

What's the Future of Adoption?



Learning from the UK Experience
AAC Session: Sunday, April 17, 2011, 9:00 am

United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) History of Adoption and Open Records

Time Period	US	Number of Adoptions per Year	UK	Number of Adoptions per Year
1851	Massachusetts Children's Act – no mention of adoption records			
1860-1890			Investigations into "baby farming" - widespread practice of foster care murders of illegitimate children. Formal adoption regarded as highly suspect	
1900-1948	Birth records open/accessible/adoption agency records available to triad members		Open adoption/birth records open/accessible	
1917	Minnesota Children's Code – made adoption records confidential/ still accessible to triad members			
1918-1919			World War I - unprecedented numbers of orphans and "war babies"	
1926			Adoption of Children Act of 1926 - birth parents and adoptive parents should be physically known to each other	
1930	Illinois sealed original birth certificates but not from triad members			5000
1937		16000	Horsburgh Report of 1937 encouraged state-supervised adoptions that included contact between birth parents and adoptive parents	
1939			Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act of 1939 dictated that birth parents had the right to know the identity of adoptive parents - "Informed consent"	7926
1926-1960s	Georgia Tamm operates as "the baby thief" promoting adoption and closed records to protect her commercial interests		Many informal ways for adopted people to access original birth certificates and adoption agency records (My original mother's name and my given name appear on my Adoption Order, 1956)	23564
1949	Pro-natalist ideology, post-war baby	50000	Adoption of Children Act of 1949 – Adoption placed	

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	boom and wartime illegitimacy led to sharp rise in demand for infant adoption		under national regulation. Adoptive parents allowed to conceal their identities behind serial numbers	
1935-1991	Birth records and adoption agency records sealed for public and adoption triad members (Alaska & Kansas never sealed their records)			
1955	High demand market: 1 million childless couples seeking 75,000 children available for adoption	93000		
1965		142000		
1973			Houghton Committee proposes continuing anonymity for birth parents, commissions study of open birth records effects in Scotland (since 1930). Study finds secrecy has negative effects on adopted persons and Committee reverses and recommends open records.	
1975	Model Adoption Law drafted with HHS, defeated in Congress. Would have allowed adopted adults access to original birth certificates at age 18		Children Adoption Act of 1975 determined that adult adopted persons 18 and over could apply for original birth certificate following counseling appointment (for adoptees born before 1975); later, the counseling requirement was dropped	
1984			Parliament requested study of response to open adoption records: only 15-21% adopted persons, mostly female, sought original birth certificates, largely because most already had identifying information. Expected social turmoil never materialized.	
1984			Private adoption made illegal in UK	
2002			Adoption and Children Act of 2002 gives original parents the legal right to an intermediary service so that, once the children they gave up for adoption reach 18, they can make contact	
2004			Children born from donated sperm given the right to trace their biological fathers	
2010	9 US states allow some form of civil			

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rights for adopted adults and access to original birth certificates			
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Adoption, Search, and Reunion: The Long Term Experience of Adopted Adults (2003)

(N=394 searchers, 78 non-searchers)

How We Feel after Reunion

94% Original/birth mothers positive that adopted person made contact

90% Adopted persons and birth parents find contact and reunion satisfying

85% Searchers said reunion had been positive experience

72% Non-searchers said reunion had been positive experience

80% Searchers and Non-Searchers said reunion had answered important questions

50% Searchers and 33% Non-Searchers said they had an improved sense of identity and wellbeing

70% Still in face-to-face contact after 8 years

84% Still in indirect contact after 8 years

Racial Identity

71% of Adopted Persons adopted trans-racially said they felt different to their adoptive families when growing up

48% of Adopted Persons adopted in white matched adoptions said they felt different to their adoptive families when growing up

Our Relationships During Search and Reunion

75% Adoptive parents supported their adopted adult children's search

65% Adoptive parents said reunion had no effect on their relationship with their adopted child

22% Adoptive parents said reunion had enhanced their relationship with their adopted child

10% Non-searching Adopted Persons would not want contact with a birth relative

Most adopted people more likely to stay in touch with adoptive relatives than birth relatives

Who Searches?

Adopted women twice as likely to search as adopted men

Mean age of beginning adoption search. Women (29.8 years) – Men (32.3 years)

Study Authors' Findings

More searchers than non-searchers describe relationships with their adoptive family with mixed or negative feelings, suggesting that feeling ambivalent or negative about one's adoption might be one factor motivating people to search

53% Searchers said their adoption was a positive experience, so negative feelings cannot be the only factor

50% Non-searchers said they were not curious about their origins; the other 50% express some curiosity but worried searching might upset their adoptive families.

Decision to search the result of complex set of factors

Adopted people who search are looking for answers to questions about identity and self-worth

Contact and reunion experiences – active or passive – proved extremely good at helping people answer questions of identity and self-worth

Adoption Triangle Revisited: A Study of Adoption, Search and Reunion Experiences (2005)

A study of **matched pairs** of birth (original) mothers with sons and daughters, and matched triads of birth mothers, adopted people, and adoptive parents (N=93 birth mothers, 93 adoptive parents, 126 adopted people, and 15 birth fathers)

- 80%** Birth mothers felt pressured by family and professionals to surrender their children to adoption
- 79%** Birth mothers reported feeling lifelong guilt as a result
- 98%** Birth mothers reported thinking about their child and wondering whether he/she was well and had had a happy adoption
- 60%** Birth mothers referred to their child's father as a boyfriend or fiance'
- 38%** Birth mothers favored having access to identifying information once their adopted son or daughter reached 18 and over; 22% were opposed; 40% were unsure Unlike the birth mothers, **few of the birth fathers** in the study **were aware the law had changed** in 1975
- A majority of birth mothers and birth fathers believed that **adopted people should take the first step** in reunion
- 94%** Adoptive parents found the experience of raising an adopted child rewarding and satisfying
- 21%** Adoptive parents still felt a lingering sense of loss surrounding their infertility
- Many said they would have like more information about the birth family background at the time of adoption as they felt ill-equipped to answer questions their children raised as they grew up
- 80%** Adopted people said they felt happy growing up
- Almost half Adopted people had felt a sense of loss or rejection as a result of being adopted (Searchers were more likely than non-searchers to report these feelings)
- 31%** Adopted people said birth relatives should have the right to receive identifying information once the adopted person was 18 years old or over; 38% said no; 31% were unsure.
- 86%** Adoptive parents told their child about his/her adopted status before the age of four
- 97%** Adoptive parents said they felt comfortable talking about adoption
- However, many **Adopted people said they felt uncomfortable and awkward talking to their parents**
- 50%** Birth mothers had not told their other children or husbands/partners about the adoption until shortly before or after contact was re-established with the adopted person
- 94%** Birth mothers were pleased their son or daughter had made contact with them
- 90%** Birth mothers said the contact and reunion was a happy and satisfying experience
- 8%** Birth mothers said their expectations had not been met
- NONE** of the Birth mothers said she wished that she had not met her son or daughter
- 70%** still in face-to-face contact after eight years
- 86%** still in indirect contact after eight years
- 50%** Birth fathers said their self-esteem had increased after contact and reunion
- 85%** Adopted people reported that contact and reunion was positive for them, enhancing their sense of identity
- 50%** Adopted people who had felt rejected for being placed for adoption reported that the feelings of rejection disappeared after contact; 68% said the same about feelings of loss

97% Adopted people said meeting their birth parents had not changed the way they felt about their adoptive parents

68% Adoptive parents were aware of their son/daughter's desire to search

23% were told only after contact and reunion had occurred because their child didn't want to upset them

80% Adoptive parents said they were pleased about their son's/daughter's search and contact.

33% Adoptive parents referred to the relationships forged by the adopted person and the birth parent with warmth and approval

66% Adoptive parents had direct or indirect contact with birth family and found this satisfying

90% Adoptive parents described close or very close relationships with their adopted son or daughter both before and after contact.

Reunion did not change this relationship.

Adoption, Search and Reunion (2003, UK) - Key Findings

- Recognition that adoption is a **life-long experience** and that people's need to **access counseling and support services is not time-limited**
- The need for improved advice, guidance, and support during **adolescence** for adopted children and adopters when thinking about birth relatives is likely to be particularly strong.
- The value of adoptive parents feeling comfortable talking with their children about their origins, background, and history.
- The value of **information about the birth family**, including photographs, being available to adopted people during their childhood.
- The need for increased publicity for the Adoption **Contact Register**.
- The need for expert and informed counseling and support throughout the search and reunion process.
- The provision of intermediary services for birth relatives that is consistent across the country.
- The need for an active debate about the provision and character of intermediary services provided for birth relatives.
- The value of same-race, matched placements for minimizing adopted children's sense of difference and enhancing their sense of self-identity.
- The need of policy makers, placement workers and adopters to consider the identity and self-worth needs of children adopted inter-country by providing as much background information as possible about origins and history.
- The value of the search and reunion process for many adopted people to help them complete their story, and improve their **sense of identity, self-worth, and sense of connectedness**.
- The need to recognize that issues of identity, worth, and connectedness raised by adopted adults are likely to be raised by adults born as a result of **donated gametes and embryos**.
- The need for parents of children born as a result of donor assisted conceptions to have access to counseling, information, and advice to help support them tell their children and discuss with them their origins, background, and genetic make-up.

Adoption Triangle Revisited (2005, UK) - Messages for Practice and Policy

- Adoption is a life-long experience and all those affected need access to counseling, advice and support services that are not time-limited.
- Publicity and information are essential for people affected by adoption so that they know how and where to access the information, advice and support they need.
- Adoptive parents need to have access to preparation, training and support to help promote communication and openness within the adoptive family environment.
- Given that most adoptive parents are understanding of their son's or daughter's need for background information and reunion with birth family members, adopted people should feel more confident about being open and raising the subject with them.
- Access to information can have a positive impact and help lessen living with uncertainty and the unknown for all those affected by adoption.
- Children who are placed in transracial adoptions, or who have been adopted from overseas, are likely to face additional challenges and issues relating to their sense of identity and belonging. Support services must be available to address these specific issues, and to meet the needs of the child and the family.
- While birth relatives have a legal right to ask for an intermediary service to make contact with the adopted adult, not all birth relatives will want to access intermediary services. Some birth relatives believe that it should be the adopted person who takes the first step.
- The fact that birth relatives do not initiate contact is not an indication that they would not want contact with the adopted person.
- Adoptive parents need to be confident that the relationship formed with their son or daughter in childhood is strong and enduring, and is unlikely to be threatened by contact with the birth family in adulthood. In this study, the majority of relationships were either unchanged or enhanced by the contact and reunion with the birth family.
- In the vast majority of cases, **contact and reunion has a long-lasting positive impact** for the adopted person, birth parents and adoptive parents.

For the Records II: An Examination of the History and Impact of Adult Adoptee Access to Original Birth Certificates (2010, USA)

Recommendations

1. Every state should **restore unrestricted access to original birth certificates for all adult adoptees, retroactively and prospectively.**
2. **State laws** that provide access to original birth certificates to a limited number of adult adoptees should be **amended** to enable them all to obtain these documents and thereby **be treated equally.**
3. No agency, attorney, social worker or other **adoption professional should promise birthparents that their identities will remain concealed** from their children.
4. A **national adoption registry** should be implemented to enable all adopted persons and their birthparents, no matter where they reside, to participate.
5. **Confidential intermediary services** should be available throughout all states, even after original birth certificates access is restored.

Conclusion

Wherever one stands, this much is clear: The laws on the books in most states do not benefit the vast majority of the affected parties, and therefore should be changed. Modern adoption practice, with its emphasis on *openness, honesty and family connections should be the operating model*. It is time to end the secrecy that has not only resulted in shame and stigma for nearly everyone concerned, but also has undermined the institution itself by sending a signal from the very start – at the time a birth certificate is issued – that adoption has something to hide. *(Emphasis added)*

Does Opening Adoption Records Have an Adverse Social Impact? Some Lessons from the U.S., Great Britain, and Australia, 1953-2007, Prof. Wayne Carp (2007)

Highlights

In Oregon, less than 1% No Contact preference forms submitted by birth parents in the five years following the opening of birth records in 2000. (8,190 adopted adults received original birth certificates; 503 birth parents filed contact preference forms; 391 wanted contact, 29 wanted it only through intermediary, 83 wanted no contact. No contact requests have barely increased since 2002)

In 80 years since birth records were opened in Scotland and over a quarter of a century in England and Wales, 55% of the people adopted in Scotland, England, and Wales have sought genealogical information from their records and/or established contact with a birth relative, usually the mother. **NO CASES** have been reported so far of blackmail or vindictiveness.

What can we do in the US to bring human and civil rights to all adopted people?

- Encourage adopted persons to “come out of the closet” - and stay out
- Speak honestly about the trauma and complexity of adoption
- Publicize contact registries
- Emphasize positive outcomes of search and reunion 36 years after UK open records
- Promote positive reunion statistics and stories
- Advocate ending most adoption, except domestic adoption through the foster care system
- Educate students in universities and social work schools (next gen counselors and therapists)
- Promote counseling for adopted people and others affected by adoption (new markets for adoption agencies)
- Encourage and help international adopted persons search and reunite
- Include people conceived through artificial means in adoption communities

Other Ideas



Bibliography

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- Complete study available for free download:
http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2010_07_for_records.php
- Howe, D and Feast, J with Coster, D (2003) *Adoption, search and reunion: the long-term experience of adopted adults* BAAF, ISBN 1903699533
- A fascinating study originally published by The Children's Society (2000) and now been reprinted by BAAF with a new introduction. Compares a group of adopted people who searched for birth relatives with a group who did not, and provides real answers about why some adopted adults decide to search for their natural parents while others do not.
- Order a copy of the study:
http://www.baaf.org.uk/res/pubs/books/book_adoptsearch.shtml
- Read a six-page summary of the research findings:
<http://www.adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk/professionals/research/>
- Triseliotis, J, Feast, J and Kyle, F (2005) *The adoption triangle revisited: a study of adoption, search and reunion experiences* BAAF, ISBN 1903699711
- The first UK study to investigate the experiences of both birth mothers who initiated a search for the child that they placed for adoption and birth mothers who have not searched, but were contacted by the adopted person. Gives a comprehensive picture of the adoption experience and the impact and outcome of the search and reunion process for all the key players: birth mothers, adopted people and adoptive parents.
- Order a copy of the study:
http://www.baaf.org.uk/res/pubs/books/book_adoptiontriangle.shtml
- Read a six-page summary of the research findings:
<http://www.adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk/professionals/research/>
- UK Adoption Researcher: Julia.feast@baaf.org.uk