

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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How Adoption Professionals Can Support Adult Adoptees' Search for Information

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Over the past ten years, I've received many calls from young adult adoptees pleading with me to send them their adoption or birth records. Most are heartbreaking stories of lost documents due to fire, flood, or multiple moves. There are other stories of dissolved adoptions, relationships gone bad, or just a disconnection. Most of these calls come from international adoptees, although we receive requests from domestic adoptees as well. Parents and military officers have also contacted us. The callers hope that the agency will have answers for them—that somewhere in our files, we have original adoption documents they can request and we can produce.

Some of these calls are the result of estrangement between the adoptee and his or her adoptive parents. The adoptee wants proof of identity, validation of adoption and U.S. citizenship, or information about their biological family. I've heard stories of adoptive parents refusing to provide the necessary legal documents to their adopted adult child. I have heard many reasons for this, such as the adoptee is "irresponsible"—or, worse, that the parent shredded the documents when the child went into foster care because they were angry and blamed the child for the dissolved adoption. Often the adoptee has already left home and does not want to reach out to the adoptive parents for their information, hoping they can



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obtain originals from the adoption agency. I have also had parents call me, embarrassed that they can't find the original adoption records. Often, the documents have simply been misplaced or lost in a flood, fire, or move.

Although adoption agencies are generally required by law to retain basic information (rules and requirements can vary state by state), often that is not the only information the adoptee is seeking. Many adoptees insist that we should have all of the information about their biological family, but in fact many files have very little information. Sometimes agencies have since closed or merged, making files less accessible for interested adoptees. Due to state and federal laws, full case records can rarely be handed over to adoptees; often, the limited information retained by the adoption agency can be provided only in redacted form. Domestic adoptees who once had their original documents can replace these fairly easily, but for international adoptees, documents can be very difficult and costly to replace, as often only one copy was provided to the adoptive parents and replacement requests need to go through the original foreign court or Central Adoption Authority.

The inability of agencies to produce all the information they are seeking can understandably escalate feelings of helplessness in the adoptee, who sometimes blames the agency for the lack of information. I find it helpful to use reflective listening, acknowledging the emotion of the request, and the emotional pain felt by the individual.

Personally, I have found that taking notes and trying to get the most complete history possible is a good way to start. Determine what information is available: Which agency or attorney facilitated the adoption? Was this a domestic or intercountry adoption? Was it an open or closed adoption? Is the original birth certificate available? Is there information available on the biological parents? Does the individual have their original birth certificate or a copy? Is it possible to speak with both the adoptee and their adoptive parent(s) in an effort to obtain as much information as possible?

Providing Information to Adoptees: What is Available?

The first step when receiving these calls is to obtain as much information as possible. It is important to gather all the known facts, as well as information that the adoptee or adoptive parents only vaguely recall. The information may be coming from a verbal report provided via translator, remembered by the adoptive parent, etc. Or the information may be a result of what the adoptee remembers from comments made during their

childhood. If the individual already has their original adoption documents but is hoping for additional information from the agency, that gives us a stronger foundation on which to help them try and locate additional information.

It is important to determine exactly what information is available in the agency files, as well as what can be provided to the adoptee according to state law. Every agency must be aware of what is allowed in its own state. The best resource for this is the Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/search/searching/

Each state provides information on how to obtain original adoption records for domestic adoptions. It is also helpful to search online for government resources within your state, and find out whether the adoptive parents are aiding in the search or presenting roadblocks. Redacted records are usually readily available for both domestic and intercountry adoptees.

Each adoption agency has information that is retained for every adoption. Depending on the state, that information is retained for a period of years (ranging from five years in some states to 100+ years in the majority of states). However, over the years, files are often “thinned,” scanned, misplaced, or destroyed in fires or floods. Agencies close, attorneys retire, and their records may be transferred and stored according to state laws; some may also be untraceable. Families move or lose contact with their agency for any number of reasons, perhaps missing the notification of an agency’s closure or move. For adoptive parents who finalized their adoptions in another country, the agency might have requested that all documents provided to parents in the foreign country also be provided to the agency upon return home, but not all families will have supplied their agencies with these documents.

There are also state and federal laws about information that can be provided to the adult adoptee. Although some states allow the release of limited adoptee information, often it cannot be released until the adoptee is 18 or 21 years of age. Sometimes it also requires the birth parent to first sign a release allowing for the records to be accessed. All states and agencies allow for redacted information to be readily provided to the adult adoptee, but that rarely answers all of their questions—for some, not having some information limits or slows their ability to obtain legal identification and proof of citizenship.

For many adoptees, the redacted information only offers clues as to their biological family history. Often they want their adoption file or original records so they can find and contact their biological family. Although

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not every adoptee has an interest in or feels a need to learn about their biological family, for some adoptees it is a critical piece of their identity that they feel is missing. Does the biological family have the right to privacy and secrecy or should the adult adoptee have the right to know all of the information contained in their records? Different states have different answers, and for many it has changed over the years.

Every state has a process by which the domestic adoptee can access their adoption records as an adult. However, some states allow for full disclosure once an adoptee reaches the age of 21, and other states only allow for the release of redacted information, which does not include full names or information about the biological parents/family of the adoptee. In some cases, it is possible for the domestic adoptee to register with their state, so that if their biological parents want to provide information or allow contact, they are connected with one another. But these registries are generally not well-advertised.

When my father was adopted as a toddler 80 years ago, adoptions were still largely kept secret. When my brother was adopted 50 years ago, adoptions were still “closed,” but the fact of the adoption was generally discussed and acknowledged. When my niece was adopted eight years ago via domestic adoption, her adoptive mom was her birth mom’s labor coach. The amount and extent of information exchange and contact has changed over the years, with domestic adoptions now being more open. The exchange of medical and social information is common.

In international adoptions, information about the child’s birth family is often minimal at best. Occasionally there will be a basic history from birth, and some information about the birth family, but it is rare to have a detailed, accurate history. If a child was abandoned at birth, then no information about family history is available. When families travel to the country to confirm their referral for the adoption, in many cases that is also when the family receives whatever information is available about that child. If there is involved biological family, more information may be available. It may require the adoptive family to take notes or repeat what they heard in court; they may record the information or keep it in their head. Sometimes that information is provided to the adoption agency or the family may have shared that information, but it is rare to have more than a few paragraphs of history and perhaps a few photos at the time of referral.

Acquiring and Maintaining Information for Adoptees

Adoption agencies should have a plan and a procedure to follow when receiving information requests from adult adoptees. First, obtaining all of the adoptee's information is critical. I always ask for the adoptee's name, birth name if known, the adoptive parents' names, the adoptee's place of birth, and the birth parents' names if known. If the individual was adopted internationally, I try to determine which documents related to their adoption and citizenship they have in hand.

In a domestic adoption, birth parents typically complete a profile, describing any medical issues as well as any historical information about the family they want to share with the adoptee and their family. Sometimes there are letters, photos, etc. that have been left for the adoptee. In addition, there are state records about the adoption that may be accessible to the adoptee. In a domestic adoption, adoption records can often be retrieved, though some information may be redacted. It helps if all involved in the placement – which may include attorneys, agencies, or other professionals – can be located and records requested.

After determining the basic facts of the situation and precisely what the adoptee is seeking, agencies must follow state protocols for the release of information. It is important to have the individual who is seeking information sign a release of information form so that the agency can speak to others on behalf of the adoptee. States may require notarized forms, and often the individual must have reached the age of 18 to 21 before information can be released. I try to educate the family or adoptee as to which documents might or might not be in the client record.

In an international adoption, information will often be far more limited. Some countries provide scant history, and there may be no way to obtain more information for an international adoptee. Some families choose to adopt via intercountry adoption precisely to ensure a “confidential” adoption; many countries have laws outlawing or limiting access to original adoption records. Even with adoptees whose documents have been lost, however, it is sometimes possible to obtain copies of their original adoption documents; it just may be very costly and challenging.

When families bring their internationally adopted children home to the U.S., they complete immigration procedures on behalf of their child. At that time, they must submit copies of their original adoption documents to USCIS. Families can apply to have their documents returned to them by completing USCIS Form 884. It also is recommended that adoptees

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contact the placement and homestudy agencies to see what information may be available in their records. The agency might be able to put the individual in contact with their in-country personnel, who in turn might be able to go to the court and apply for the original adoption records (for a fee). Other searchers are also sometimes available and can be found by searching online.

For both international and domestic adoptees, the Internet can be the best tool when attempting to track down information. If they have the names of biological family members, they may try to find them on Facebook or other social media. (V-Kontakt is the Eastern European version of Facebook, and many international adoptees have used it to find family members.)

Recommendations

For adoption professionals

1. In international placements, use your influence and connections within the international child welfare community to help other advocates, policymakers, and stakeholders understand the importance of gathering and safeguarding any and all information about how children enter care and maintaining accurate information during the child's stay in institutional care.
2. Educate the adoptive family about the importance of history and information. They want information about the child they are adopting, after all. It is important that they record and keep all information received.
3. The agency needs to record any information provided, preferably in an online, secure cloud-based program, making it fireproof, flood-proof, and available for the adoptee.
4. Require families to provide copies of all adoption finalization documents, certificate of citizenship, and birth certificates to the agency.
5. Support adult adoptees trying to obtain more information.
6. Provide counseling to the adoptee on how to reach out to their biological or adoptive families in a considerate, healthy manner, and support them throughout the process if needed.

For biological parents

1. Know that providing medical and family history can help fill in the missing pieces for an adoptee. Providing the most complete history possible for ongoing and/or future access by the adult adoptee is important.

2. The biological parent should be able to update their history or contact information at any time post- placement.
3. If the biological parent is open to contact, it is important to stay in touch with the original placing agency.
4. Provide a forwarding address to the agency (and the adoptive family, if it is an open adoption) if you move.
5. Provide contact information and say whether you want or don't want future contact and what type of contact you might prefer (and know that you can change your mind at any time and let the agency know your wishes). Even if no contact is desired, information can still be provided for the adoptee.

For adoptive parents

1. Keep and record all information provided; make sure all documents are safe, secure, and easily retrievable. Ask questions, take detailed notes and photos, and record any history available at the time of adoption. Keep it in a secure, cloud-based system, along with scans of all important documents.
2. Place hard copies of all important records in a safety deposit box. Many of the documents are irreplaceable, and only one original copy may have been provided. For domestic adoptions, these records are easier to replace. For international adoptions, it may require a trip to that country or an expensive intermediary.
3. Talk about adoption from day one with your child, and share what information you have when developmentally and age-appropriate.
4. Answer the adoptee's questions about adoption at their level at all times. The questions may be difficult or challenging to answer if the information is unknown; acknowledge that, and the adoptee's feelings about it.
5. Educate schools and peers about adoption so that your child doesn't feel isolated by their experience.
6. Seek information about the adoptee's history at their request. Ask them if they are interested in doing so, and do this more than once. The adoptive parent should provide what information is available and support the adoptee in the quest for further information, not focus on their own curiosity. When my brother and father were not interested in obtaining their original records or whatever information I could help them find, I backed off and let them know I was available to help if they wanted. With our daughter who was interested, I shared what information I'd been able to track down and then offered to pay for an additional search; she decided to do it on her own. I've also offered to

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pay for counseling if desired or needed as a follow-up to her search. Remember that it is the adoptee's story, and the level of information sought needs to be directed by them.

7. Make sure the adoption and U.S. citizenship was finalized! I've spoken to families who thought they were "all done" when they came home with their internationally adopted child, but never completed the actual finalization of the adoption, leaving the adoptee vulnerable.

For adoptees

1. Ask yourself: What information is necessary to me at this time, and what information is desired? These are personal decisions only an adoptee can make.
2. Do I want a relationship or contact with my biological family, or do I just want to have my questions answered?
3. What questions do I have for my biological family?
4. Do I want medical history?
5. Do I want to know the specifics of my placement?
6. Know that a search and/or reunion can provide healing or closure, but can also reveal hard or complicated information. The adoptee has to be open and ready for all scenarios when deciding to search.
7. Have emotional support in place when searching. Family or friends may serve this role. Additional support might be provided by adoption professionals or a counselor to help process emotions around new information or relationships.
8. Understand that the biological family may not want to open the door to a relationship, even if they are willing to provide more information.
9. Know that all involved parties will be more likely to be cooperative if treated with compassion and respect.
10. Store any new obtained records or information in a safe and secure location, such as a bank safety deposit box as well as scanning them to a secure, cloud-based location.

Every time a call comes in from an adult adoptee, I remind myself of the courage it takes to reach out to a stranger to try and obtain intimate, personal information and history. Even when we as adoption professionals are unable to provide the exact information sought by the adoptee, at the very least we can provide acknowledgment, support, and resources for them as they search. I always enjoy hearing the outcome when a searching adoptee finds what they are looking for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rhonda Jarema, MA is Executive Director California Office of Nightlight Christian Adoptions. She has worked as a social worker and advocate in the fields of international adoption and mental health for over 20 years. Since 1995, Rhonda has focused her attention on the international adoption field as a social worker, advocate and educator. She has presented at national adoption conferences on the issues related to adopting school-aged children, and has published several articles related to internationally adopted children. Ms. Jarema is married and the mother of four adult children and one high school-aged child, all adopted internationally.



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