

## PARTNERS OF BIRTHPARENTS

Sometimes it is forgotten that adoption affects many more people than those who are immediately involved ie adopted people, adoptive parents and birth parents. One group of people who sometimes feel neglected are the spouses and partners of birth parents. If you are one of this group, then this information sheet is for you. More commonly, it is the spouse or partner of a birth mother who is affected, but it doesn't exclude the reverse situation. For ease of reading, this information sheet has been addressed to the most common situation.

You might always have known about the child or children that your partner placed for adoption; it might have been something that you discussed prior to marriage or at the commencement of your relationship. Or you might only have found out recently, either by your partner telling you of the search and reunion, or as a result of your partner being contacted by the adopted child. At whatever stage you learn of the adoption, you might experience feelings of disbelief, shock, anger or hurt. At the time of a reunion other feelings may also emerge and your relationship with your partner might undergo some stress and new challenges. You might feel that your partner is focusing on the relationship with the newly found child to the exclusion of your relationship. You might feel dismissed, jealous, excluded, hurt or angry.

Before looking at the possible impact of a reunion on your relationship with your partner, it might be helpful to consider some of the implications of adoption for birth parents and how it might have affected your partner's life. Winkler and Van Keppel (1984) describe placing a child for adoption as **the most stressful life event ever**. It is a tragic occasion where there is no structured ritual to mourn the loss of the child and often no support to cope with the associated grief. In the past a conspiracy of silence often surrounded the adoption, resulting in birth parents having to deal with the painful burden of adoption alone.

The adoption and ongoing burden of grief can result in low self-esteem, deep regret, feelings of shame and being "bad", depression and guilt. Often difficulties in relationships or in parenting subsequent children are experienced. Anxieties about being an adequate mother are exacerbated by fears of losing further children. As a result birth parents can become overly possessive and protective or alternatively, be unwilling or unable to risk closeness with their children.

Particular events can serve to trigger the feelings associated with the loss of the child, and highlight the feelings of grief. Such events could be the death of a parent or friend, the illness of a loved one, or "happy" occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries or the birth of further children. All these situations can be reminders of the lost child.

Birth parents need the opportunity to talk about their loss and grief with family and friends and to receive support from them. If your partner has "successfully" kept the adopted child a secret from you for many years, you might have to deal with your own hurt as well as try to listen to your partner without being judgemental or condemning. You may also have to assist your partner in dealing with your children's reactions to the fact that they have a half sibling. They might respond with anger at not being told earlier, sadness at the loss of their sibling, or curiosity and a desire to meet them. Sometimes the eldest child expresses feelings of being "second best" and resentment at being usurped from their position in the family, especially if they are the same sex as the adopted child.

Over the past couple of decades there have been changes in societal attitudes and values, and these are reflected in the current adoption legislation. Current adoption laws in NSW/ACT and QLD give birth parents rights to information, acknowledging their need to know about and to find their adopted children. Searching for and meeting the child who was adopted can be part of beginning to heal the pain of the adoption. Your partner might be thinking about a search or already be involved in a reunion. You may wish to consider how you can help your partner and how to cope with some of the “ups and downs” that can result from a reunion.

As a starting point, try to offer support and encouragement in the search. This will be especially valuable if at any stage your partner receives disappointing or distressing information, for example, if the adopted son/daughter has refused contact.

You may be tempted to undertake the search on your partner's behalf, wishing to protect her from possible hurt. However, it is not wise to proceed without their full involvement, bearing in mind that the search can be part of the healing process. Also, ask yourself if your wish is to take control of the situation yourself rather than protect your partner.

You might encourage or support your partner, only to feel resentment when she or he becomes obsessed by the search and all her / his energy is focused on it.

The following quotes from people we have spoken to at The Benevolent Society serve to illustrate this.

“It's like I can't get through to Barbara any more, that this has taken over her life”.

“When I married her and we had kids of our own I thought she'd get over the first one”.

“I thought it was all in the past”.

You may begin to worry that the search seems to be taking over not only your partner's life but yours as well, and when the reunion takes place and your partner pours all her / his emotions into the newly found adult child, you might begin to question the value of your own relationship. You might both be surprised by the depth of the emotions that a reunion can release and you could experience feelings of jealousy and anger as your partner negotiates her new relationship with her / his child. You might find yourself resenting the time that your partner spends with her / his child, and be alarmed if there appears to be an element of physical attraction in their relationship. This is not uncommon and is referred to as “Post Reunion Attraction” and increases the difficulties and challenges for the birth parent's partner. There is some helpful literature on this subject, which may offer insight, and understanding and if you are facing this particular situation, ask one of the post adoption counsellors at The Benevolent Society for some reading you can do.

If there are existing problems in a marriage or relationship, the stress caused by reunion can serve as a catalyst by highlighting these, and sometimes major difficulties will result. One of the ways you and your partner can deal with the effects of a reunion is to talk about what is happening for each of you. Respect your partner's feelings but don't be afraid to tell her / him how you are feeling. Support your partner while she / he is working out her / his new relationship so that she can successfully make space in her life for everyone. You and your children will also have to consider where the adopted person fits into your lives. Everyone needs time and support in negotiating the various new relationships that result from a reunion.

There are several strategies that you could consider to assist you through the stages of your partner's reunion.

- Discuss how you feel with your partner at regular intervals. It is all too easy to become distanced from each other.
- Try to give your partner the time and space she / he needs to work out the new relationship.
- Be willing to compromise. For example, accepting that sometimes you might have less time with your partner because of her / his commitment to her / his newly found child.
- Try to respect and accept each other's feelings. Listen to each other.
- Make a contract with your partner (written if it helps) about things you will both do for your relationship, even if they seem very small and insignificant. You may, for example, commit some regular time to spend together, to have a meal, to go for a walk, see a film.
- If things get really difficult seek help. Make an appointment to see an adoption counsellor, or relationship counselling might be appropriate. Feel entitled to ask for help just for you. Look after yourself. Recognise that this is a major event - not just for your partner but also for you and that seeking professional help is quite legitimate.
- Do some reading (see reading list).
- Join an adoption support group with your partner.

If you can, let your partner go at their own pace, and give them time and space to work things out, it will pay dividends. The intense period that follows a first meeting can last for anything from three months up to a year or longer. If you can be patient, "hang in there" and attend to your own needs as well as your partner's, your relationship may emerge even stronger than before.

#### Reading list

*Lost and found: Betty Jean Lifton*

*Birthmothers: Merry Bloch Jones*

*Looking for Lisa: Libby Harkness*

*Letter to Louise: Pauline Collins*

*Birthbond: Gediman and Brown*

*Meetings: NSW Committee on Adoption & Permanent Care*

*Further down the track: NSW Committee on Adoption & Permanent Care*

*Adoption and loss-the hidden grief: Evelyn Burns Robinson*

*Journey of the adopted self: Betty Jean Lifton*

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