

# ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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## Preparing for Search and Reunion

BY ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

**T**he media often presents the dramatic and heartwarming aspects of search and reunion, but for those involved, the reality is much more complex. This article explores the common questions and concerns of adoption constellation members involved in search and reunion. The focus is on adult adoptees but addresses 1) preparation for everyone involved in this unique and important experience as well as 2) the potential relationship challenges after reunion that can present over time.

**Jenna, 20**, shares that her mother thinks she has found Jenna's birth mother on Facebook. Before making contact, her mother thinks Jenna needs to talk to someone before they attempt to contact her birth mother.

**Diane, 54**, is recently in reunion with two birth sisters. (Her birth parents are deceased.) She reports feeling anxious about how these relationships are going, especially with one sister who appears jealous whenever Diane spends time alone with the other sister. Diane is also unable to get past the distress she feels for having waited so long to find her family and missing the opportunity to know her parents. Her fear of rejection was the major reason she did not search sooner.

**Tom, 27**, after coming back from meeting his Korean family is filled with guilt and regret at cutting the visit short. He met both birth parents, five sisters, and two brothers. He shares that he was overwhelmed by his birth



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mother's constant attention—and her repeatedly saying that he was now “back” where he belonged. It felt like so much pressure.

Lynn, 71, a birth mother in reunion for five years with her son, daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren comes in to say she is thinking of ending her relationship with her son. She feels hurt a great deal of the time, finding her son to be cold and rejecting at times. Her son is only willing to see her with the family—never one on one. She worries that they don't really have much in common. However, she doesn't want to lose her relationship with her grandchildren.

These stories are composites of the ones we hear from adopted adults and birth parents who come to the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) for assistance. While the trend today in adoption is toward openness and open adoption in every type of adoption, there are still many adults involved in the process of search and reunion because their adoptions were closed or their families lost contact with birth families. The search process and all stages of these new and unique relationships in reunion can bring challenges. What kinds of assistance do members of the adoption constellation need to successfully navigate this incredibly powerful journey?

## Why Is Preparation So Important and What Is Involved in Preparation?

In our experience, we often find that members of the adoption constellation have had little emotional preparation for this life-altering and deeply complex experience. Jayne Schooler in *Searching for a Past*<sup>1</sup> writes, “The word search is not limited to its literal meaning of a physical effort to make a connection. The meaning expands to include all that is part of the adoptee's quest, for it is an emotional, psychological and spiritual quest.” While adoptees may certainly know what is motivating them to search, they do not always have a clear comprehension of all of their feelings, fears, fantasies, expectations, hopes, and dreams—let alone potential challenges involved in search and reunion.

Understanding the reasons for wanting to connect with birth family is therefore a critical part of preparation. They need to address many questions. For example, are they looking to fill in “the missing pieces” for medical, genetic, and other significant information or to ask their birth mother the burning question “Why did you place me for adoption or not try harder to keep me?” Do they feel they cannot truly form a cohesive identity without knowledge of where they came from? Are they

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<sup>1</sup> Schooler, Jayne. *Searching for a Past: The Adopted Adult's Unique Process of Finding Identity*, Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press, 1995

driven to search because they want to know what has happened to their birth family members and let birth parents know they have had good lives? It is rare, in my experience, that the desire for connection is due to unhappiness with the adoptive family, but that would be important to explore. It is therefore very important for adoptees to reflect on some key questions.

### Examples of questions include:

1. How do your parents/siblings feel about your desire to search? Are they supportive or worried or feel threatened?
2. If they are worried or threatened, what impact does that have on you?
3. What are your concerns/fears (if any) regarding search and reunion?  
Examples include: won't find birth family, invading their privacy, they will be rejecting, siblings will feel resentful, they will be deceased, they won't like/approve of me, I won't like/approve of them, we are too different from each other, etc.
4. What kind of relationship are you hoping to have with birth family members?

Adoptees may be quite articulate about these fears and feelings or quite surprised to discover answers to questions they hadn't contemplated. Most surprising is that adoptees are often unaware of the intense feelings of loss and grief that may be triggered by this process. Many who have had the opportunity in the past to acknowledge and grieve for the many losses connected to their adoption may be surprised to find these feelings have come back with a vengeance. And for those who have not processed past grief and loss, it can be especially distressing. In this preparation phase, it might be the first time that the adoptee has expressed their sadness and anger. It might be sadness at not growing up with siblings, it might be anger over the reasons for placement—a birth mother wanting to finish college or doing drugs, or anger at feeling concerned about being rejected “again.” It might be guilt that wanting this connection must be disloyal to their adoptive parents and therefore hurtful. It might be worries that they won't feel they will fit in with their birth family because their adoptive family is so different—ethnically/racially/religiously/socioeconomically. Whether surfacing again at this juncture or being expressed for the first time, these very normal, predictable feelings should be addressed *before* meeting and attempting a relationship with birth family.

Preparation of this kind does not mean these feelings will be resolved during search and reunion. But it can certainly help prevent the feeling of being completely caught off guard and overwhelmed. When adoptees have not had the chance for such exploration, we often see them after reunion

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when things have gone awry and both their well-being and relationships with birth family and/or adoptive family are in jeopardy. Unprepared for how they have been triggered, they are not equipped to handle or cope with their distress. That is why preparation also involves providing adoptees with strategies to handle and manage the circumstances they encounter and the emotions that surface. For example, the adoptee afraid of rejection can be prepared to know that the extreme hurt will not last forever. As they consider who to take with them or have nearby for a first meeting with birth family, their companion can be prepared to provide the support they may need. Or the adoptee concerned with dealing with the fall-out of the impact of reunion on their adoptive parents or other family members can work with their family members to address their concerns before reunion to help ensure their continued support after reunion.

As noted, part of the preparation process is education around the common challenges that can surface in these new, unique relationships and how to address them. Again, this includes education about other parties' experience of reunion. As adoptees explore their own fears and feelings, loss and grief, etc., they can consider these feelings from the perspective of their birth and adoptive families. For example, they may fear a birth sibling's resentment but not understand why this would happen or how to address it. If they understand that birth siblings may be resentful because they see their birth parent being completely enthralled with the adoptee, or the adoptee's presence changes the dynamic of "birth order," they can carefully think about their behavior. Armed with this knowledge, the adoptee can be prepared to try not to take these kinds of reactions "personally" and remember that the sibling's reactions will likely dissipate with time. Being mindful to respect their siblings' place in the family, they may have the courage to say, "I know I'm technically older than you, but I am a new friend to the family, not suddenly the oldest."

While this article is not intended to address the "how-to" of search, it is important to note that decisions regarding how to conduct a search are of course influenced by the adoptee's feelings. One adoptee felt more comfortable using an intermediary even though she had information to make direct contact. She felt she could better handle rejection through a third party. Another adoptee was clear about making direct contact so that she could feel more in control of what would happen. Decisions about who, when, and where to meet also have great significance. Reflecting on general recommendations is critical. For example, most adoption counselors advise that adoptees not plan to stay overnight at the home of their birth family during a first visit so that, if needed, adoptees have the space and opportunity to process their emotions after the meeting. Therefore, preparation does include exploration of feelings regarding the

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mechanics of the search process and decisions regarding meeting and visits with birth family.

## Meeting Challenges Post-Reunion

Education includes understanding the typical phases of reunion. In her book *Birthright*<sup>2</sup> Jean Strauss outlines the stages of reunion. Understanding the progression of these unique relationships can do much to prevent frustration, disappointment, and threats to these sensitive relationships. In addition, setting boundaries, limits, and expectations and resolving conflict of all kinds regarding these relationships is extremely important and will not be a one-time learning event—but will be ongoing throughout. Ten years into reunion, one adoptee said she was still struggling to assert herself with her oldest of three sisters when that sister was critical or intrusive (as she was with the other sisters). Having no problem standing up for herself with her siblings through adoption or close friends, she knew her fear of rejection was still in play. With guidance, she was able to talk to her sister about this fear which served to strengthen their bond.

Through search and reunion, everyone who is significant to the adoptee—spouses, partners, parents, children, and close friends—may also be prepared so they can be supportive and understanding of the adoptee. It is recommended that those close to an adoptee express support for the adoptee's decision; in general, it is not helpful to question the adoptee's motivation or suggest they end a relationship with birth family at the first hint of conflict or trouble. Parents often benefit from reading resources and talking to other parents whose adult children are in reunion. Parents may also consult with an adoption-competent professional. Significant people can attend support groups with the adoptee. Significant others should be prepared to be part of this relationship *if* the adoptee desires them to be, which is usually the case. It is often quite hurtful for adoptees to have their parent tell them, "I support your relationship with birth family, but I have no desire to be part of this." Unless there is a mutually agreed upon reason, adoptive family members should make every effort to embrace the adoptee's birth family. When advising adoptive parents, counselors encourage them to be certain the adoptive parents' own feelings of insecurity are not preventing them from truly knowing what their adult child's wishes/needs are. Adoptive parents who are supportive of their adoptee's choices about search and reunion often have the strongest relationships with their adult children.

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<sup>2</sup> Strauss, Jean. *Birthright: The Guide to Search and Reunion for Adoptees, Birthparents, and Adoptive Parents*, New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1994.

As noted, real challenges begin post-reunion. All of the feelings explored in the preparation phase may still be there during the various stages of reunion, especially intense feelings of loss and grief. Adoptees must figure out how to integrate these new relationships into their lives, and what they mean for their sense of identity. Sometimes they need to reflect on what kind of relationship they want, if any. One adoptee was very disappointed in relationship with her birth mother but really enjoyed spending time with an aunt. One adoptee said she had to explain to her birth father that she was busy and did not even see her adoptive parents every month, which was his expectation. Another adoptee said their different political views were creating a barrier between them like never before. While these kinds of differences can crop up in all families, they can be especially disturbing and daunting in relationships between adoptive and birth families who have no history of relationship security or resolving conflict. Before anyone decides to withdraw from a relationship, it is strongly recommended they seek professional assistance. Such assistance may result, unfortunately, in the cessation of the relationship, but more often may result in a redefinition of the relationship, and perhaps even stronger bonds.

In reunion, as adoptees work to understand and manage their own emotional responses, they can feel overwhelmed by feeling like they have to also manage everyone else's responses—their adoptive parents', siblings' (both birth and adoptive), etc. If adoptees are in therapy, most therapists will advise bringing in the family members whose distress is presenting challenges for the adoptee. These family sessions are intended to provide support to the adoptee in resolving conflict in the relationships, setting boundaries, and encouraging family members to seek their own individual assistance as needed and appropriate.

Birth parents seeking reunion often struggle with complex feelings as well. They may worry that they are not entitled to search or request contact or relationship with the child they placed for adoption or who was removed from their care and their parental rights terminated. They need preparation as much as adoptees do to work through their feelings and understand all that can unfold in reunion, including the impact on spouses, partners, children, and other relatives. Unfortunately, if they are the ones that are found, they may be very unprepared. Adoptees should recommend they get assistance and if this happens in reverse, it is important that adoptees seek assistance for preparation.

Search and reunion in international adoption may present additional challenges. Cultural and language barriers can make search difficult and painful. Some countries' governments are assisting in the process, like

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Korea, and DNA databases are helping make connections that were not possible before—as with many relationships formed following adoptions from China. Searchers are finding birth family in Guatemala, Russia, Ethiopia, and many other countries. Long-distance relationships can be challenging, but social media and advances in technology have helped many people maintain contact. Adoptees may benefit from guidance around managing these special circumstances.

Both adoptees and birth family members need to be educated about what is commonly referred to as Genetic Sexual Attraction (GSA)<sup>3</sup>. There is controversy as to whether this is a scientifically based phenomenon, but it refers to romantic or sexual attraction occurring between biological relatives who have been separated and meet as adults (as happens in adoption reunions). This is very rare, but can be quite troubling when it happens between birth parents and their adult children or between siblings. Professional assistance is always recommended, especially to ensure these complex feelings are not acted upon. Information regarding GSA is listed under resources.

In sum, reunions can bring healing even when there is disappointment. While it can be devastating to find deceased birth parents or birth parents unwilling to be in relationship, adoptees in these situations may find they can establish meaningful relationships with other relatives. Most adoptees and birth parents that I have worked with—even when disappointed by the outcome of their search and reunion experience—say they do not regret having had the experience as the benefits they gained outweigh the hardships.

## Professional Assistance and Other Resources

While consulting with an adoption-competent therapist may be extremely beneficial, there are also a number of excellent books and online resources, support groups, etc. that can assist in the process of search and reunion.

- Schooler, Jayne. *Searching for a Past: The Adopted Adult's Unique Process of Finding Identity*, Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press, 1995.
- Randolph, Brooke. *It's Not About You: Understanding Adoptee Search, Reunion & Open Adoption*, Ann Arbor, MI, Entourage Publishing, 2016.
- Strauss, Jean. *Birthright: The Guide to Search and Reunion for Adoptees, Birthparents, and Adoptive Parents*, New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> More information can be found at: [www.adoption.com/genetic-sexual-attraction](http://www.adoption.com/genetic-sexual-attraction)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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