

To Search or Not to Search

Adoption is often viewed as a triad that exists between the adoptee, adoptive family, and the birth family. But for many Wisconsin adoptees, this triad may not feel whole because of a lack of information about their birth family. To complete the picture, many adoptees choose to search for the missing information.

People can sometimes make an unfair assumption that the reason behind an adoptee's wish to search for information about her birth family stems from dissatisfaction with or a conflict within the adoptive family. However, for adoptees, there are several reasons why you might choose to search for information about your birth parents and other birth family members. Before beginning your search, it's important to have a good understanding of your reasons for searching, realistic expectations, and a personal support system in place to help you through what can be an emotional journey.

Reasons for Searching

"My parents told me early on that I was adopted and that someday I could search for my birth parents if I was interested . . . Finding my birth parents really helped me complete the picture of who I am. It was very useful to gather their medical history, but it was also very helpful to talk about [the reason my birth parents made an adoption plan]."

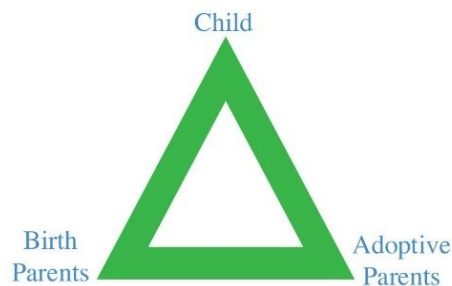
- John Bauman,
Wisconsin Adoptee

Curiosity about your past. It's quite common for all of us to feel curious about our own personal histories. For those who were adopted, there may be many unanswered questions about the past, and you may find that you feel driven to find those answers. Depending on the type of adoption (domestic, international, or adoption from the foster care system) these questions could include:

- Why did my parents choose to make an adoption plan for me?
- Why was I placed in foster care?
- Did my parents fight to keep me?
- Why were their parental rights terminated?
- What was it like to live in my country of origin?
- Do I have any birth siblings?
- What about extended birth family?

There is often a natural drive for adoptees to want understand their past and the circumstances surrounding their adoption. Conducting a search may start you on the path to answering some of these questions and filling in those missing details. However, it may be unrealistic to expect that you will have all of your questions about your adoption answered.

A sense of loss. At the heart of all adoption is loss. Even if you were raised in a loving and supportive family, you still experienced a loss, if not a series of losses, throughout the



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course of the adoption process. Many adoptees experience the loss of relationships with birth parents, the loss of relationships with siblings who were not placed with them, and the loss of relationships with entire branches of extended family. If you were adopted from the foster care system, you may have experienced these losses, in addition to the possible loss of former foster families and caregivers. Those who were adopted internationally may also feel the loss of their country of origin and its culture, language, and customs.

An adoption search may help you find out about these lost connections and, in certain circumstances, may help you recapture some of these losses; but it will likely not fill in all of the missing pieces.

Medical and genetic history. If you have ever had a physical at your doctor's office, you know that you are often asked for your family's medical history. That's because many medical conditions, such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and even some mental health conditions have a strong genetic component. Based on your genetic history, you may have risk factors or protective factors that should be considered when monitoring your health and wellness. However, if you are an adoptee, answering these questions may be difficult.

Your medical and genetic history might be available in an adoption search. For some

types of adoptions finalized in Wisconsin, a medical and genetic history report is often included in adoption records. However, these records may be incomplete or missing. If, through your search, you are able to connect with members of your birth family, you may be able to get this information from them.

Things to Consider Before You Search

As an adoptee, you may feel motivated to search for one of the reasons shared above or for many other possible reasons. Regardless of your reasons for beginning your search, there are many things you may wish to consider before getting started.

Realistic Expectations

It's important to have realistic expectations about what type of information you might find during a search and what outcomes may occur as result. In many cases, adoption records are sealed and much of the information is

restricted because of

laws, regulations, and confidentiality practices. Even when adoptees are able to successfully access records pertaining to them, they may find that the information is incomplete or missing and doesn't answer their questions.

It is also important to have realistic expectations about what type of outcome a search might lead to. For example, it may not be realistic to expect that, once you are able to make contact with your birth family,



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they will be open to re-establishing an ongoing relationship – or even to the idea of reconnecting with you. On the other hand, it may be equally unrealistic for you to expect that you will be fully open to whatever type of relationship your birth family member(s) may want with you.

Another important consideration is the impact an adoption search will have on your personal life. Finding answers to your questions may not lead to the type of fulfillment you may be looking for and may even lead to new questions. It might be helpful to see the search as the beginning to a life-long journey of understanding and discovery about your past and present selves.

Emotions of Searching

Like any major life event, adoption is surrounded by a variety of emotions. During the search process, you may re-experience many of those emotions. For example, there is a chance that your search will reconnect you with birth family members and that you will have a positive experience with them. They may accept and love you from the first moment of your reunion. However, there is also the risk of rejection or sadness. Or you may find that, while learning about your birth family opens a whole new world of positive experiences, you also encounter old wounds and feelings that you weren't prepared to handle. It is also possible that you may experience disappointment and frustration, if you are

unable to find the information you are looking for or encounter barriers in your search. More than likely, you can expect to experience a wide range and mix of emotions during your search.

Before searching, it's helpful to consider how these emotions might come into play, and to come up with a plan to support yourself through this journey.

Building Your Support Network

The search process is a journey into your past with many highs and lows. This is a journey for which you will likely need some additional support. For many people, support starts at home with family.

Talk with your family about your search and why it is important to you. Adoptive families sometimes have mixed feelings about your seeking information on your birth family, so it may be important to consider their

feelings and try to address any concerns they may have. Other families are entirely open to and supportive of the process. In either case, having their support may help you cope with frustrations, barriers, and disappointments that you may encounter.

It's always helpful to remember that there is a large adoptive community in Wisconsin. Connecting with the adoption community through support groups, conferences, and events can help you meet individuals who have experience with the search process.



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There are national support groups, web-based support groups, and, in some areas, there are local support groups that meet in person.

The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families is also a support that is available to you. You can call and speak with a Resource Specialist who will help connect you with resources and offer you support along your journey. These resources include therapist and support group lists, publications, trainings, and an extensive lending library.

Therapy and Counseling

An adoption-competent therapist is a professional who has experience working with adoptees and their families, and they can be a great support as you go through your journey. The emotional journey of searching for your birth family will likely bring up many feelings, and a good therapist will help you gain the tools to effectively process your feelings and emotions while you are searching.

A good therapist can also be helpful in navigating any family or interpersonal issues that you may face after your search. Wisconsin adoptee, John Bauman, says, “I am very glad that I found my biological parents, although it was a challenge to navigate through how everyone wanted this new relationship to develop. Initially, they wanted more contact than I was ready for.” A therapist can help you set healthy boundaries and expectations when contacting your birth family.



The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families publishes a regularly updated list of professional therapists that have experience with helping clients who are touched by adoption.

Beginning Your Search

In Wisconsin, adoption records are sealed. However, if your adoption was finalized in Wisconsin you can begin your search by contacting the [Adoption Records Search Program](http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption_search/default.htm) (dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption_search/default.htm), facilitated by the Department of Children and Families. Current law requires the State of Wisconsin to maintain records

permanently and adoptees may apply to gain access to the information in their record. You should [contact their office](http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption_search/contact/default.htm) (dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption_search/contact/default.htm) to find out which records and information might be available to you, and how to apply to gain

access. You may also try contacting the agency that facilitated your adoption. In social work lingo, this is what is called a Child Placing Agency and, in most cases, is a county, private, or state contracted agency. There may be records through this agency that you can gain access to.

If your adoption was not finalized in the state of Wisconsin, you need to know that every state and country has different laws and record keeping practices. In some cases, it may be easier to access adoption records; in other cases, such as seeking international adoption records, it may be very difficult.

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Childwelfare.gov has a pool of resources available that can give you a good starting point on beginning your search. Visit their Adoption Search Page at childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/search/.

The Internet makes connecting with the global adoption community easier than ever before. In many cases, adoptees and birth families have connected through online registries where both parties shared information. Of course, as with any online service, it's important to protect your valuable personal information such as exact address, social security numbers, and banking information. Never send money to third parties that you don't know.

There are many registries that offer these services, but here are some of the larger ones:

- [International Soundex Reunion Registry](http://isrr.org/About.html). One of the oldest and most respected registries covering all states and many foreign countries. This registry is a mutual consent registry. After you fill out your profile, volunteers will determine if a relationship exists and notify you. The services are free. (isrr.org/About.html)
- [Adoptee Connect](http://adopteeconnect.com). Has search registries for each state, and many registries for foreign countries. You can fill out a profile, and search by name, date, and area. (adopteeconnect.com)
- [Adoption.Com Reunion Registry](http://registry.adoption.com/register.php). Also a large reunification registry that has over 400,000 profiles to search. (registry.adoption.com/register.php)

Finally, there are also adoption detectives who you can hire to help search for you.

Reflecting on the Search Process

Searching for your birth family is a major decision that you may face as an adoptee. It's an emotional journey that requires good

planning, patience, and a sound support network. This journey can be enlightening and lead to new self-discovery, but it may also lead to frustration. It will be important for you to understand the reasons you wish to search and maintain reasonable expectations throughout your search.

Only you can decide if it is right for you to begin a search for your birth family. The Coalition for Children, Youth & Families is here to help answer your questions and support you along your journey.



Resources

Books

- *Searching for a Past*, by Jayne Schooler
- *Journeys after Adoption: Understanding Life Long Issues*, by Jayne Schooler & Betsie Norris
- *The Adoptee Search: Looking for the Missing Piece*, by Marilyn Schoettle
- *Adoption Wisdom: A Guide to the Issues & Feelings of Adoption*, by Marlou Russell, PhD
- *Adopted Teens Only: A Survival Guide to Adolescence*, by Danae Gorbett

Web

- Wisconsin Adoption Records Search Program, dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption_search/default.htm
- About.com: Genealogy, genealogy.about.com
- American Adoption Congress, americanadoptioncongress.org/search_faq.php
- Holt International, holtinternational.org/pas