

ARE YOU WONDERING HOW TO RESPOND TO CONTACT FROM A BIRTH RELATIVE?

You are party to an adoption; perhaps an adopted person, a birth parent or an adoptive parent. You now know that a birth relative would like contact and this may or may not be appealing to you. Perhaps contact is something you never gave much consideration to. Perhaps it is something very precious and you are frightened it may “go wrong”. Perhaps it seems likely to complicate your life in ways you don’t feel prepared for.

On the other hand, you may have a desire to know something about your birth relative. What is your birth mother like and why did she place you for adoption? Was your child’s adoption a success and what is his/her life like now? Why does your birth relative want contact now?

The decision about whether or not to have contact is often not a simple one to make, but there are some things you can do that will help at this time.

Face Your Feelings about Contact

If your birth relative who wishes contact seems very keen, you may feel uncomfortable that such a momentous issue for you is apparently “easy” for them. You may wonder what their expectations will be, and if they will intrude in your life. While you may want to know “the truth” about your adoption, you may be anxious that there will be information you would prefer not to know.

For Example:

Adopted people sometimes fear that they may have been conceived by rape or incest or that their birth father abandoned their birth mother or that their birth mother abandoned them.

They may fear that contact with their birth family will cause them to “lose” the self they know and understand and not have something they value to replace it with.

Birth parents may fear that they will learn the adoption was not a success and that their child had a difficult life. They may fear the adopted person will resent them or not be prepared to listen to their explanations. They may find the thought of future contact causes them to remember the shame, guilt and pain of the adoption placement. They may fear that others in their present life will reject them if they know of the adoption.

Adoptive parents may fear they will lose their child to birth relatives, or at least lose the specialness of their parent-child relationship. They may want to protect their child from unpleasant information. They may fear intrusion in their child’s and their own lives. They may find themselves faced with many feelings from the past about their own infertility and the adoption. If they adopted children believing contact could never occur, they may feel angry, cheated and unprepared for the present circumstances.

There may be other people in your life that you presently feel need to be “protected” from your birth relative, people such as your parents, children and spouse.

If you, yourself, would like contact, you may feel guilty at entertaining this thought, when you feel others around you would not want the contact.

This may have made it hard for you to discuss this issue with those people who usually support you through difficult times. The result is that you might feel isolated. You probably don't know anyone else who's been through this situation, so it's hardly surprising you would feel that way.

Gather information you need

You are at a stage in your decision-making when you need to gather information – about your options, other people and their expectations.

You may already know a little about your birth relative and why they are seeking contact. It may help you to see some photos and know who else in the person's family is seeking contact with you, what your birth relative hopes contact with you will be like, and how they feel about the adoption.

Your own desires for information and understanding about the adoption and your birth relative will now have to be balanced against any desire you have not to have contact. You may also have some understanding of your birth relative's needs and feel you would like to put that person's mind at rest too.

An intermediary could assist you to gather information from your birth relatives if you do not wish to have direct contact at this time.

If you have not already done so, you may like to do some reading about adoption reunions or about adoption generally. PARC's bookshop and library has copies of 'Further down the track' and 'Meetings', both of which are collections of personal experiences of search and reunion. You may also find it helpful to come along to our Information and discussion meetings.

Find out what contact is really like

A “reunion” is about information, understanding, knowing, “the truth” and resolution. Where a willingness to share exists, even a little, it's hard not to achieve some measure of success.

If you have exchanged some information with your birth relative, you can already claim to have been successful. It's not fair for you, or your birth relative, to perceive a desire by either of you not to pursue the contact further, as a failure.

What type of contact do you want to have? Every reunion is unique. A “successful reunion” is one in which both parties have their questions answered AND feel comfortable with the level of contact that is established.

Some people have letter or phone contact only, some have a lot of initial contact that peters out, some have birthday and christmas contact, and some become firm friends over time. Some reunions happen in days, others months. Some are short lived, others become lifetime involvements. Only you will be able to determine what your reunion will be like.

It is extremely rare for people to establish a “parent child” type of relationship and few people seem to want that. For both parties to feel comfortable, no doubt some compromises have to be made, but of course no-one should be forced into contact they do not want. It is common for one person to want more contact, but to accept the level of contact the other person feels comfortable with.

You may find it reassuring to know that most people report a feeling of satisfaction following their reunion, even if the reunion did not go well. For many people, “not knowing” has produced many fears, fantasies and feelings of emptiness. People who “just want to know the truth” invariably feel some sense of satisfaction when they finally do know, even if part of the truth is painful.

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