

Approaching reunion: information for adopted people and birth relatives

This article has been written to help answer some of the questions people are left with after having just been contacted by an intermediary, on behalf of someone they were separated from, through adoption, years before.

For many people the first contact is likely to have left them with a thumping heart and a churning stomach. Some may feel that their world has been turned upside down, others will have a sense of great relief and excitement or indeed a combination of the two! Many feelings may surface from elation to sadness, joy to anger, there may be a high level of anxiety or an overwhelming need to have immediate contact.

Typically, the person who searches is more ready for reunion than the person who is found. The searcher has been actively thinking about their feelings for some time and will usually have met with an intermediary to explore in depth their reasons for wanting contact and the possible outcomes of an approach. The person being found will need time to catch up in their thoughts and feelings and it is important to take this time to think about what is happening and what it means to them. They could decide that the time is not right for them or that they have no wish to be in touch with the person making the approach. If this were the case, the searcher would be likely to want them to know that their door would be open for contact in the future.

Adoptive families can often feel left out of the reunion process. It may have stirred up a lot of feelings including a fear of losing the son or daughter they have raised and loved. For most adopted adults, these are important relationships, which they do not want to jeopardise. Reassuring their adoptive families, including them and being open and honest can help them to feel more at ease with the reunion. The bonds formed by years of love and proximity are extremely durable and are often strengthened further by a reunion.

Relationships with partners and children can also be strained as people try to negotiate a place in their lives for the newly found relative.

Once a decision has been taken to accept contact, the intermediary will usually suggest that they exchange letters in the first instance as this allows them to find out more about each other without having direct contact. It will normally be the searcher who writes the first letter and may have already left one with the intermediary. There will usually be a facility to provide a 'letter box' service in the early days of letter exchange until both parties feel comfortable about giving their address. Some people feel that email is a good way of communicating, perhaps finding ongoing letter writing a more daunting prospect! However, email can result in people feeling overwhelmed as there can be a tendency to feel an instant response is expected. Letters allow a much slower pace with time to stop and reflect.

Having established some degree of contact, there are those who might then decide that they would like to be in telephone contact and others who prefer to meet rather

than speak on the phone. There are no rights and wrongs, it is about feeling comfortable with the way things are progressing and the intermediary will be available to offer support and guidance.

At some point it is likely that both parties will reach the stage where they feel that they would like to meet. This could be soon after the initial contact or for some it may be several years later. Some people prefer to meet without the initial exchange of written information. There are also those who decide not to go as far as a meeting and stop at the exchange of letters. Again, the intermediary can provide ongoing support and discuss what is happening in the contact and the direction it is taking.

For those wishing to meet, this can be arranged through the intermediary or between themselves. The intermediary would usually suggest that the first meeting takes place on neutral ground and would be happy to attend the meeting if this would be helpful. Some intermediary agencies could provide a room for the first meeting. Alternatively a pub or a hotel could be a suitable place to meet. Geography will obviously play a part. Sometimes people decide to meet in the most unusual places for example, the South Mimms Service Station on the M25, this being a halfway point which both parties knew. It is important, however, that the meeting place does afford some privacy and is neither too noisy nor too crowded.

It is impossible to predict the outcome of a reunion or how it will develop. Each situation is unique. It is a coming together of strangers who may have a deep and intimate bond formed in a previous relationship. The birth mother is likely to have a very vivid memory of that relationship and the feelings she experienced at the time. The adopted adult is likely to have a strong need to know what happened in those early days of his or her life. While the birth father may not have had the same level of involvement with the baby, he may also have strong feelings and memories from that time. Sometimes birth fathers were not aware of the pregnancy or adoption but even so, might be willing to accept they fathered the adopted person, although some may request DNA testing to verify this.

Both adopted adults and birth relatives can be amazed at how many similarities there are between them or they could be very different with little common ground. For the adopted person, they could be meeting for the first time somebody who they physically resemble. This can be especially poignant for those adopted adults who were transracially placed and are meeting black family members.

Both parties may have brought with them their personal fantasies about the other person and a reunion can go better than expected or leave much to be desired. It is important to allow the reality to replace the fantasy as not to do so can create obstacles.

Expectations might be quite different and it is important to be clear and honest about what each person needs or does not need and what feels comfortable or not. Some may see the reunion as an opportunity to establish a deep relationship, others might simply want to exchange information and connect once or twice a year. Being up front with each other is very important and can help to avoid misunderstanding and disappointment. Avoid making commitments or promises early on that may be later

regretted and cause disappointment.

The reunion process has often been described as like being on an emotional roller coaster. It can bring up a lot of intense feelings from the past and the euphoria of having found each other can be replaced by feelings of sadness and loss. There can be a kind of 'honeymoon' period in reunion relationships, which can last for some time. It has been described as feeling similar to the falling in love period at the beginning of romantic relationships when everything seems magical and wonderful. There are those who find that they are totally preoccupied with their birth parent or son/daughter to the exclusion of those around them and they need to take care not to shut out those people who have supported and encouraged them and are part of their usual life.

It is not uncommon for people reuniting to want to touch, to spend time together, to talk and to share. This is seen as a natural result of the bonding process which was cut off in infancy and is often referred to as genetic attraction. However, the strong emotions that people can experience may stimulate sexual feelings especially between brothers and sister who have not grown up together but also between the adopted adult and birth parent. It helps to be aware of this in advance. In a small number of instances, birth family members and adopted relatives have entered into the 'forbidden' territory of sexual activity. This can be very destructive and seriously damage not only the relationship of the reuniting family members but also existing relationships with partners and adoptive family members. This is usually referred to as genetic sexual attraction and people are urged to seek help if they are concerned that their relationship might be moving into a sexual arena.

The reunion process offers the opportunity for adopted adults to know first hand about the circumstances that led to their adoption and to have information about their family of origin. For birth parents to know about what happened to the child they parted with all those years before and to be able to explain their actions can go a long way to healing the wounds left by the experience. Whatever the degree of contact, even if only short lived, the majority of people feel a sense of well-being and ability to move on and make other decisions in their life.

This article from Adoption Search Reunion website was written by Jenny Setterington while she worked at the Children's Society in 2006.
