

# OUTCOMES IN ADOPTION

The views of adoptees and natural parents

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## INTRODUCTION

Under the provision of Section 62 of the Adoption of Children Act (Victoria, Australia) 1964, inspection of records of adoption proceedings is restricted, and Regulations 35 and 36

of the Adoption of Children Regulations 1965 prohibit or restrict access to birth entries relating to adopted children. In November 1976 the Attorney-General of Victoria requested the Statute Law Revision Committee to examine whether these

restrictions should apply to an adoptee who has attained the age of 18 years or to the natural mother of an adoptee. The Committee reported in October 1978 and recommended, inter alia, that in any new adoption legislation adoptees should have only a qualified right to access to original birth records on application to a judge. Moreover, any changes in the law should not be made retrospective to cover those already adopted.



Although the Committee had received written and verbal submissions from all of the interested parties in adoption, including Dr. John Triseliotis who was in Australia in May 1978, their Report seemed to reflect a lack of understanding of the basic issues and, in particular, because of the absence of Australian research, no objective data.

In an attempt to remedy this deficiency the co-operation of Jigsaw — an association of adoptees, natural and adoptive parents — was sought. Members were invited to participate in a research study to attempt to describe the circumstances of adoptees seeking information and/or contact and of the natural parents. In all, 86 people were interviewed, 48 adoptees, 32 natural parents, 3 adoptive parents and 3 relatives of adoptees. In addition, one of the adoptees was also a relinquishing parent and an adoptive parent, and one adoptee was also a relinquishing parent. Data were obtained, in all but a few cases, by means of interviews.

### THE ADOPTEES

In all, 48 adoptees were interviewed — 37 women and 11 men. Their ages ranged from 19 to 50 years, the largest group (16) being in the 31-35 year group. There was a considerable variation in the age at which adoptees had found about their adoption —

5 years and under	13
6 — 10 years	11
11 — 15 years	7
16 — 20 years	8
Over 20 Years	9
Total	48

Similarly, there were considerable variations in who did the telling. Ten adoptees said they had been told by both adoptive parents; 1 by her foster mother; 15 by the adoptive mother; 2 by the adoptive father; 2 by the adoptive mother on the insistence of the adoptees; 1 by the step-adoptive mother; 5 by the family members; 3 by friends; 2 by school children; 1 by a person at work.

### WHY DO ADOPTEES WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR BACKGROUNDS?

From our knowledge about the generally successful outcomes in adoption it is at least reasonable to infer that not all adoptees seeking information about, or contact with, natural parents will be unhappy, unstable, or from unsatisfactory adoptive homes. The search for origins is much more complex than a simple search for an idealised "happy reunion" with a "lost" parent. This is reflected in the range of answers to the question "Why do you want access to information about your birth?" We have categorised answers in terms of:

- 1) a search for personal identity — typified by such statements as "I don't know who I am";
- 2) a belief that the wish to know one's origins is a right, and a normal thing;
- 3) pure curiosity;
- 4) a strong wish to meet a parent or parents;
- 5) and those answers with multiple reasons — e.g., medical history, curiosity, ethnicity, ancestry, belief that parents want to be found.

1. **Fifteen answers fell into the category of a search for personal identity.** e.g. "I would like to know who I am — in what circumstances I was conceived and born; how my mother coped with giving me up and her life since then. To me to know is part of my life. Not knowing is absolute frustration. Being an adoptee has left me with a certain insecurity. When you suffer from not knowing what other people automatically know it unsettles your judgment for other things. I have feelings of insecurity. It is an identity need."

2. **Nine respondents felt that a wish to know was a right, a normal thing.** e.g. "It is a natural birth right. I feel it is a normal, natural, basic thing to want to know. It is a basic human right. (The good it has done everyone concerned since I found out only reinforced my feelings that it is a right to know.)"

3. **Five wanted to know out of pure curiosity.** e.g. "Plain curiosity. I am a busybody! I don't want a mother — I already have one."

4. **Five were motivated by a strong wish to meet a parent or parents.**

e.g. "I would like to find them both. Perhaps to find the parents I never had. I wanted to find someone to whom I could relate emotionally."

5. **Twelve answers contained more than one reason.** e.g. "It is part of my process of growing up. Curiosity comes into it — to find out what they looked like and why they gave me up." (Her parents were married when she was relinquished.) "Being pregnant prompted it. I want to be able to tell my child about our ancestry." "Medical problems triggered it off." (This young woman had had an unexplained medical condition. She eventually found both her natural parents, and her father said that he had an identical problem when he was her age and it cleared up naturally.)

6. **Two respondents did not answer this question.**

Knowing why adoptees wish to have information about their origins is, however, only part of the complex constellation of factors making up the need for access. Having analysed the timing of the revelation of their adopted status we can now discover the length of time the adoptees have wanted further information. It is reasonable to assume that the strength of this need will vary according to individual circumstances, the quality of certain significant relationships and the onset of particular events.

Because the access question has only become a matter of public debate in the last few years, some adoptees may have suppressed their wish to know because they did not believe that it could be gratified within the existing legal structure, and particularly within the confines of the promises of confidentiality made at the time of the adoption. Few adoptees fall into this latter category. Twenty-two said they had wanted more information ever since they

learned about their adoption. It is particularly significant that this group comprises adoptees from each of the age groups — i.e. from those told at 5 years or under to those told at 20 years or over. Seven mentioned early teens and adolescence as the starting point, and 1 other specifically referred to the onset of the identity crisis.

Eight said that a particular event had triggered their wish to know — for 1 it was his engagement; for 2 it was marriage; 1 said it was her pregnancy and 1 the birth of a first child; 3 pointed to the death of an adoptive parent as the precipitating factor. This finding is consistent with that of other research. Six gave imprecise answers to this question, like "I've wanted to know for several years".

#### **ADOPTees WHO HAD CONTACTED OR KNEW THE WHEREABOUTS OF NATURAL PARENTS**

Twenty-two respondents had found their natural mothers and 2 of these had also found their natural fathers. Two of the 22 have located their natural mothers and an approach has been made with a view to a meeting. The circumstances of the natural parents are as follows:— 21 were married at the time contact was made; of the 21, 1 had been married twice and widowed twice; 3 were widows; 3 were separated; 3 divorced; 1 had died and 1 had remained single. Of the 2 natural fathers, 1 was married and 1 was a widower.

In 18 cases contact was first made by means of an intermediary; 4 had made direct contact without using an intermediary and 2 are still waiting to make contact but intend using an intermediary.

In an attempt to assess the quality of the contact, where made, respondents were asked if more than one meeting had taken place, and if they planned to keep in contact. Thirteen had met with the natural parent more than once and sometimes regular meetings were taking place; 7 had had only one contact at the time of the interview; 1 had still to arrange a meeting; 1 had not had contact, and 1 postal respondent did not answer the question.

Eighteen respondents said they plan to keep in contact; 1 had planned to keep in touch but the natural parent

died; 2 were uncertain about further contact depending on whether both parties can cope; 2 did not answer the question and in 1 case it was not applicable as yet.

#### **THE NATURAL PARENTS**

One of the problems in formulating opinions about adoption in Australia has been the lack of objective data about the outcomes. In the preceding section we presented information provided by adoptees based on their experiences of the adoption process and their own reactions to their identity as members of two sets of families — adoptive and original.

The present study also allowed us to assess how some natural parents react after being separated from their children. One of the assertions most frequently heard when the access issue is raised is that natural parents will not want the ghosts of the past raised because they will have made new relationships and forgotten the mistakes of the past. This seems at best to attribute feelings and capacities to natural parents that are absent in other parents. Our increasing knowledge about the processes of grief, loss and mourning should lead us to infer that the circumstances surrounding the relinquishing of a child would be traumatic for most people and that unless given significant help and support some might suffer long term unresolved grief/loss reactions. Moreover, if this supposition is correct, many would never have become reconciled to the loss of the child and would entertain hopes of either finding that child or of being themselves found.

In order to test these suppositions we asked the 32 natural parents in our sample about the reasons why they placed their children for adoption; what efforts they had made to obtain information after the adoption; whether they would be satisfied with having information about the child; and whether they wished to meet their child.

Altogether 32 natural parents were interviewed. Twenty-eight were women, three were men and there was one couple who had married after their child had been placed for adoption. Their ages at interview were as follows:—

Age of Natural Parents:	
20 — 29 years	2
30 — 35 years	8
36 — 40 years	10
41 — 45 years	4
46 — 5- years	0
51 — 55 years	3
Over 55 years	5
Total	32

#### **REASONS FOR RELINQUISHING THE CHILD**

As may be expected, most of the natural parents gave several reasons for not keeping the child. All spoke of the involuntary nature of the decision to relinquish, and none stated that a child had been given up without regret. It is important for a proper understanding of all sides of the access issue to be aware of the depth of feelings and distress entailed in relinquishing a child. It also raises the question of whether we should talk in terms of people freely consenting to give up a child when clearly for many there is no opportunity to exercise choice.

#### **EFFORTS TO OBTAIN INFORMATION**

Having been told that the effect of an adoption order was to permanently extinguish their parental rights, it is not surprising that some parents believed there was no way of getting further information. However, it is interesting that this belief varied in strength and over time.

One woman did nothing for two years and then returned to the agency; another waited thirty-five years before she traced the adoptive family to England. At every point on this time-scale there were people waiting and wondering. In some cases their efforts to get information were sparked by a newspaper article or a television programme or by their membership of the Jigsaw organisation.

#### **WOULD YOU BE SATISFIED WITH INFORMATION ONLY?**

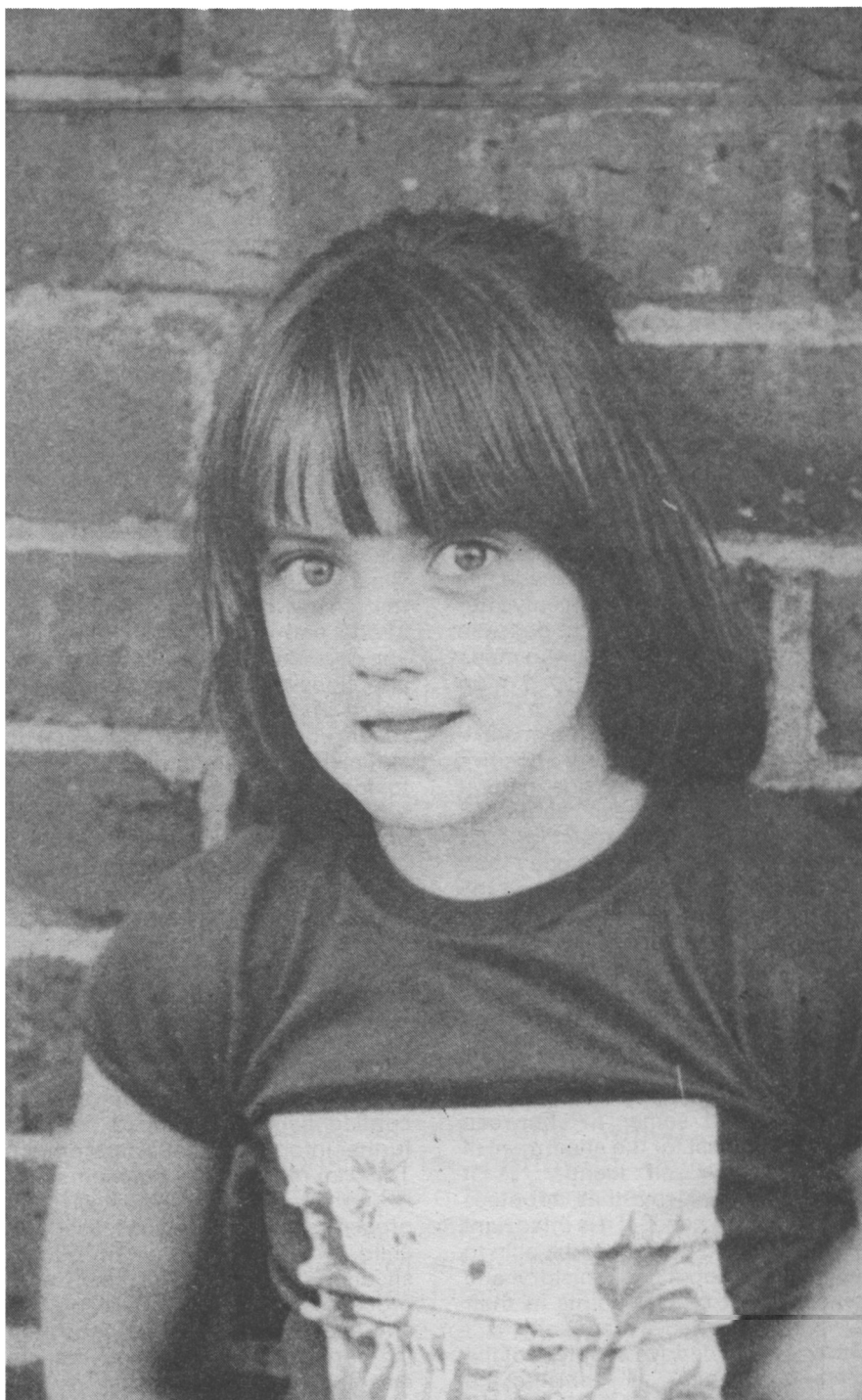
In their answers to this question the natural parents revealed a number of things — the extent of their need to know what had happened to their

child; their hopes and fears, and, indirectly, the strength of their feelings of identity with the child they had produced. Only one gave an unequivocal "yes" answer. All the other "Yeses" were qualified — "At the moment, yes"; "Yes, if that is what he wanted"; "Yes, *anything*"; "Yes, if nothing else was possible". Six respondents gave a categorical "No", and there were several qualified negatives — "Not entirely, but it would help"; "Not in the slightest, but it would be better than nothing"; "Not knowing anything is the worst — just knowing he's all right would help but I hope for more. If he doesn't know he's adopted I'd accept it"; "It would be better than nothing at all. We would love to hear about his health, welfare, education — anything."

### DISCUSSION

The main purpose in carrying out this study was to shed light on the access issue by reference to facts as opposed to fears and suppositions. What do the findings as presented tell us about the reasons why adoptees want information about and contact with relinquishing original parents? Perhaps the most consistent themes are concerned with such natural reasons as wanting to know about one's personal history and genealogy, and, through that knowledge, to complete and identify felt to be incomplete. This sense of incompleteness has often been misinterpreted by adoptive parents and others, as being equivalent to a rejection of the adoptive parents in favour of some idealised lost parent. This is not supported by the findings of this study, even though a number of adoptees report unsatisfactory relationships with one or other adoptive parents, and a feeling of lack of acceptance in the adoptive family. Moreover, it seems that the desire to know about one's origins is not dependent on either the quality of the relationship or the age at which the adoptee learned about his/her status. At one end of the adoptee group 13 had been told at age 5 or under, and at the other no less than 9 did not find out until they were over 20.

Although the desire to have more information seems to be independent of the age at which the adoptee is told about his/her status, the nature of the desire is often bound up with the quality of the relationships with the adoptive parents — both positively



and negatively. We found a number of instances in which adoptees felt supported and encouraged in their search by loving and concerned adoptive parents. Conversely, some adoptees searched sadly, lacking either information or encouragement from adoptive parents from whom they felt estranged.

The belief that most adoptees seeking access to information

learned about their adoption from persons other than their adoptive parents was not generally supported in this study. Thirty of the 48 adoptees had been told by one or both adoptive parents.

The overwhelming impression is of a group of adults who have a need to know facts about themselves that others not adopted take for granted. Moreover, this need to know does not

contain overtones that could be construed as either disturbed or punitive.

The general level of concern and compassion for adoptive parents and natural parents was high and lacked any apparent motivation to confront angrily or to condemn. Although both researchers interviewed adoptees who were manifestly distressed by their situation, neither registered the belief that negative outcomes would result from any contact with natural parents. This accords with the low level of concern registered by the counsellors in the recently published General Register Office Survey in Britain.

A strong indication of the level of concern about the circumstances of the natural parent(s) is the manner in which the adoptees sought to make contact. Eighteen out of 24 made use of an intermediary and then only after careful consideration of possible repercussions. All of the 4 who made direct contact without an intermediary said they felt in retrospect that it had been a mistake — in spite of generally positive outcomes. On the other side, natural parents who had been contacted appreciated the use of an intermediary although one had serious criticisms about the way the intermediary made contact.

The reasons advanced by adoptees to have access to information have to be examined, in part, in relation to the circumstances of those who are not adopted. If the research in the field of personality development accurately reflects the developing person's need to establish some "fit" between present and past for the attainment of a satisfactory self identity, is it reasonable to deny that adoptees have the same need? If it is important to non-adopted persons to be able to verify facts about their history and genealogy at crucial points in their lives, e.g., marriage, pregnancy, is it reasonable to deprive adoptees of the same opportunity? It seems to the researchers that the present law and practice of adoption entail the violation of certain fundamental human rights, *unless* it is argued that adoptees are different from other people — an argument impossible to sustain. Research in Britain and the United States of America supports the view that such needs are representative of a large number of adoptees. Moreover, there is increasing evidence, through

research in those countries, and on a more subjective level in Australia, that providing access to information as a right (and the attendant likelihood that information will be used in some cases to contact natural parents) does not produce a significant level of distress or disruption. Presumably this must be due in some measure to the fact that most adoptees who seek, do so responsibly, and on the other side, most parents who are "found" are willing to let the contact take place. We cannot at present know for what proportion of adoptees and natural parents this is a significant issue.

Although this research has been mainly concerned with the adoptee's search for origins, our sample of natural parents enables us to articulate some of their concerns. Clearly, the most important finding is that many natural parents have a strong and often long-held need to know about the outcome of the adoptions they helped to make. It is only in the last decade that researchers have followed up sufficient numbers of natural parents to form a picture of this generally forgotten group. "Forgotten", that is in the sense that they received virtually no services or supports after they had signed the consent to adoption. Triseliotis and Sorosky et al. have now shown both the needs of this group and their willingness to be contacted. The present study has outlined the underlying reluctance to relinquish children and the concomitant wish to know what happened. Because of the promise of confidentiality few hoped for any further information, let alone contact. This can most readily be understood in terms of an unresolved grief process set in train by the loss of the child. In normal grief producing situations, grief and mourning processes culminate in a resolution and acceptance by means of which the grieving person can resume meaningful activities. For the natural parent, who may not even know that the adoption took place, the processes of grief and mourning often lack the culminating resolution which would enable them to "let go". This is likely to be accentuated if the decision to relinquish was taken under pressure and without the support of someone who could convey an understanding of the mother's feelings. It could also be argued that part of the adoptee's

search for origins, our sample of completion of a grieving process.

Once again it must be stressed that these views are not only supported by the answers of our respondents but also by an increasing volume of research data from a number of countries. These data should enable us to formulate policies and practices based on a sound understanding of the needs of actual and potential users of social welfare services.

As with some adoptees, a number of natural parents said they would accept information if only information were available. However, this acceptance was tempered by the knowledge that adoptees and natural parents were meeting with increasing frequency. Indeed, since its inception the Jigsaw organisation reports that more than 100 "reunions" have taken place in Victoria. The lack of consistency in terms of availability of information (identifying or non-identifying), co-operation from agency workers and public officials simultaneously brings hope to some and growing anguish to others.

From the foregoing we can see that in this study at least there is strong support from adoptees and natural parents for a change in the law relating to access to information. Both groups also recognise that their views are not the only ones. There is strong support for formalising the processes by which access to information is made possible. The most acceptable mechanism seems to be an officially established contact agency staffed by qualified and experienced counsellors. All of the adoptee respondents supported access being made a right which would include access to the original birth record. The researchers have concluded that the British model as established under the Children Act 1975 provides an acceptable system which offers reasonable safeguards. Present experience shows that even when the law prohibits access many people are daily succeeding in their searches. This hit or miss system offers no protection to any of the parties and undoubtedly causes much justifiable anxiety. The provision of an official agency should ensure minimal protection for all who desire the safeguarding of their privacy whilst at the same time providing a more reliable channel of communication for those adoptees and natural parents who wish to meet or at least exchange information. ●