

MAKING CONTACT

Once the search process is completed and an individual is located, the time for contact has arrived! Making contact is a profoundly moving experience for both the searcher and the person who has been found; there is no other experience quite like it. One's hopes and fears are all wrapped up in this final step in the search process.

While you want to take into account the other person's privacy and unique situation, it is really not possible to know that much about his or her current life situation prior to contact. We suggest discretion and plenty of forethought. Sometimes searchers worry that they will interrupt the life of the person found. Remember that by contacting him or her, the searcher is simply providing both individuals with the opportunity to know one another. This is an opportunity that has been denied both the adopted adult and his/her birth parent until now. When all the secrets are out on the table, it is so much easier to understand, to share, and to relate to those with whom we are irrevocably tied by blood and circumstance

Our suggestions about making contact are based on the recognition that contact is a critical part of the search and reunion process. Each step of the journey requires courage, stamina, and resourcefulness. While it may not be recognized as such in the early stages of search and reunion, it is ultimately a journey of emancipation and resolution for adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents.

There is no way to adequately prepare oneself for contact. It basically requires a "leap of faith." Although some searchers agonize over how best to make contact, most realize that once they have located the person(s) for whom they have been searching, contact becomes an imperative. How then is it done?

A number of individuals involved with search and support groups and independent search consultants were queried as to their thought on making contact. The following suggestions are offered:

TELEPHONE CONTACT

By utilizing the telephone for the initial contact, a searcher will receive immediate feedback. It also offers one-to-one privacy, a concept highly recommended by all those interviewed.

While there are always variations on this basic theme, the elements of contact by telephone usually are these:

- Ascertaining that the timing of the call is appropriate
- Establishing one's identity
- Respecting the other's needs and desires
- Being non-threatening
- Beginning to get acquainted over the phone.

Here are some possible scenarios for the phone call:

Scenario 1

Searcher: “This is (searcher’s name). Is this a convenient time to talk? I have something important and private I would like to discuss with you. Are you where you can speak privately?”

Person found: “Well, no I’m not, but what do you want?”

Searcher: “Since this is not a good time for you to talk, I would rather call back when it is convenient for you. Would you please take down my name and phone number?”

Person found: “Okay”

Searcher: “I am James Smith. My number is 703 333-3333. Is there a good time when I might call you back?”

Person found: “Yes, tomorrow evening after 9.”

Another scenario (searching adoptee to birth parent):

Searcher: This is (searcher’s name). Is this a convenient time to talk? I have something important and private I would like to discuss with you. Are you where you can speak privately?”

Person found: “I guess so. What’s this all about?”

Searcher: “My name is James Smith. I was born in St. Luke’s Hospital in Phoenix on April 6, 1972 and placed for adoption”.

Person found: (Pause) “Oh my. I’ve always wondered if you would try to find me. I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe it’s you. How did you find me?”
(At this point there may be tears).

Yet another scenario (adoptee to birth parent):

Searcher: This is (searcher’s name). Is this a convenient time to talk? I have something important and private I would like to discuss with you. Are you where you can speak privately?”

Person found: “I suppose it’s okay.”

Searcher: “My name is James Smith. I was born in St. Luke’s Hospital in Phoenix on April 6, 1972 and placed for adoption”.

Person found: “Yes? Is that date supposed to mean something to me? What do you want?”

Searcher: “I’ve spent the last year discreetly searching for my birthmother and all the trails have led directly to you. I would like to get some information on my background for myself and my children.”

Person found: “This is very awkward. That all happened so long ago. It never occurred to me that you would be able to find me or would want to. I’ll need some time to think this through.”

Yet another scenario (birth parent to adoptee):

Searcher: “Is this Sally Jensen?”

Person found: “Yes”.

Searcher: “This is Olivia Thompson and I’m trying to locate Sally Jensen who was born on July 22, 1963 in Hartford, Connecticut and placed for adoption.”

Person found: “That is my name and birth date, but I wasn’t adopted.”

Searcher: “Gee, I guess it is possible I have the wrong person. I’ll have to do more research. Thanks for you time.”

(Depending on the honesty recognizable in the voice of the person found, the birthparent – searcher may then have the answer to the vital question of “does she know that she is adopted?”)

A Fourth scenario (birth parent to adoptee):

Searcher: “Is this Sally Jensen?”

Person found: “Yes”.

Searcher: “This is Olivia Thompson and I’m trying to locate Sally Jensen who was born on July 22, 1963 in Hartford, Connecticut and placed for adoption.”

Person found: “Well, that’s me – who is this?”

Searcher: “My name is Olivia and I’m the woman who gave birth to that child. I named her Katherine.”

AFTER THE FIRST PHONE CALL

The results of the first phone contact are usually POSITIVE! After some hesitation the person found will acknowledge his or her identity and gradually begin to open up to the caller. Remember that the searcher knows that contact is about to be made. The person found will likely be surprised and may need time to come to terms with the change in circumstance. Subsequent calls will give the two parties the chance to explore tentatively such sensitive issues as the circumstances of birth and why the placement was made. However, these issues are usually not explored in depth until there is a face-to-face meeting some time in the future. If such a meeting is impractical, yet there is a desire to get better acquainted, a period of correspondence and subsequent phone calls must be substituted.

We do suggest the exchange of photographs as they do a great deal toward making the situation tangible and let both parties absorb details about each other until the reality of actual reunion is achieved.

CONTACT BY LETTER

Some searchers believe this approach best suits their needs. If there is no phone number available, a letter is often the only way to make contact. Sometimes it is helpful for the searcher to consider how s/he would like to be contacted. If the situation were reversed, would the searcher prefer to be contacted by phone or mail? The searcher should use his/her answer to help decide how to make contact.

Here is a sample letter written by a searcher:

Dear Mary,

I was born at Good Samaritan Hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on September 3, 1969 and placed for adoption three months later by the Children's Home Society. The name given me at birth was Elizabeth Stanford. My adopted name is Rebecca Young and I grew up in Columbus, Ohio where my adoptive parents moved when I was six months old.

It has taken me three years of active but discrete searching to locate you. I am writing to say that I have always known I was adopted and have wanted for many years to meet and get to know you. I am hoping you can answer some of the questions that have been with me my whole life.

I hope you will call me; I was unable to reach you, as your phone number is unlisted. You may reach me at (phone #) during the day or at (phone#) after six in the evening. I will anxiously await your call.

With love,

*Rebecca Young
135 Main Street*

It is the opinion of some experienced searchers that an initial contact by letter should not spell out the details of an “adoption story” but should simply state that you have been trying to make contact and ask that person to call you. Many spouses or parents are in the habit of reading any and all mail that enters a house; remember that a private contact is very important, so consider sending a much abbreviated letter of this sort. It is not fair to alert a spouse or someone else in a family who does not know of the birth and adoption. Nor is it fair to the adult adoptee to be denied direct contact with the birth parents because an adoptive parent has opened a letter and decided the contact should not be.

Sending a certified letter is not advisable, as it will certainly get the attention of anyone in the household. Again, discretion is the name of the game.

INTERMEDIARY

Quite a few states and provinces mandate the use of a court-appointed intermediary or social work professional if the search is done under their auspices. Not only does the intermediary conduct the search, but must make contact also, then report the results to the court. We regret this approach is mandated, because it abrogates the freedom searchers should have to choose their preferred method of contact. We, in the American Adoption Congress, are seeking legislation which will provide access to the original birth certificate for all adult adoptees. If you live in a jurisdiction with a mandated intermediary system, you will simply have to rely on the good judgment of those running that system, trusting that they will contact the person being sought with sensitivity and caution. If you are fortunate, the search and contact will be conducted by a triad member, one who has “been there” and understands your situation.

The AAC opposes the use of intermediaries in general because this strips the searcher of the important element of control to which he or she is entitled. Searching is, after all, a journey from the unknown to the known, from a lack of control over a critical aspect of one’s life to the opportunity to regain that measure of control.

Once the search is completed, the contact is imminent. Even though a spouse or friend may offer to make contact for you, we discourage this approach for several reasons. First, the person being contacted by phone will very likely respond more positively to the person with the kinship tie rather than to a party unrelated to him or her – a third party. Perhaps more important, if the contact is not positive and there is an initial rejection, the intermediary is placed in an awkward position. We have known of situations in which the telephone contact is the one and only contact; the chance to hear the voice of the person found is lost forever. No “professional” can do it as well as you.

IN PERSON CONTACT

If it impossible to make contact by telephone or by letter, the searcher is sometimes left with the least attractive alternative – going in person to the home of the person he or she

is seeking. This has to be a last resort, as the situation can never be assessed clearly before one ends up in the middle of it. Care needs to be taken not to back a person found into a corner and to explain in detail to him or her why such personal contact was necessary.

THE REUNION

The logical conclusion of a contact by any means is the face-to-face meeting. It is an event highly anticipated; plans to meet are often discussed during the initial contact or soon thereafter, sometimes for months before it actually comes about.

We recommend that the first meeting be a private one between the searcher and the person found. There are many things to sort out and all one's energy will need to be focused on the situation and on the other person.

A neutral setting, such as a restaurant or park will provide the necessary privacy and freedom for the first meeting. No one's home or "space" will be intruded upon and there will be no children to watch. A park provides room to walk and talk with the utmost privacy. Remember that the initial meeting is often emotional and both the searcher and the person found may cry. Be sure to choose a location in which both individuals will feel comfortable showing emotions. Family members may often want to join the newly reunited persons after they have two or three hours together alone and this is fine. Just don't skip the "alone" part altogether!

Many people find that reunion is far more emotional than they had anticipated. Birth parents may find themselves reliving feelings they felt at the time of surrender. Adoptees may feel guilt and a sense of betrayal toward their adoptive parents. Both adoptees and birth parents may experience sadness and anger over what they have lost, or confusion about what they should feel toward the new people in their lives. We suggest that you seek out other people who have experienced reunion. No one understands what you are experiencing like they do! The AAC website lists local support groups for adopted adults and birth parents. There are also online support groups such as Concerned United Birthparents and the Canadian Council of Natural Mothers. Local and online support groups will be able to direct you to therapists who specialize in adoption and practice in your area.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Here are some books containing additional information about the search, contact and reunion experience. You will find others and several personal accounts of reunion in the Recommended Reading List on the AAC website.

The Other Mother: A Woman's Love for the Child She Gave Up for Adoption
by Carol Schaefer. Soho Press, 1991. ISBN 0939149753.

Adoption Reunion Survival Guide: Preparing Yourself for the Search, Reunion, and Beyond by Julie Bailey and Lynn Giddens. New Harbinger, 2001. ISBN 1572242280.

Birthbond: Reunions Between Birthparents and Adoptees by Judith H. Gediman, Joan S. Dunphy, and Linda P. Brown. New Horizon Press, 1991. ISBN 0882820729.

Birthright: The Guide to Search and Reunion for Adoptees, Birthparents, and Adoptive Parents by Jean Strauss. Penguin, 1994. ISBN 0140512950.

Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience by Betty Jean Lifton. Harper Collins, 1988. ISBN 0060971320.

Reunion: A Year in Letters Between a Birthmother and the Daughter She Couldn't Keep by Katie Hern and Ellen McGarry Carlson. Seal Press, 1999.

Adoption Reunions: A Book for Adoptees, Birth Parents and Adoptive Families by Michelle McColm. Second Story Press, 1993. ISBN 0929005414

We wish you good luck in the search; may you find the answers to your questions and touch once again those from whom you have been separated.

THE END

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