

Contacting Relatives

Tips for Adoptees

Tip #1: Start by sending a letter and some photos.

The dying art of exchanging written letters may seem strange in the age of email, Facebook and mobile phones, however there are reasons we recommend it. Writing letters slows things down and allows each party to process all of the information. It is also the first time each party has seen the other's handwriting which creates a personal connection. Share a bit about yourself and your upbringing. It's good to send a couple of photos with your first letter. In your parent's mind, you may still be a baby, so it's good for them to see you as an adult. It also creates some connection as the parent looks for similar features. As excited as you may be to meet your mother or father they may need time to work through past issues to 'ready' themselves for contact. Take it slow and make personal contact when both parties are ready.

Tip #2: Be careful with social media.

Finding information about your parents can be such an exhilarating experience that you feel like sharing with the world. However it may be that upon hearing of your search for information your parents may be experiencing something different. It may re-trigger feelings about the loss of a child or relationship. It may also mean telling family members about a 'secret' child. Some parents continue to carry feelings of guilt and shame. Being public about your information on social media also means being public with your parent's information. Be sensitive to your family on the net by not sharing personal information or photographs of others without permission.

Tip #3: Beware contacting purely for medical purposes.

Wanting to find out medical information may be a strong motivating factor for adoptees starting the application process. It can often give them 'permission' to start searching. Having medical history is important both for adoptees and for any children they have. There's nothing wrong with seeking this information, however it's also important to understand that there's a human being attached to this information. While contact may look different in each situation, using someone to purely get information from them may come across as disrespectful.

Tip #4 Be aware of the history of adoption

People generally do the best they can in the situations they find themselves. Mothers and fathers found themselves in situations they had very little control over and like your adoption, may have had very little choice in the matter. Read about the history of adoption in the years you were born to get a full understanding of the times your parents were living in. The website forcedadoptions.naa.gov.au is a good place to start. You may want to talk through any negative feelings with a counsellor or Jigsaw staff.

Tip #5: Understand that your mother or father may not see adoption from your perspective.

You may have had a wonderful and happy upbringing in your adoptive family. Knowing about your upbringing may remind your mother or father of the childhood they didn't get to experience with you. Even though your mother may be pleased you went to a great family, her experience of your adoption may bring back memories of being in an unmarried mother's home and having you forcibly taken away. Your father may have resisted your adoption or encouraged it. Recognise that you, your adoptive parents, your original mother and father do not all need to see your adoption in the same way and accept there will be many different viewpoints.

Tip #5: When approaching a mother.....

Guilt and shame are part of most mother's experience of adoption. Many mothers were not allowed to grieve for the child they lost and the trauma of losing a child has deeply affected them. Some went on to start new families with new partners who are unaware of your existence while others later married the father and had additional children. Your contact with her may allow her to finally grieve the loss of a child causing a significant emotional reaction while other mothers may continue to hide the pain in secret. Approaching a mother should be done with a lot of sensitivity and respect.

Tip #6: When approaching a father.....

Information about fathers can be difficult to obtain if your adoption took place some time ago. Fathers were sometimes disempowered in the adoption process, not mentioned on birth certificates and didn't need to give consent for the adoption to take place. Some fathers wanted to keep their children yet had no options to do so. Fathers may have gone on to start new families who are totally unaware of your existence, while other fathers may have eventually married the mother and had further children. Fathers may need to confront not only the loss of a child but the loss of a romantic relationship. In some cases fathers were not informed that a pregnancy had even occurred. Issues of secrecy, loss and guilt are often present in fathers as well as mothers so approaching fathers should be done sensitively keeping these issues in mind. A DNA test is recommended to confirm paternity for both of you.

Tip #7 Get support from someone who knows about adoption.

Finding out information about your family and preparing for a reunion can be an emotional rollercoaster. There can be feelings of enormous excitement followed by confusion and fear. Talking with Jigsaw Qld can help you figure out what might be going on underneath the surface. They can also help with advice about how to approach the other party, prepare for contact and develop a relationship. Support groups, workshops and reading can also help you process your thoughts and feelings.

Tip #8: Reunion is the beginning of a journey not a miracle pill.

Unfortunately reunion doesn't bring back lost years, fill empty voids or fix relationships. All relationships take work, go through changes and face challenges. You can contact Jigsaw for support in dealing with any post contact issues.