birth parents may find it easier to work through their emotions associated with the adoption.

Another way to help birth parents cope with the loss of their child is to create traditions. After the child is born, many times an “entrustment ceremony” occurs (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b). In this ceremony, which usually occurs at the hospital, the birth parents are allowed to say goodbye to their child as they give the child to the adoptive parents. It aids the birth parents in the grieving process. After this, the birth parents are encouraged to start a tradition to honor the child they relinquished (Administration for Children and Families, 2004b). For instance, every year on the child’s birthday, they may write a letter to the child expressing their thoughts and feelings. Whether they choose to send the letter is up to both sets of parents.

### **The Adopted Child**

**Psychological issues.** Psychological issues for the adopted child does not tend to occur until adolescence. Adolescence is the time where children can comprehend their loss and their adoption may become an issue as they are separating their individuality from their adoptive parents.

The issue of loss affects the adopted child, too. The child may fear the loss of their birth family and lose the opportunity to grow within that family. According to Silverstein and Kaplan (1986), it “affects the adoptee on a very profound level” (p. 46). Many times, losses within the life of the adopted child are more intense in the life of a non adopted child. This process is largely unconscious. The adopted child may equate losses within her life to the loss of her birth parents, which may affect the child in a greater way (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig (1992) relate this loss to the loss involved in a divorce. Adoption, like divorce, is potentially reversible (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). A reunion can happen with the birth parents just as if a couple divorces and then remarries in the future. Both adoption and divorce consist of a voluntary decision (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). In adoption, the decision is made by the birth parents. In a divorce, the husband or wife make the decision to initiate the divorce. The loss in both cases is rarely recognized because very “few rituals or support systems exist to help the child get through the loss” (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

Adopted children also have a tendency to feel rejected by their birth parents. Many times these children believe the adoption occurred because they were unwanted by their biological parents (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). As Silverstein and Kaplan (1986) put it, the child realizes that in order “to be ‘chosen’ means first that one was ‘un-chosen’” (p. 46). The child believes that the adoptive parents want her, but has to cope with the idea that the biological parents did not want her or could not handle having her for a child. Society has enforced upon adopted children its beliefs that there are “good” and “bad” adoptees (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). The “good” adoptee accepts things the way they are and does not ask questions (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). The “bad” adoptee is constantly asking questions regarding her adoption (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). When the adoptee continuously asks questions, it may make the adoptive parents feel rejected by the adoptee (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

For the adopted child, guilt and shame can arise from believing that something about herself was the reason she was placed for adoption. As a child, she may begin to blame herself for the birth parents giving her up (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). The adopted child may then begin to grieve the loss of her birth parents, blaming that loss on herself (Administration for Children and Families, 2004a). If the family she has been placed in is a happy family, she may



feel guilty for feeling the way she does. Since society does not encourage grieving for birth parents, once the child enters adolescence, she may have a rough time finding an outlet to explain her guilt and shame and may suppress her feelings.

Grief within the adopted child is a delayed process, due partly to developmental issues (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). The grieving process begins around when the child begins school (Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig, 1992). Parents may try to distract young children in order to prevent the child's grief over losing her birth parents. Society believes the child should be happy; her birth parents gave her up in order to give her a better life. In the eyes of the adopted child, she grieves the loss of her biological parents with whom she shares a blood line (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

This delayed grief can lead to "substance abuse or aggressive behaviors" (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986, p.48). The aggressive behaviors often occur in children around the age of 7 to 8. Teachers may deem these children "difficult" or "troublesome" when in reality, the child is just going through her stage of grieving (Brodzinsky et al, 1992, p 72).

Finding one's identity may greatly affect the adopted child, especially during adolescence. The child is pulled away from her biological parents and is not able to know who she is in regards to lineage, medical history, religious background, etc. (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). The child has questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? What is my nationality? Why weren't my birth parents able to take care of me? Questions like these plague the adopted child and limit the adopted child's grasp of his or her identity. This leads the adoptee to try and find a way to belong within the culture (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). She desires to find a place where she is accepted and belongs.

Identity formation has the greatest impact during adolescence for children. There are four coping mechanisms when dealing with an identity crisis. The first mechanism is identity achievement ((Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992). This is where the adoptee asks who am I? Not only does the adoptee have to answer this question, but she also has to answer the question of who she is in respect to her adoption. Does the adoption have a major impact on her life? Or is it only a part of who she is?

The second mechanism is moratorium. This type of identity formation occurs when the adoptee is unsure about the adoption and what the adoption means. It often brings up the question, “what do I believe in?” (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 104). An adopted child is often in moratorium because an inadequate amount information has been presented to her regarding her birth parents (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

Identity foreclosure, the third mechanism, is when the adopted child seems to have developed her own set of morals and established an identity for herself. The problem is that the identity has been established too soon. The adopted child often accepts their adoptive family’s view of adoption instead of developing a view of their own. Identity foreclosure happens most often in families where the adoption is not discussed often and the adoptee develops an identity that does not include the adoption.

The final mechanism discussed by Brodzinsky et al. (1992) is identity diffusion. Identity diffusion is when a child seems to be unable to make an identity for herself. The child may feel as if she lost a part of herself when she was given up for adoption. Often, the child is not sure where she fits in. She is unsure of where she attained her traits such as her abilities and perspectives. According to Brodzinsky et al. (1992), the child “seems to be floundering, with no clear path for herself” (p. 107).

The adopted child may grow to have problems with intimacy during young adulthood, whether it be with the adoptive parents or with members of the opposite sex (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). As a child, she may have felt rejected by her biological parents, so she loses the intimacy they might have had with the biological parents. This may carry over later on in life and not allow the child to form an intimate bond with loved ones, her new parents for instance, or even lovers in later years (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

Establishing intimacy involves having established a firm identity (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992). In order for the adoptee to establish an intimate relationship with a lover, she must reveal to her partner that she is adopted (Brodzinsky et al, 1992). Intimacy involves both parties revealing things about themselves that they may have kept secret in the past.

The issue that may affect the adopted child the most is the inability to feel control over his or her own life. The adopted child knows she was not part of the decision making process about being placed for adoption and into which family she was going to be placed (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). The child realizes that adults made every decision to place her where she is currently. The feeling of loss of control within the child may lead to a constant struggle with authority figures, the loss of self control, and reduced ability to take responsibility for herself (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). These issues may persist throughout the adopted child's life.

As the adopted child grows older, she may begin to realize her parents' pain from before she was adopted. She may begin to believe she cannot be this dream child her parents wanted (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). If her adoptive parents have other children, the adopted child may feel the need to compete with the biological children in order to not feel "second best".

**Combating the psychological issues.** The DHHS encourages adopted people to seek counseling about their adoption (Administration for Children and Families, 2004a). Much like

the birth parents, the adopted child needs more support than solely the support of family and friends. DHHS encourages the adopted child to participate in support groups focused on the issue of adoption. Within these groups, the child is able to discuss thoughts and feelings in regards to adoption with people who have experienced the same situation (Administration for Children and Families, 2004a).

Another way adoptees are able to cope is by seeking education about adoption. Knowing there are others who have had similar experiences may help in the coping process (Administration for Children and Families, 2004a). This may lead the adoptee to consider finding the birth parents. Whether the end result leads to a happy reunion of a family, or to an unpleasant result, it tends to “fill a void” within the adopted person that at least she knows the truth about herself (Administration for Children and Families, 2004a).

### **The Adoptive Parents**

**Psychological issues.** Society may not always see loss as a problem for the adoptive parents. In society’s eyes, adoptive parents are gaining a child they so desperately want in their lives. They are gaining love and adoration from a child that was given to them. In the hearts and minds of the adoptive parents, though, they have lost their ability to have children of their own blood. In some cases, these parents have had to deal with miscarriages, stillbirths, and even the loss of a child after the child was born. According to Silverstein and Kaplan (1986), “They have lost their dream child” (p. 46).

Adoptive parents have the unfortunate problem of dealing with rejection from a variety of different sources. First, they have to deal with their bodies’ rejection of having their own child (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). In a religious context, they may even feel rejected by God and believe that God did not want them to have children of their own. Second, the adoptive parents

may have to deal with rejection from the birth parents. Adoptive parents may worry that the birth parents will dislike their parenting styles and reject them (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). And third, adoptive parents may struggle with rejection by the adopted child. As the child grows, the parents may view the child's juvenile actions (or rebellion) as rejection (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

Adoptive parents can also feel guilt and shame. These feelings arise at a different point in the adoption process, though, than they do for the child. For adoptive parents, guilt and shame arise when they find out they are unable to conceive a child together on their own (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). They may feel as if they have done something to warrant their inability to conceive children of their own. Therefore, they may feel ashamed.

Grief, too, affects the adoptive parents differently than it does the other two parts of the triad. The adoptive parents' grief stems from not being able to bear their own child. Thus, their grief begins before the adoption even occurs and lasts throughout the child's life because they may never be able to meet the ideals of the birth parents (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

Role confusion adds to the adoptive parents' inability to grasp their own identity. They may not feel as if they are the child's true parents because they do not have any blood ties to their children. They feel as if they cannot fully "claim" the child because of this loss of blood ties (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). For many people, identity is formed within the idea of procreation. They are able to explain their family history and share the future with their children, which is operationalized socially as a common cultural heritage. Adoptive parents may be limited in their ability to share the past of their family with their children because of the lack of blood ties (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

Intimacy between some adoptive parents lessens because of the inability to have their own children. One parent may blame the other for the inability to conceive a child of their own (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). The adoption process may exacerbate these feelings. One parent may believe it is the other parent's fault that they were unable to conceive a child of their own. As this feeling settles within the parents' hearts, they may lose the intimacy they once had with each other (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

Within the adoption process, many adoptive parents lose their sense of control over the adoption. The agency and birth parents have the majority of the power, and adoptive parents are at the mercy of these two powers. These thoughts and feelings lead to the experience of learned helplessness in which the parents believe they have no control over the situation (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986). Some parents may combat their feelings of lack of control by becoming extremely protective and over controlling of their child (Silverstein and Kaplan, 1986).

**Combating the psychological issues.** For adoptive parents, as for the other two parts of the triad, connecting with others who have been in the same situation aids in the years after adoption (Administration for Children and Families, 2010). It allows parents to give advice to one another about coping with their situation. It also helps new parents to see the success rate of adoption by hearing the stories of others.

Establishing family traditions helps unite the adoptive family (Administration for Children and Families, 2010). Routines help the child establish stability within the family. If the parents decide to celebrate the adoption day, it may help comfort the child and allow her to know that on the day she was adopted there was a celebration in her honor.

One major tip mentioned in DHHS literature was that adoptive parents need to prepare to talk about the adoption with those who were not involved with the adoption (Administration for

Children and Families, 2010). Those not involved may include other family members, friends, and coworkers. Many times outsiders have questions regarding the adoption. Adoptive parents need to discuss together how much information they are willing to divulge to others as well as prepare themselves for questions they may be asked (Administration for Children and Families, 2010). This way, when a topic comes up regarding the adoption, ground rules have been established about what the adoptive parents are willing to discuss.

### **The Search Process**

The adopted child's search for the birth parents is itself a part of the adoption process, even though it may not take place for years, even decades, after the adoption. Not only do adoptees search for new family members, but they also search for their lost identity and for help dealing with the loss of her birth family. The search helps the adoptee cope with the feelings of rejection from the birth family. The process has many benefits, but the biggest benefit may be that the adoptee begins to feel more in control of his or her life.

There are many routes an adoptee can choose to search for birth parents. The following information is most relevant for children of domestic adoptions. First, information must be gathered (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). This information could include birth parents' names, birth dates, birth date of the adoptee, county and state of adoption, hospital where the adoptee was born, and any other identifying information that could aid in the search. This information can be found in a variety of places. Documents that could help with finding this information include adoption agency records; birth records, both amended (which has the

adoptive parents' names) and original (which contain the birth parents' names); hospital records, and court records (which include the original birth certificate, the petition to adopt, finalization papers, the consent papers, and relinquishment papers) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011).

Once all relevant data has been collected, the adoptee must research the appropriate state laws governing the adoption process. Some states, like New York, have registries that can be filled out in an attempt to aid in the process. In New York State, there are three types of information that are available via an adoption registry (Adoption Information registry, 2013). The first, non-identifying information, may include the birth parents' ethnicities, religion(s), education, and occupation. It also includes information regarding the adoption such as where it occurred, the circumstances surrounding the adoption, and why it happened. The second type of information, medical information, includes medical histories and medical updates provided to the agency by the birth parents. The third type of information that the registry can provide is identifying information (Adoption Information Registry, 2013). This identifying information includes the birth parents' and adoptees' names and addresses. This information is only released by the state if all parts of the triad agree for it to be given out.

One of the largest registries available to birth parents and adopted children is the International Soundex Reunion Registry (ISRR) (Rillera, 1981). This registry is available to all birth parents, to adoptees over 18 years of age, and to parents of adoptees under the age of 18. This registry is regarded as a passive registry, meaning both the adoptee as well as the birth parent(s) must apply in order for a match to be made (Rillera, 1981). The ISSR cannot reunite the family if only one person applies.



For a while, searching for birth parents could take months and even years to occur. There was paperwork to fill out, files to go through, and court systems to go through. With the help of the Internet, though, searching for birth parents has become an easier and quicker process.

There are also some less conventional ways of searching for birth parents, which include searching for birth parents via social media (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Many times, when the birth parents' names are known, social networking can be used to find the birth parents. Social sites such as Facebook and MySpace allow people to search for people and "friend" one another in order to begin speaking to and messaging them. This option may be preferable to some because many of these sites are free to users, allow for contact without need for traveling long distances, and lessen the intensity of initial contact that would happen with a face-to-face or phone meeting (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Using social networking can also be dangerous. Sometimes there is a lot of information placed on these sites, including first and last names, birth dates, addresses, phone numbers, and places of work. A certain degree of caution must be exercised when choosing to use social networking sites as reunion tools.

The search process needs to be approached carefully and thoughtfully. The results may not always turn out as expected. Reunions may be positive or negative experiences and the searcher must be prepared for both.

## **Issues During and After the Reunion**

### **Adoptive Parents**

The reunion of the child and the birth parents may present problems for the adoptive parents. The first problem they must confront is the fear of losing their child. When the topic of a reunion is approached, adoptive parents begin to realize some of the things they might have done wrong as a parent (Petta & Steed, 2010). In the presence of the birth parents, the adoptive parents may realize they may have had inadequacies as a parent and fear that the child may begin to notice these downfalls. The adoptive parents may begin to feel no longer needed as parents within the child's life. This issue may result in resentment towards the birth family, fearing that the birth family could entice the child back into their family (Petta & Steed, 2010).

Adoptive parents may also find it difficult to establish a role in the reunion. When the reunion occurs, some adoptive parents may feel as if they are under constant watch which in turn leads to less room for error. When they realize this, the adoptive parent tries to become the

perfect parent in order to be good enough for the child (Petta & Steed, 2010). The adoptive parents may feel the need to prove to the biological parents they are good parents even though they are not biologically related to the child.

Another issue is the problem of dealing with the adoptive parents' inability to conceive a child. Many times when women find out they are not able to conceive a child, or when they lose a child due to a miscarriage, they proceed to adopt a child immediately after (Petta & Steed, 2010). This shortens the grieving process, and the adoptive parent does not cope with the idea of not having their own biological child. Later on, as the child grows, the adoptive parents' pain of not having their own child may recur because the grieving process has not happened (Petta & Steed, 2010).

Many factors contribute to whether an adoptive parent would welcome the reunion. Who initiated the search is an important factor (Petta & Steed, 2010). If the adoptee initiated the search, the search may be perceived as expected and more likely to be controlled by the adoptee. If the birth parent initiated the search, the reunion may be unwelcomed by, and imposed upon the adoptee and the adoptive parents.

Another factor is the motive for the search (Petta & Steed, 2010). If the adoptee began the search out of despair because of her dissatisfaction with her adoptive parents, the adoptive parents might not welcome a reunion, seeing it as an easy way out for the child. The adoptive parents may fear the child would not be emotionally prepared to deal with the feelings of finding her birth parents.

Yet another factor is protectiveness on the part of the adoptive parents (Petta & Steed, 2010). If the child's hopes and dreams for the reunion have been fulfilled, the reunion would be a

welcomed experience. If the child was disappointed after the reunion, the reunion may be unwelcomed by the adoptive parents due to their child's unhappiness.

### **The Adopted Child**

Reunions between the adoptee and the birth parents may be an extremely important part of the adoptee's life. The reunion aids in the adoptee's identity formation and allows for her to solidify her own identity and set goals for the future (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1989). The reunion allows the adoptee to tie his or her past and present together and provides links to questions that may arise within the adoptee's mind. Who am I? Who am I most like? Why was I placed for adoption? Reunions allow for adoptees to feel complete and whole (Sorosky et al., 1989). The once missing part (the biological parents) has been filled with the knowledge of who the birth parents are.

Overall, most adoptees are satisfied with the reunion with their birth parents (Sorosky et al., 1989). After the reunion, many adoptees become closer with their adoptive parents and report being more appreciative of the adoptive parents (Sorosky et al., 1989). The adoptee is finally able to ask all the questions that she has had over her lifetime. The reunion diminishes the adoptee's fear of the unknown.

Many adoptees report feeling a sense of relief after finding the birth parents (Sorosky et al., 1989). The adoptees are able to have new beginnings without any unknowns. A feeling of joy may overcome the adoptee when she is able to find similarities between her and her birth parents.

### **The Birth Parents**

The experience of the adoptee can also relate to the experience of the birth parents. Often, the birth parents are warm and welcoming to the idea of reuniting with the child. The more

welcoming and healthy the relationship, the deeper and more meaningful it becomes for both parties (Sorosky et al., 1989).

A different issue may arise when it is the birth parents who decide to search for the child they relinquished. This type of reunion is more controversial because the adjustment period for the adopted child is longer than that of the birth parent (Sorosky et al., 1989). The birth parents have known about the adoption since the child was born, while the child may or may not know about the adoption. The birth parent may seem intrusive by beginning the search instead of allowing the child to initiate the search.

Another issue that may arise between birth families and adopted children is incest (Sorosky et al., 1989). Birth mothers have reported sexual feelings for their sons because of the, now much older, adopted son and the son's resemblance to his father. Adoptees have also reported having romantic and/ or sexual feelings for their brothers or sisters because they do not see one another as siblings (Sorosky et al., 1989). As a result, incestual feelings can and have occurred in some adoption cases.

### **Post Reunion Experiences**

After the search occurs, the adoptee's relationship with the birth parent(s) will fit into one of seven descriptive categories describing the relationship as “‘close’, ‘close but not too close’, ‘distant’, ‘tense’, ‘ambivalent’, ‘searching’, or ‘no contact’” (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999, p. 179). This study occurred before the internet was prevalent, so contact with the birth parents consisted mainly of letters, phone calls, and face-to-face visits.

#### **Close**

People who remained in contact with their birth parents considered themselves the “close” category (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999). They said at one point, they may have had frequent visits with their birth parents, but the visits have died down since the initial contact. This group reports that even though they may not be able to see their birth parent(s) as often as they had at one time, they maintain contact frequently through phone calls or mail (Gladstone &

Westhues, 1999). They reported feeling close to their birth parent(s), even more so than when they initially made contact.

### **Close but not too close**

People who considered themselves to be “close but not too close” with their birth parents were much like the group who considered themselves “close” to their birth parents, except for the amount of contact between the adoptees and their birth parents. The number of visits was about the same, but the frequency of contact between the two groups was less (about once every two to three months) (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999). The individuals within this group claim to want to have more contact with their birth parent(s), but state there are other factors that hinder them from having more contact with their birth parents (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999). These factors may include taking care of their own children, spending time with their spouses, and other commitments the adoptee may have in their everyday lives.

### **Distant**

The adoptees within the “distant” group do not consider themselves close or somewhat close to their birth parents. They are content with the amount of contact they have with their birth parents, although since the reunion, contact of all kinds- face-to-face, over the phone, and/or by mail has decreased. Some within this group sought a reunion out of curiosity about the identity of their birth parents and only maintained contact out of a feeling of obligation (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999).

### **Tense**

The “tense” relationship between adoptees and their birth parents is much like that of the distant group, but members of the group may desire less contact with their birth parents than the amount of contact there is at that moment (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999). Many times phone

calls are refused and mail does not receive a response. Adoptees may continue contact with the birth parent(s) because they feel guilty by not maintaining contact. There may also be tension within the relationship that could drive the adoptee away from their birth parent(s). Clashing of values and lifestyle choices, differences of expectations, and problems between the birth family and the adoptee contribute to the tense relationship (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999).

### **Ambivalent**

Members of the “ambivalent” group have a limited amount of contact with their birth parent(s) but want more contact. They report being neither close nor distant from their birth parent(s) (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999). Visiting, phone calls, and mail occur between the parties only two or three times a year. While the adoptee desired more contact with their birth parents, they were not sure exactly how much more contact they wanted. The reasons adoptees offer for this includes disappointment with the birth parents’ personalities and the inability to balance feelings towards the adoptive family with feelings towards the birth family (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999).

### **Seaching**

The group of those who considers themselves “searching”, like the ambivalent group, feel neither close to nor distant from their birth parent(s). Unlike the ambivalent group, they have had a moderate amount of contact with their birth parent(s), yet they still want more (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999). Many times the adoptee becomes highly motivated and begins to search for ways to become closer with their birth parent(s). The lack of closeness between the birth parent(s) and adoptee may stem from the reasons that include both the fear that the birth parent(s) do not want the same kind of relationship as the adoptee as well as the fear of what the



adoptive family would think or feel (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999). Some adoptive families may feel apprehensive about having the birth parents involved in the child's life.

### **No contact**

The final group is the adoptees who have no contact with their birth parent(s). Having no contact with the birth parent(s) does not mean that there was never any contact. It means that there may have been contact at one point, but now there is none. Reasons may include the inability to get along with the birth family, negative reactions from either the birth family or adoptive family, or the lack of enthusiasm from one party or the other about maintaining contact (Gladstone & Westhues, 1999).

### **My Experience**

This has truly been a journey for me. When I started out, I was looking into the future thinking I may find my birth parents this year. To me, it was wishful thinking. I figured it would be an interesting topic to write about since not too many people can say they have experienced any part of the adoption process. As my research grew, I began to realize that there was much more involved than just a paper backed up by research. This project was going to change my life drastically. I was going to discover my roots. I was going to know exactly whom I came from, what my birth parents looked like, their personalities, and would even be blessed enough to hold conversations with them. The goal of finding my birth parents became more realistic to me as time went by. I realized that this was going to affect me in a bigger way than I had expected. I was going to be shaken mentally, emotionally, and even physically.

### **My Process.**

When I first started looking for my birth parents, I began by searching their names through Google. Thank God for the Internet. Many names came up, and luckily my birth father still lived in the same area of New York that I had been born in 22 years earlier. I obtained his name, address, and even his phone number. I stopped at that point and proceeded to look for my birth mother. Finding her contact information was a little bit more difficult. As I continued to search on the Internet, the only person with her name lived in Arizona and worked as a waste management call operator. This did not make sense to me because no one moved away from the small place where I am from in upstate New York. Once you move there, you never leave. I continued my search, just in case. The thought soon occurred to me: *what if she had gotten married? Or what if she had been married and changed back to her maiden name?* I began searching marriage records. I did not find anything. From that point, I decided to check for the last name I knew for her (let us say it was Brown) residing in the same city or surrounding cities as my birth father. This is where things got interesting. As I searched the name “Brown”, I came up with the name of a man living in the same city as my birth father. I followed the link and it directed me to a site listing his relatives. On the list was a woman with my birth mother’s first name, but a different last name. I decided to follow that name and began my search over again. Sadly, nothing turned up. There were records of her living with him, but no pictures or information allowing me to believe that this could be my birth mother.

Out of complete despair, I decided to look for her on Facebook. Trust me, this was a last resort. I was desperate to find her, especially after searching for hours upon hours on the Internet and not having any luck. I began with the first last name I was given. All I found was a young man with the same last name. I proceeded to type in the other name I had found within my search. Lo and behold, a woman’s picture popped up. She lives in upstate New York like the

woman I had traced earlier. As I clicked on the site, a picture popped up with her name next to it. After clicking on the picture, her face appeared on my screen. *Wow, I thought, I kind of look like this woman. I froze. What if this really was my birth mother? How do I ask her? How can I make sure before imposing myself upon her?*

I tried to click on more pictures, but since her profile was private, no other pictures would show. I finally built up the courage to send her a friend request. My heart was racing. I had no idea whether this woman would accept me as a friend. If she did not, could I message her and ask? Or would I wait and see if I could find another way to find out? I closed the computer and prayed for the best. The next day, I had a report that she had accepted my request. I immediately began searching through her pictures. Sadly, there were only a few. One picture really showed her face. I stopped and looked at it. *Oh my God, I thought. This is really her. That is my face. Those are my eyes. That is my nose. Those are my lips and smile. I have never seen someone who looks so much like me.*

A glimmer of hope shot through me. Maybe she recognized me. That could be why she accepted me as a “friend”. I did not want to get my hopes up, so I finally concluded she had accepted me just to accept me. There was probably no reason behind it. More thoughts began to race through my head. How do I tell her that it is me? I know she has not forgotten about me, but this is out of the blue. How do I explain to her that I am the daughter she gave up so many years ago? What if I message her and she does not respond?

I decided to wait. I had gotten so far so fast. Within two days of beginning my search, I had found a woman who looks like a carbon copy of me, and found many links connecting us with each other. I had a strong feeling it was her, but I was not ready to find out for sure. I

wanted to wait a week or two to allow my thoughts and feelings to settle. Maybe giving it a little time would allow me to figure out how to approach the subject with my potential birth mother.

### **My Birth Mother's Reaction.**

The next day after leaving work, I was shocked to find a letter in my inbox from the woman who I had thought to be my mother. It read as follows:

Dear Jenna,

I have hoped and prayed for this moment for over 21 years now. I have so many feelings now that the time has come and I have this chance to communicate with you. I am sure that you have so many questions and I have asked myself, where do I begin? I think I will just start with what has been in my heart for so many years.

My thoughts and prayers for you have been that you have had a wonderful life. One that I know I would not have been able to give you. Never think for a minute that I didn't want you or that I didn't care. I was not a child when I had you. I was struggling to raise the child I already had and saw no way that I could give another child a good life while being on my own. The decision was not an easy one, it was one made out of love for you. I remember holding you in the hospital thinking that two wonderful people were going to treasure you and give you the family life that I loved while I was growing up. I pray every day that that is the life that I was able to give you by letting you go.

Your biological father and I are still friends. The first thing I did when I heard from you is to email him to let him know. He is a wonderful man who offered support and wanted to be in your life, but just not with me at the time. We made the decision together and although we've never talked about you since, I know you have been in his thoughts.

You have grown into a beautiful young woman and I'm sure your parents are very proud. I know they wanted me to write you a letter when you were born to share my thoughts and feelings at the time. I was much too distraught and unstable at the time to do it. It would have made it just that much harder and I have to say that not bringing you home with me was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.

At a later time I will answer any questions you may have. I hope to hear from you soon. I am hoping and praying that I hear that your life has been a wonderful, love-filled life. I am so happy that you found me!

Love Always

My heart sank. I was not sure how I felt. I was elated, excited, nervous, sad, happy, depressed, and anxious all at the same time. This had all happened so fast. Everything happened within the course of three days!

As time passed and we began to talk, I found out some interesting news regarding my biological brother. He was five years older than me and living in Albany, New York. My birth mother explained that he knew about me but never understood or accepted that she had placed me for adoption. As the talk continued, I found that the two do not talk much. He had gotten into some things he should not have, and she was forced to pull away from him until he straightened out his life.

### **My Adoptive Parents' Reactions.**

Once I heard back from my birth mother, I immediately called my adoptive mother. I told her everything that happened and we cried together. She told me how proud of me she was and that she knew that I would be able to find my birth parents. I continued to express my concern that she may feel let down that I found them or nervous that her spot may be taken. I wanted to

reassure her that nothing or no one would take her place. She responded to me that she knows that I will always have her in my heart as my mother and that there is always room for more love, no matter who it is. My mother wanted me to know that she will always be there no matter what and that she was so thankful that I had involved her in my journey to find my birth parents.

My adoptive father, on the other hand, thought I should have started searching sooner. He looked at me, read her message, and proceeded to tell me that he had wanted me to do this years before, but that my mother wanted me to try to find my birth parents when I decided to on my own. She did not want him to push me to do anything I did not want to do. His excitement was not apparent on the outside, but it began to show a couple days later when he began to encourage me to travel up to New York to meet them within the next month. He did not want me to miss out on having a relationship with the people who brought me into the world.

I am still hesitant to visit my birth parents so soon. I found them quickly and began talking to them just as fast. I think I need a little more time before I am able to meet them in person. I want to be able to have conversations and get to know them. I want to feel comfortable meeting them for the first time in person. I think with time I will be able to meet them, but not as soon as my (adoptive) father would like.

### **My Thoughts and Feelings.**

Overall, it was a joyous experience for me. I had found my birth parents and my adoptive family supported me the whole way. If I had the chance, I would do it all over again. I can finally relax and know that my birth parents are still around and are happy to have heard from me. They gave me up for good reasons and gave me a wonderful life that they may not have been able to provide for me had I stayed with them. I am thankful for this entire experience and cannot wait to see where this journey takes me.

### **Conclusion**

This journey has taught me a lot about who I am, how I became this way, and about the situation I was placed in. I learned that even though I was relinquished for adoption, it did not mean that my birth parents did not love me. It was because they loved me that they gave me to a loving family who could support me better than they could at the present time.

### **Where I am Now in my Journey**

I was one of the lucky adopted children. My adoptive parents supported me along the whole journey and were there for me whenever I needed to talk. My adoptive parents were not hurt that I was looking for my biological parents. Instead, they encouraged me to continue my search to find them. Every step of the way, my parents were involved. From the beginning when I began my search, to finding my birth parents, to contacting them, and everything in between, my adoptive parents were right by my side.

I now feel more complete than ever since finding my birth parents. For a very long time I felt like there was something missing in my life. I never knew who the woman was who gave birth to me. I did not know if she ever thought of me in her day-to-day life and I never knew if my birth father was still around or if he had disappeared. I always had the thought in my mind that I was the product of a one-night stand. I did not know that my birth parents had known each other and were close enough to both be involved in my adoption. It is definitely a relief to know that even though I was not planned, the two had known each other and still remain friends till this day.

### **Where I Go From Here**

From here, I am going to continue corresponding with my birth mother and father with plans on one day meeting them face to face. I want to get to know both of them, and I want them to get to know me. I want to learn about their histories and hear their stories about their lives. I want to be able to relate my life to things that have happened to them in the past and see how much we are or are not alike.

If I could go back in time, I do not think I would change a thing about finding my birth parents. I think I waited until I was emotionally ready and old enough to understand all of the outcomes of trying to find my birth parents. I have gained so much in this journey, but most of all, I have gained a sense of fulfillment. For years I thought about finding my biological parents, and now I have finally accomplished what I have been wanting to do.

### **What I Have Gained**

My adoption was a blessing not only to my adoptive parents, but also to me. If I had not been placed for adoption, I would not be where I am today. I am so happy with my life, and it all



comes back to a decision that was made by my birth parents to give me a better life. I am so thankful to them for that.

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