The Adoption Reunion Handbook

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About the authors

DR LIZ TRINDER is a researcher into family relationships. Most of her work is in the area of contact after divorce, e.g. the recent report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on Making Contact. This is the first time she has written about adoption. She was herself adopted.

JULIA FEAST currently works at the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), London, as the Policy, Research and Development Consultant. In the past she managed the post-adoption and care counselling research project, The Children’s Society and has counselled a number of people who have been adopted and also those who were brought up in Care through the search and reunion process. She has published many articles on the subject of Adoption Search and Reunion and also the information needs of children conceived as a result of donor-assisted conception. She is co-author of Preparing for Reunion: Experiences from the Adoption Circle (The Children’s Society, 1994; new edition 1998) and Adoption, Search and Reunion: The Long-Term Experience of Adopted Adults (The Children’s Society, 2000; now published by BAAF), and Searching Questions: Origins, Identity and Adoption (BAAF, 2003).

DR DAVID HOWE has a long-standing interest in all aspects of adoption. He is the author of many books, including Half a Million Women: Mothers who Lose their Children by Adoption (Penguin), Adopters on Adoption (BAAF), Patterns of Adoption: Nature, Nurture and Psychosocial Development (Blackwell Science), and, with Julia Feast, Adoption, Search and Reunion: The Long-Term Experience of Adopted Adults (The Children’s Society, 2000; now published by BAAF).
Preface

When I agreed to be the lead author on this book I never anticipated quite how long it would take or what a personal impact it would have on me. Writing this book has been a revelation and a personal journey. As an adopted person, I had never been particularly interested in my birth family and had always identified strongly with my adoptive family. I joined the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia to do research on divorce and separation. It was only later that I learned that a major study on adoption search and reunion was being carried out in the School with The Children’s Society. Hearing about the findings of the study was the first time that I had really started to think about adoption. One of the things that rattled me was the use of intermediary services enabling birth relatives to make contact with adopted people. I hadn’t known that that was possible and wrote an article criticising the practice and arguing in favour of using the Adoption Contact Register (where both adopted people and birth relatives can sign up independently and can then be matched). It was the first time that I had written anything about adoption.

At that point, although I was not interested in my own background (or didn’t think I was), something was drawing me in. The main part of the Adoption Search and Reunion study had been completed but there were still 74 long interviews with adopted adults that had not been fully analysed. I volunteered. That was when my own roller-coaster ride began. The interviews were sent to me in four batches. I remember reading them all day and all night. The stories included joyous reunions, rejections, adopted people who were angry at being contacted, stormy reunions and people who had searched and were thinking about reunion. I felt overwhelmed, sometimes shocked, sometimes fascinated, sometimes cheering people on. Sometimes thinking ‘Yes, I’ve got to do it’ and then thinking ‘God, no way would I risk that’.

What really struck home, however, was reading the interview statements of people who had been angry at being approached by The Children’s Society Intermediary Service on behalf of a birth relative. Many of the things that they said confirmed what I had thought – that plenty of adopted people are simply not interested in their birth families and feel that their adoptive families are no different from any other type of family. What also hit me was the amount of energy that was being put into being not interested, almost protesting too much. That really made me think about where I was in all of this.

There began a long journey through the analysis and writing of this book. It has taken a lot longer than I had planned. At times I would have bursts of enthusiasm and the book would storm forward, then I would reach a difficult bit and find other things that seemed more important (or at least easier). It did not take me very long to realise that analysing the interviews and writing the book had a lot of parallels with the search and reunion process, with its ups and downs, turning points and false starts, usually with a lot of unexplored emotions lurking under the surface.

At times working on the book has been an absolute gift in helping me to work out
what I think and feel about my own situation; at other times the material has just been too overwhelming. I also became conscious that although I felt I had a huge amount to learn from other people’s experiences, I was also in danger of losing my objectivity or imposing my own thoughts and feelings on other people’s stories. Although we have written this book as a team, and everything has always been checked out, I was the one doing most of the writing. At that point I decided to see a counsellor to get some perspective on what I wanted to do. I found it incredibly helpful in working out what I want and what my expectations might be. Although it wasn’t the intention, it has also really freed up the process of writing the book, and let me see the interviews in a new light.

By writing this book I have learned a huge amount not only about adoption and reunion, but also about myself. Reading about the search and reunion pathways of others, and looking at my own process and motivations, has enabled me to call for my own adoption record and I know I shall make contact only if and when the time feels right. My message to you, the reader, is: ‘You don’t have to do this by yourself.’ I hope this book will help you on the way. But if you can, try to get a mentor to help.

It is always traditional to thank interviewees in a research study as research cannot be done without people who are prepared to share their own experiences. For this study I want sincerely want to thank all the interviewees not just for their overwhelmingly honest contributions to the research, but also for what I have learned as both a researcher and a person. I hope that I have given something useful in return. I’d also like to thank my two colleagues, Julia and David, for being tolerant of my painstakingly slow progress. Many thanks, too, to my counsellor, Helen McLean, without whom this would have been a very different book. Finally I’d like to thank my parents for all the support they have given me on this journey.

Liz Trinder
As one of the adopted people quoted in this book points out, ‘If you... know where you’re from in your history, you probably take it for granted.’ Those of us who are adopted, however, have lost an entire family. Our roots, to a greater or lesser degree, remain a question mark during our formative years and often a lot longer.

It was during my own childhood when I worked out that the search for birth records – and in my case, birth relatives – is inevitably the only journey back into this past. Many years later, I made a further discovery – that it is not a journey ending with the reunion. As the American academic David Brodzinsky points out, adoption is a lifelong search because it is ultimately a search for self. ‘Just as people don’t mature once and then stay the same for the rest of their lives, they also don’t wake up one day finished with thinking about adoption,’ he says.

Despite the significance of the search in adopted people’s lives, however, it is my experience – as well as those of many adopted people I have interviewed as a journalist – that its path can feel lonely, unguided and scary. There has long been help available but it can seem, at best, disparate and, at worst, inaccessible or impersonal.

Meanwhile, birth relatives – who, on various parts of the globe, are increasingly able to search for the people they have lost to adoption – can feel even more isolated and unsupported. Society has all too often treated them as invisible and without any real ‘right’ to trace birth relatives.

It is therefore with excitement that I welcome this book – a useful, systematic and highly detailed guide for people at all stages of the searching process. It is important not only for pulling together information and guidance on what is an emotionally and often practically complex journey – but also for incorporating candid accounts from ordinary people who have undergone their own individual searches.

These factors make this book all the more relevant to anyone who has an interest in, or is affected by, adoption. Indeed, the emotional ripples of searches and reunions can spread far and wide, with the people touched by them ranging from adoptive and birth relatives through to friends and partners.

Adoption is a unique blend of gains and losses, but the loss is less often acknowledged. This book is of great value in showing how search and reunion can help people come to terms with this loss. I only wish this book had been around when I did my own search. An essential and illuminating read for anyone involved in adoption reunion.

Kate Hilpern, journalist specialising in adoption
Acknowledgements

The origins of this book stretch back to a time when The Children’s Society’s Post Adoption and Care Project, based in Peckham, London, had already built up considerable experience working with adopted people interested in exploring their backgrounds, many of whom went on to have a reunion with one or more of their birth relatives. The project team was keen to have their work examined in greater depth. In particular, there was a lot of enthusiasm to look in more detail at what were the views of the many adopted people who had been helped by the project. The Nuffield Foundation was approached and agreed to fund a major study into adopted people’s experiences of search and reunion. The findings have been reported in a variety of books and papers. However, it became increasingly apparent that what was also needed was a guide, a handbook, a how-to-do-it manual for all those adopted people thinking about a search, but still uncertain how to begin.

This book is the result of that recognition. It could not have been written without the support and help of a number of key people. The Peckham team of Denise Coster, Erica Peltier, Jenny Setterington, Janet Smith, Rose Wallace, Elizabeth Webb and Penny Whittingham put in a huge amount of effort at every stage of the project and we owe them many, many thanks. We are also extremely grateful for the support and backing of both The Children’s Society and The Nuffield Foundation. Particular thanks must go to Sharon Witherspoon of The Nuffield Foundation who was a constant source of encouragement. And finally, we owe a big debt of gratitude to the hundreds of adopted people who shared their search and reunion stories with us. Their resilience and humour, thoughtfulness and sensitivity kept us captivated and engaged. Without their insights and openness the book would never have seen the light of day.
Introduction

The search and reunion process is a leap into the unknown for those involved and is likely to be a rollercoaster ride of highs and lows.

Since the mid-1970s many Western countries have introduced new laws to enable adults adopted as children to find out about and meet a birth relative. In other words to have an ‘adoption reunion’. More recently some countries, such as Australia, have also given rights to birth relatives to make contact with the adopted person. In England and Wales, the new Adoption and Children Act 2002 will mean that from 2005 birth relatives will be able to ask an adoption support agency to make contact with the adopted person on their behalf.

Ever since adoption reunions have been possible they have led to enormous public interest and a lot of media coverage around the world. In the UK the reunion between the former government minister Clare Short and her son was headline news. Search and reunion have also figured strongly in magazine articles, film and soap opera plots and TV shows like ‘Kilroy’ and ‘Oprah Winfrey’.

One of the reasons why adoption reunions are such a favourite topic in the media is that they are very dramatic and emotional. The search and reunion process is a leap into the unknown for those involved. Whatever the outcome the search and reunion process is likely to be a rollercoaster ride of highs and lows. For birth parents and children meeting for the first time in decades, or siblings seeing each other for the very first time, it is likely to be a highly charged process, often with high, sometimes unrealistic, expectations. But coverage of adoption reunions in the media does not necessarily give a clear picture of what happens in the real world with real reunions. One of the distinctive features of this book is that it is based on the real life experiences of a large number of people who have actually gone through the search and reunion process. The authors were involved in the largest UK research study of adoption search and reunion.1 The study was based on questionnaires completed by 394 adopted adults who had searched for information about birth relatives (the ‘searchers’) and 78 adopted adults who had been con-

tacted by a birth relative (the ‘non-searchers’). We followed up 74 of the questionnaire cases with an in-depth interview.

We have written this book as a guide for anyone who is thinking about undertaking a search and reunion and for those who are already involved in the process. We have been able to use our research findings to describe what usually happens in reunions, and the highs and lows to expect. We cannot, of course, predict what will happen in an individual reunion. As you read this book it will become clear that each reunion story is unique, with different people with different expectations in different circumstances. Even so, there are often common experiences that people can share and from which they can learn. There are no guarantees that a search and reunion will turn out exactly like those included here, but by describing what typically happens, as well as the sheer variety of reunions, we aim to help you to make your own decisions about whether to start your own search and reunion as well as to be as prepared as possible for the journey ahead. For those who have already embarked on the journey we hope the stories told here will give you insights to help you to negotiate and find your own way through some of the potential pitfalls and to get the support you might need. Although our research is based on reunions in the UK we are certain that many of the experiences, issues and emotions reported by our contributors will be just as relevant to people around the world.

The book also aims to give as much practical advice as possible. We include material, for example, on legal rights and on how to locate names and addresses of birth relatives. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the search process in England and Wales and the Appendix has information on searching in the rest of the UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, Canada and the USA.

Most chapters also include ‘advice boxes’, summarising key points to bear in mind to make the search and reunion process as good as it can be; for example, advice on how to make initial contact and where/when to arrange a first meeting. Some of this advice comes from the adopted people themselves, others from our own collective experience. The Appendix contains an annotated list of further sources of advice and information. Some chapters also include worksheets that you may find helpful to work through when making decisions about the search and reunion process.

It is important to point out that we are not seeking to either encourage or discourage anyone from taking these steps. The overall message from our study is that search and reunion is usually an emotionally challenging process requiring a lot of consideration over the years, but one that most people are glad they began. Only you can decide if you are ready to take these steps. We hope that this book will help you to make these decisions and, if you decide to go ahead, to help you to be as prepared as possible.

A word about words

One of the many tricky aspects of writing this book is deciding what terms to use. Adoption reunion is one of those areas in which it is difficult to find terms that will be acceptable to everyone. The word ‘reunion’ itself will be unacceptable to some people who might feel uncomfortable with the implicit suggestion that there is an existing relationship that
can be renewed. We use it simply because it is by now the most widely used and recognised term to describe the experience. There are similar problems with the term ‘birth mother’ or ‘birth father’. Again we’ve chosen these as the most common terms but we know that other people would prefer ‘natural’ or ‘blood’ or ‘biological’ mother/father. We’ve also used ‘adopted people’ rather than ‘adoptee’. We realise that this is a personal preference but adoptee to us denotes a category rather than a person.

Finally, we should point out that in this book we use many quotations from our research interviews with adopted people who have been through the search and reunion process. In order to preserve their anonymity, we have used substitute first names and place names throughout.