Introduction

Adoption Issues is Volume 326 in the ‘Issues in Society’ series of educational resource books. The aim of this series is to offer current, diverse information about important issues in our world, from an Australian perspective.

KEY ISSUES IN THIS TOPIC
There has been an overall decline in the number of adoptions of Australian children over the last 25 years, however past and present adoption practices continue to raise a number of challenging and complex emotional and practical issues.

This book examines the adoption experience in Australia, including local and intercountry adoption and the legal processes involved; adoption trends; identity and disclosure issues; the impacts of past coercive adoption practices on unmarried birth mothers and their children; post-adoption grief and loss; and the same-sex adoption law debate. A number of personal search and reunion stories are also featured which illustrate some of the complexities and hardships involved.

Information about this topic is presented in three chapters: Adoption trends in Australia; Search and reunion; and Intercountry adoption.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION
Titles in the ‘Issues in Society’ series are individual resource books which provide an overview on a specific subject comprised of facts and opinions.

The information in this resource book is not from any single author, publication or organisation. The unique value of the ‘Issues in Society’ series lies in its diversity of content and perspectives.

The content comes from a wide variety of sources and includes:
➤ Newspaper reports and opinion pieces
➤ Website fact sheets
➤ Magazine and journal articles
➤ Statistics and surveys
➤ Government reports
➤ Literature from special interest groups

CRITICAL EVALUATION
As the information reproduced in this book is from a number of different sources, readers should always be aware of the origin of the text and whether or not the source is likely to be expressing a particular bias or agenda.

It is hoped that, as you read about the many aspects of the issues explored in this book, you will critically evaluate the information presented. In some cases, it is important that you decide whether you are being presented with facts or opinions. Does the writer give a biased or an unbiased report? If an opinion is being expressed, do you agree with the writer?

EXPLORING ISSUES
The ‘Exploring issues’ section at the back of this book features a range of ready-to-use worksheets relating to the articles and issues raised in this book. The activities and exercises in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond.

FURTHER RESEARCH
This title offers a useful starting point for those who need convenient access to information about the issues involved. However, it is only a starting point. The ‘Web links’ section at the back of this book contains a list of useful websites which you can access for more reading on the topic.
ADOPTION
A FACT SHEET FROM THE CHILDREN, YOUTH AND WOMEN’S HEALTH SERVICE

Finding out you were adopted may be a hard thing to come to terms with. When you find out in later life, like in your teenage years, it can be even harder. It might feel like everything in your life has changed and you don’t know your place anymore. People may tell you that because you were adopted you are special, however, you can still have very strong emotions and questions about why you were adopted.

Why does adoption take place?
Put simply, adoption is when a family takes a child who has different birth parents into their lives to bring up as their own.

People adopt a child because they want a family. They may adopt a child because they cannot have any of their own, or they may feel they are in a position to make a difference in a child’s life.

Birth parents may decide to put their child up for adoption for many reasons, usually because they want their child to have the best quality of life and do not feel they can provide it.

Feelings around adoption
There is no rulebook on how you are likely to feel about being adopted, but there are some things that many young people seem to share at some times when finding out they were adopted, or when they have grow up knowing they were adopted.

➤ Some feelings of abandonment. The knowledge that your birth parents gave you up for adoption can bring up feelings of rejection. “Why didn’t they want me?” or, “Wasn’t I good enough?” are some of the questions these feelings can bring about. This can have an effect on different aspects of your life. Some people find they have problems in their relationships. They may think people are going to abandon them again and so find it harder to trust or get close to others.

➤ Low self-esteem can result from feelings of inadequacy. During adolescence many young people go through an identity crisis, which happens due to changing roles and beliefs as you get older. If you find out you were adopted during this time, it can make this transitional period even harder to deal with.

➤ If you did not know you were adopted you might have feelings of betrayal. This is a normal reaction to such unexpected news.

➤ Feeling like you don’t belong. If there is no resemblance between you and your adoptive family, you may feel like you don’t fit in. Feeling as if the family sees you as different can also cause problems with relationships within the family.
Coming to terms with adoption

Dealing with issues around adoption is often a lifelong journey of discovery and healing for some people, while others find it less troubling.

People may say hurtful things without realising the effect it has on you. There can be times when you see things which bring up painful memories or images. For some people these times can be very testing and can affect how they deal with everyday life.

Many people find they can talk to family or friends about their feelings and have them accept sadness, anger and grief. Others find that they want to talk to someone who might really understand, someone else who has also been adopted. It is likely that there are supports for adopted people near where you live.

People may tell you that because you were adopted you are special, however, you can still have very strong emotions and questions about why you were adopted.

It can also be helpful to talk to a counsellor or mental health specialist if your feelings are affecting your life. A counsellor who is experienced in dealing with adoption would be particularly helpful.

If you are feeling uncomfortable talking about how you feel, try writing it down. Getting the things in your head onto paper can be a great relief. To see your thoughts in front of you can often give you a new perspective on what is happening.

Intercountry adoption

Many people choose to adopt children from foreign countries these days. In Australia, there are more intercountry adoptions than local placement adoptions. When people were born in another country they may look much different to their adoptive parents. Feelings of not belonging can be made greater by these differences. Differences may be confusing and hard to deal with as the adopted person is growing up. Some people may ask insensitive questions just because they are curious and do not understand that the questions may be hurtful. Others may have racist attitudes or make hurtful comments because they fear people different to themselves.

Although differences may be confusing to someone while growing up they can also be a cause for celebration. If you were adopted from a country other than the one you live in with your adoptive parents, your parents may help you to explore and embrace some of your home country's culture or you may do this by yourself. This could be a way for your family to strengthen your bonds with them, or relieve any nervous feelings they may have about your searching. Being an individual and having a varied and interesting background is something to be proud of.

The ‘Stolen Generation’

Since the first days of European occupation of Australia, some indigenous children were forcibly separated from their families and communities. This became official policy after the meeting of The Commonwealth State National Welfare Conference in 1937. The ‘Stolen Generation’ is the name given to the indigenous children who were removed from their families under child welfare legislation. This topic is too large to be covered in this article.

To read more about indigenous children who were taken from their families see: 

Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.
Searching for birth parents

Many adopted young people have lots of questions about their birth parents. Wondering what they look like, what they were good at and most importantly, why they put their child up for adoption? Fantasies about birth parents, both good and bad, are also common. Sometimes people find searching out their birth parents is a good way to put these questions to rest and move on with their lives. Searching can be a way to gain some control of the situation. Finding out that your birth parents were similar to you in some respects, can fill in some of the blanks and bring about a sense of understanding.

There are certain things which should be considered before this search is started, however:

➤ Have you got a support network in place? Searching can be a very tough process, one that should not be undertaken without some support. Will your family and/or friends help you along the way and should you contact some organisations that could provide additional support and advice?

➤ What are your expectations of searching? Finding your birth parents will not suddenly fix problems that you have been dealing with for years. It will still take time and healing for these issues to be worked through.

➤ How much contact will you have with your birth parents after your search? Just as it takes time to get to know a new friend, it takes time to get to know your birth parents. If you plan to only meet up with them for special occasions or holidays, the getting to know you process can take a long time. If this means you don’t feel connected to them straight away, you may experience additional feelings of rejection and loss.

➤ Consider how your adoptive parents feel about the search. Your adoptive parents can also go through strong emotions due to your search. They too can experience feelings of rejection and loss. Talking to them is the best way to find out and stop any misunderstandings.

➤ Be aware that there may be many set backs and disappointments along the way. It is possible your birth parents did not make the information available for you to find them. Further issues of abandonment and disappointment can follow. Your birth parents may not fit the idea you had of them, or they may not be alive anymore. Preparing yourself for these outcomes can reduce the impact, but the negative effects of this can outweigh the positives of beginning your search in the first place.

➤ Searching for your birth parents can be one of the most important times of your life. It is therefore important to choose when you decide to do this. If you have recently been through a tough time or trauma, it may be better to wait for a time when you feel you would be more prepared for the emotions you will encounter. It may be good to put a plan in place and organise the time frame you will search in. You may find that undertaking one part of the search and then having a break before moving on to the next, is a good way to pace yourself.

➤ Why are you really searching for your birth parents?

Is it about finding them or finding more out about yourself? You can use the search for self-exploration and discovery.

Dealing with issues around adoption is often a lifelong journey of discovery and healing for some people, while others find it less troubling.

Adoption is usually a very open situation these days (rarely hidden). If you think about how many of your friends live in families which are not the ‘normal’ family situation, you will see that the ‘normal’ family is very rare these days. It is normal to experience feelings of confusion and loss because you were adopted, but sometimes it is more important to focus on those around you than to look else where for answers. Research has suggested that children who have been adopted do as well in their lives as children brought up in other kinds of families.

REFERENCES

Adoption South Australia
www.dfc.sa.gov.au

A fact sheet from the Children, Youth and Women’s Health Service Young Adult Health site | www.cyh.com.au
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Adoptions in Australia
A summary from Adoptions Australia by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

BACKGROUND

This report presents the latest data on adoptions by Australian families of Australian children and children from overseas. Adoption is one of a range of options used to provide care for children who cannot live with their birth families. The report also highlights important national trends in adoptions over the last few decades.

Data for this report were obtained from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Adoptions Australia data collection. This data collection is a record of all finalised adoptions in Australia since 1990-91, collected from each state and territory department responsible for adoption.

MAIN FINDINGS

Since the early 1970s, there has been a 21-fold decrease in the number of adoptions in Australia – from 8,542 in 1972-73 to 412 adoptions in 2009-10. However, the total number of adoptions has remained relatively stable since the late 1990s, at around 400 to 600 children per year.

The overall decline in adoptions can be attributed to a fall in the number of Australian children adopted (including local and ‘known’ child adoptions). In contrast, intercountry adoptions have increased overall in the last 25 years, and have emerged as the dominant category of adoptions – representing 54% of all adoptions in 2009-10, compared with 10% in 1984-85.

The overall decline in adoptions can be attributed to a fall in the number of Australian children adopted. In contrast, intercountry adoptions have increased overall in the last 25 years, and have emerged as the dominant category of adoptions.

In 2009-10:
- There were 412 adoptions in Australia (1.9 per 100,000 population) – the lowest number of adoptions recorded since reporting commenced, and a 7% decline from the previous year. Of these, 54% were intercountry, 15% were local and 31% were ‘known’ child adoptions.
- The majority of intercountry adoptees came from the Asian region (82%). The three most common countries of origin in Asia were the Philippines (22%), China (14%) and South Korea (14%). Ethiopia was the most common country of origin outside the Asian region (15%).
- Overall, 65% of adopted children were aged under 5 years. In local and intercountry adoptions, nearly all children were under 5 years (100% and 86%, respectively).
- Of the children in local and intercountry adoptions, 39% and 63% respectively had adoptive parents aged over 40 years and over. The majority of local and intercountry adoptees were adopted into families with no other children (75% and 58%, respectively).
- Nine in ten (92%) local adoptions could be considered ‘open’ – that is, all parties were open to freely discussing the adoption within their families, and were happy to allow contact to occur between families. The remaining 8% were adoptions where birth parents had requested no contact or information between them and the adopting family.
- Three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were adopted in 2009-10, with a total of 63 indigenous children being adopted over the last 15 years.
- Two-thirds (67%) of ‘known’ child adoptions were of children aged 10 years and over.
- For ‘known’ child adoptions, 57% of adoptions were by step-parents and a further 41% were by carers.

Summary from Adoptions Australia 2009-10, December 2010
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The categories of adoption in Australia are:

- **Intercountry adoptions** – adoptions of children from countries other than Australia who are legally able to be placed for adoption, but who generally have had no previous contact or relationship with the adoptive parents

- **Local adoptions** – adoptions of children who were born in Australia or who were permanent residents of Australia before the adoption, who are legally able to be placed for adoption, but who generally have had no previous contact or relationship with the adoptive parents

- **‘Known’ child adoptions** – adoptions of children who are Australian residents, who have a pre-existing relationship with the adoptive parent(s) and who are generally not able to be adopted by anyone other than the adoptive parent(s). ‘Known’ child adoptions include adoptions by step-parents, other relatives and carers. Intercountry ‘known’ child adoptions are not included in this publication.

From the 1998-99 report, the categories of adoption used in the *Adoptions Australia* publications differ from those used in previous publications. The categories were changed to better reflect the types of adoptions that occur, and to bring the terminology more in line with that used by state and territory departments responsible for adoption. Refer to Figure 1.1 below from the *Adoptions Australia 2008-09* report for further details (AIHW 2010).
The number of adoptions in Australia has declined considerably since the 1970s, according to the latest statistics from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

Since the late 1990s, the number of adoptions has fluctuated from year to year, but has remained relatively stable at around 400 to 600 children per year.

The overall decline in adoptions in the last 25 years can be attributed to the fall in the number of Australian children adopted – an 11-fold decline, from 2,045 in 1984-85 to 190 in 2009-10.

Although changes to the adoption categories in 1998-99 limit the amount of trend data available for local and 'known' child adoptions of Australian children, it is possible to explore trends for adoptions by both relatives and non-relatives over a longer time period. The number of Australian children adopted by relatives and non-relatives has fluctuated in the past 25 years, but has decreased overall (Figure 2.4). Between 1983-84 and 2009-10, this decline was greater in adoptions by relatives – a 19-fold decline from 1,452 to 76 adoptions, compared with a 10-fold decline from 1,108 to 114 adoptions by non-relatives.

Between 2005-06 and 2009-10, national adoption rates have fallen from 2.8 to 1.9 per 100,000 of the population (Table 2.2).
by increases in the number of ‘known’ adoptions. The 2009-10 period saw the highest number of ‘known’ child adoptions since 2002-03 (Figure 2.5).

The number of children adopted from overseas has fluctuated over time, but decreased by 6 per cent over the 25 years between 1984-85 and 2009-10.

**Intercountry adoptions**
The number of children adopted from overseas has fluctuated over time, but decreased by 6 per cent over the 25 years between 1984-85 and 2009-10 – from 235 to 222 adoptions. Since 1999-2000, intercountry adoption has been the dominant category of adoptions. In 2009-10, intercountry adoptions represented 54 per cent of all adoptions, compared with 10 per cent of adoptions in 1984-85. Between 2008-09 and 2009-10, the proportion of intercountry adoptions decreased (Figure 2.6). This decrease can mostly be attributed to the reduced number of adoptions from China and South Korea.

Children from African countries made up 15 per cent of all intercountry adoptions in 2009–10, up from less than 1 per cent in 1991–92.

In accordance with these trends, the key countries of origin have also varied. Although from the early 1990s the majority of intercountry adoptions have consistently been from Asian countries, there have been considerable changes in the proportion of children adopted from Africa and South/Central America (Figure 2.7).

Children from African countries made up 15 per cent of all intercountry adoptions in 2009–10, up from less than 1 per cent in 1991–92. This increase can be directly attributed to a sevenfold increase in adoptions from Ethiopia between 1995–96 and 2009–10 (AIHW 2006). However, adoptions from Ethiopia in 2009–10 were down on previous years. This was most likely a consequence of the 6-month suspension of the Ethiopia-Australia program from November 2009.

The proportion of children adopted from South/Central American countries has been steadily declining since the early 1990s – from 26 per cent of all intercountry adoptions in 1992–93 to 2 per cent in 2009–10. This is largely due to a fivefold decrease in

**TABLE 2.2: NUMBER AND RATE OF ADOPTIONS, 2005-06 TO 2009-10**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of adoptions</th>
<th>Adoptions per 100,000 population (a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-09</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Rate for ABS estimated resident population is at 31 December (all ages).

Source: AIHW Adoptions Australia data collection.
In 2009-10, the Philippines became the leading country of origin, accounting for 22 per cent of adoptions.

After Australia signed a bilateral agreement with China in 1999, the number of children adopted from China increased (a fourfold increase between 2000-01 and 2008-09). Between 2003-04 and 2008-09, China was the leading country of origin (AIHW 2010).

However, as China and South Korea bring in more stringent regulations on foreign adoptions, and put greater emphasis on local adoption solutions in an effort to find permanent homes for children in their own country, the number of children adopted from these countries will decline, as has been seen in recent years. In 2009-10, the Philippines became the leading country of origin, accounting for 22 per cent of adoptions.

The number of adoptions from these countries represents a relatively small proportion of all intercountry adoptions in Australia.

There have also been some notable changes among the Asian countries of origin since the early 1990s.

South Korea was the leading country of origin between 1991-92 and 2002-03.

In 2009-10, Colombia adopted the number of children adopted from Colombia between 1992-93 and 2009-10 – reflecting efforts by this country in recent years to give local adoption a higher priority (AIHW 2004).

Extract from Adoptions Australia 2009-10
December 2010
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Raising an adopted child
A fact sheet by Raising Children Network – the Australian parenting website

Although adoption in Australia has dropped dramatically since the late 1960s, nearly 450 families adopt every year. These days far more children are adopted from overseas than locally. Read about one family who adopted locally in the 1980s, and about challenges facing adoptive parents around Australia.

Profile

Kathryn and Patrick are parents of Alex 36 (biological child) and Bianca 27 (adopted child). They live in Albury, New South Wales. Here, Kathryn shares the challenges and rewards of raising an adopted child.

Kathryn

“It took 3 years for me to fall pregnant with Alex and for many years afterward we tried unsuccessfully to have another child. It had always been our dream to have more than one child. So when he was around 4 years old, we decided to register with an adoption agency.

“Seven years later we finally received a letter telling us there was a girl we could possibly adopt. The next year was the most gruelling year of my life. The interview and assessment process was unbelievably traumatic and we'd travel to Melbourne for meetings and interviews, not knowing whether we'd pass. There were so many single parents hoping to adopt. But in the end, having Alex worked in our favour as it proved we were capable parents.

“The moment I laid eyes on Bianca I instantly fell in love. She was this 14-month-old bundle of joy and from that day on she became our child and part of our family. She was a very, very easy child until she hit her teens. From day one we were open about her adoption and this wasn't a problem until Bianca reached her teens. Between the ages of 13 to 16, when Bianca was dealing with all the typical experiences of being a teenage girl and trying to work out who she was, the adoption became an issue.

“The thing with adopted children is that they need to feel secure and loved just a bit more than other children. If they see any failure in your love towards them, they can take it and run with the idea 'you don't love me because I'm adopted' or 'I hate you and you're not even my real mother'. As a mother it can hurt; it is like she had extra fuel for her teenage angst. But our strategy was just to respond with love. We always made a point to show her how much we loved her and made sure she felt special and she was our child and loved as much as Alex was. It was hard there for a while, but by the time she turned 18, things sort of levelled out.

“Today Bianca is the most wonderful, mature, contented, loving, gorgeous, well-adjusted woman. She has an amazing circle of friends, a fantastic career and amazing relationships. I think she's turned out pretty well!”

At a glance

➤ There are far fewer adoptions in Australia than there were before 1968-69, when contraceptives became more widely available and support increased for single parents
➤ In the year 1971-72, there were nearly 10,000 adoptions. In 2007-08, there were 440
➤ In 1979-80, 66 overseas-born children were adopted in Australia (about 2 per cent of all children adopted). In 2007-08, 268 overseas-born children were adopted (61 per cent of the total)
➤ In 2007-08, 97 children were adopted by people they already knew: 67 by step-parents, 26 by carers or foster parents and 4 by other relatives
➤ More than 70 per cent of the 104,000 adoptions since 1968-69 occurred before 1980
➤ Adoption of children from overseas has increased: 30 per cent of the 18,000 placement adoptions since 1979-80 were of children from other countries, while 70 per cent were local children.
The challenges

All parents have problems raising kids, and the problems of adoptive parents are much the same as those of ‘natural’ parents. The challenges specific to adoption are:

Deciding to adopt

We expect to be able to have children biologically. It’s a great loss when this can’t happen. Researchers and professionals working in this area have come to believe that adoption works best when adopting parents have openly faced the grief associated with infertility and come to accommodate or accept their situation, even if sadness associated with infertility never fully goes away. It seems that it is easier for parents to bond with their adopted child – and also to cope with the child’s natural curiosity about their origins when that arises – if at some point the goal of becoming a parent has become more important than how you become a parent.

The adoption process

Adoption assessment can be very stressful. Being evaluated for suitability to adopt can involve intense levels of scrutiny from an outside agency. It involves a ‘waiting game’ that may lead to parents feeling anxious or low in self-esteem. Some parents may also feel that there is a stigma attached to adoption – that it is a ‘second-best option’. Others may feel that there are fewer role models for adopting parents compared to biological parents.

Discussing the adoption with the child

Perhaps one of the most difficult issues parents who adopt deal with is discussing the adoption with their child. Parents can worry about when and how to start talking about adoption, and about how the child will deal with the information. As they enter school and get better at figuring things out, children are likely to become more curious about their biological heritage.

Once your child turns 18, he can access records about his birth parents, and birth parents can look at his records as well. Your child won’t need your permission to do this.

Bonding with the child

Research shows that there is little difference in the quality of attachment between adopted children and non-adopted children. The exceptions are when a parent has difficulty accepting the child as their own and feels as though they have a lack of support for this process.

Meeting the challenges

As with all parenting situations, the positives associated with adoption help to buffer the negatives. Often adopting parents are older. As a result, they may be more financially stable and may tolerate differences in their partner more comfortably than younger couples, which can mean less family conflict. If they have struggled for some time to have a child, they may also feel a heightened sense of fulfillment as a result.

If your child was adopted from overseas, it can help a lot for your family to get involved in your child’s culture.

Tips for parents who are facing some of the challenges of adoption:

➤ It is normal for a child to feel all kinds of emotions when they discover that they were adopted. These emotions are often associated with coming to terms with the loss of their biological family
➤ Understanding and guiding a child through their grief can help to avoid long-term emotional issues about being adopted
➤ Talk and listen to your child about their adoption
➤ Be positive with your child about their biological origins
➤ Respect the child’s curiosity about their biological heritage
➤ Respect differences between your child’s current environment and their biological origins. Help your child understand and know themselves, both as your child and as a child of their original culture.

FOR FURTHER HELP

Australia-wide
➤ Care Leavers Australia Network: support for state wards, foster children and children who were raised in homes.
➤ Adoption Jigsaw: support for adoptive parents, birth parents and adult adopted children.
➤ Intercountry Adoption Support Network: links adoptees up with other adoptees and provides emotional and cultural support.

NSW
➤ The Benevolent Society: Post Adoption Resource Centre

Queensland
➤ International Adoptive Families of Queensland

Victoria
➤ Adoptive Families Association of Victoria

REFERENCES


Although reliable figures are not available, in the decades prior to the mid-1970s, it was common for babies of unwed mothers to be adopted. Estimates of the number of women, children and families affected by the adoption of babies of unwed mothers are considerable. However, there is limited research available in Australia on the issue of past adoption practices.

The purpose of this paper, commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), is to review existing research literature about past adoption practices in Australia.

Themes identified in the research literature

The available information highlights the following themes:

➤ The wide range of people involved, and therefore the wide-ranging impacts and ‘ripple effects’ of adoption beyond mothers and the children that were adopted

➤ The role not only of grief and loss, but the usefulness of understanding past adoption practices as ‘trauma’, and seeing the impact through a ‘trauma lens’

➤ The ways in which past adoption practices drew together society’s responses to illegitimacy, infertility and impoverishment

➤ Anecdotal evidence of the variability in adoption practices

➤ The role of choice and coercion, secrecy and silence, blame and responsibility, the views of broader society, and the attitudes and specific behaviours of organisations and individuals

➤ The ongoing impacts of past adoption practices, including the process of reunion between mothers and their now adult children, and the degree to which it is seen as a ‘success’ or not, and

The need for information, counselling and support for those affected by past adoption practices.

Key messages

There is a wealth of material on the topic of past adoption practices, including individual historical records, analyses of historical practices, case studies, expert opinions, parliamentary inquiries, unpublished reports (e.g. university theses), as well as published empirical research studies. They include analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data, gathered through methods such as surveys or interviews.

Despite this breadth of material, there is little reliable empirical research. To have an evidence base on which to build a policy response, research is needed that is representative, and systematically analyses and draws out common themes, or makes relevant comparisons with other groups (e.g. unwed mothers who did not relinquish babies, or married mothers who gave birth at the same time, etc.).

There is scope for new research to provide information where there are current gaps:

➤ Conducting archival research on individual hospital records, administrative data and other historical documents, which could be used to answer questions around the extent of practices, variability between practices in different locations, factors that might have affected this, and the impact on individuals involved

➤ Supplementing such historical research with qualitative in-depth
interviews with key informants from the time, such as relevant professionals and organisational leaders

- Conducting a systematic, representative study of the experiences of mothers affected by past adoption practices, their adopted children, the families who adopted them, and others involved in past adoption practices

- Examining the reasons why not all illegitimate babies of unwed mothers were adopted – and what distinguished between these two groups

- Using surveys or interviews to understand more about the value of reunions and ‘what works’ to assist with the reunion process, and

- Conducting surveys or interviews with men about their experiences as a father of a child who was adopted, as well as the experiences of the subsequent partners of the women who were unwed at the time of the adoption.

Building a reliable evidence base around the extent and impact of past adoption practices requires careful sifting between different sources of information. Consideration should also be given to how generalisable conclusions might be, given the role that individual authors may have (independent researcher, autobiography, biography, or a mixture). Good practice in evidence-based policy making suggests prioritising where possible conclusions based on systematic research (although it must be recognised that retrospective research is descriptive and cannot say whether one event ‘caused’ another).

This review has shown that past adoption practices have the potential for lifelong consequences for the lives of these women and their children, as well as others, such as their families, the father, the adoptive parents and their families.

Conclusions

This review has shown that past adoption practices have the potential for lifelong consequences for the lives of these women and their children, as well as others, such as their families, the father, the adoptive parents and their families. Although there is a wealth of primary material, there is little systematic research on the experience of past adoption practices in Australia. In many areas, the information needs of those developing policies or services to support those affected by past practices cannot be addressed by the existing research base.

In assessing the value of the research literature in understanding the context and impact of past adoption practices, it is important to acknowledge that we are viewing past behaviour and judging it by the standards of today – with the benefit of hindsight. This does not discount the impact of these practices on those affected. Views about the moral correctness of past practices, or even the contributions of individuals or institutions are evident in the literature and while this material is distinguished from research, its significance is still acknowledged.

For example, while acknowledging the pain and suffering of those affected by these past practices, the Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee (1999) aptly summed up what the body of literature also shows:

In hindsight, it is believed that if knowledge of the emotional effects on people was available during the period concerned, then parents may not have pushed for adoption to take place and birth mothers may not have, willingly or unwillingly, relinquished their children. (p.11)

Taking the time to understand the full extent of the impact of past practices is needed in order to be able to tailor appropriate service responses to meet the needs of those affected.

Executive summary from Impact of past adoption practices: Summary of key issues from Australian research, Final report, March 2010
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Same-sex adoption

Same-sex couples, lesbian co-mothers or gay co-fathers cannot generally adopt a child, according to the ‘Same-Sex: Same Entitlements Report’ by the Australian Human Rights Commission

A same-sex couple, lesbian co-mother or gay co-father would all be recognised as the legal parents of a child in federal law if they could adopt that child. And adoptive parents can generally access the same financial and work-related entitlements as birth parents.

In theory, adoption should be a powerful tool for same-sex families who face biological challenges to being birth parents. However, in practice, the adoption laws in the various states and territories make it extremely difficult – and sometimes impossible – for same-sex couples to adopt.

It is important to remember that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires that the best interests of a child be the paramount consideration in adoption (Article 21). Adoption laws which arbitrarily exclude a couple on the grounds of sexuality will breach these rights because they fail to consider the best interests of a particular child.

(a) A same-sex couple can only adopt an unrelated child in WA and ACT

At present, only WA and ACT allow same-sex couples to register for adoption of an unrelated child. However, even in those states very few gay or lesbian couples successfully adopt children in Australia. An opposite-sex couple can apply to adopt an unrelated child under all state and territory laws. See box on page 15 for update on changes to NSW laws.

(b) A lesbian co-mother or gay co-father is unlikely to achieve ‘step-parent adoption’

One member of a couple can apply to adopt the birth child of the other member of the couple under ‘step-parent adoption’ laws. Theoretically this would be an effective mechanism for a lesbian co-mother or gay co-father to obtain legal parental status regarding the child he or she has been caring for from birth.

However, New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory do not allow step-parent adoption for same-sex couples. A lesbian co-mother or gay co-father could apply to adopt the birth child of their partner in Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania. However, even those laws contain a general presumption against making an adoption order. This is because an adoption order severs the legal relationship between the child and one of the child’s birth parents.

Due to the serious consequences of an adoption order, all step-parent adoption laws (including those applying to opposite-sex couples) contain a strong preference for dealing with new parenting arrangements through a parenting order rather than an adoption order.

The Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC) argues that the presumptions against step-parent adoption may not be appropriate for some same-sex couples. In the case of a lesbian co-mother of an ART child there is unlikely to be a competing interest. In the case of other lesbian or gay co-parents, there may be consensual agreements between the various people seeking to raise a child. The Inquiry supports amendments to legislation which open up additional options for a lesbian or gay couple to attain legal status and therefore better protect the best interests of their child.

(c) Overseas adoptions by gay and lesbian couples may not be recognised in Australia in the future

It appears that surrogacy and adoptions occurring overseas may not be recognised under Australian law in the future. As at March 2007, the federal government’s list of legislation proposed for introduction includes the Family Law (Same Sex Adoption) Bill. The Bill is described as legislation to ‘amend the Family Law Act 1975 to indicate that adoptions by same sex couples of children from overseas under either bilateral or multilateral arrangements will not be recognised in Australia’. However, the Bill is not available and it is unclear what will be the final form of the legislation (if it is indeed introduced).

(d) Restrictive and discriminatory adoption laws have a particularly serious impact on the children of gay couples

A lesbian co-mother may become a legal mother through a parenting presumption in her favour (although for the moment that is limited to ACT, WA and NT). But it is particularly difficult for a gay couple to become a legal parent of their child without adoption.
A gay male couple cannot have a child, whether through ART or intercourse, without involving a child-bearing woman. The Inquiry does not support the enactment of parenting presumptions which would automatically remove the rights of a child-bearing woman. Rather, it should be possible for a gay couple to adopt an unrelated child, or a child born through ART to a surrogate or friend, after the birth mother has made a positive decision to transfer her legal parenting rights.

However, the limited scope of state and territory adoption and step-parent adoption laws severely limits the possibility of adoption for gay and lesbian couples.

The outright prohibition of adoption by same-sex couples in some states and territories breaches article 21 of the CRC which requires that the best interests of the child be the paramount consideration in adoption. The other limitations may also compromise the best interests of the child under Article 3(1) of the CRC.

(e) Comments from gay couples trying to adopt

Dr James Dowty compares adoption for same-sex couples in Australia and the Netherlands. He argues that adoption provides greater protection for children:

...I think it is important that same-sex couples should be allowed to adopt children. When the Dutch parliament was debating [legal] recognition of same-sex relationships they decided that same-sex couples should be given the same opportunities as opposite-sex couples to adopt. In a country where approximately 20% of lesbian couples have children from previous relationships, this was mainly seen as a way of ensuring the best outcome for the children in the event of the death or incapacity of the biological parent. Australian children deserve the same protections as Dutch children in such situations.

In theory, adoption should be a powerful tool for same-sex families who face biological challenges to being birth parents. However, in practice, the adoption laws in the various states and territories make it extremely difficult – and sometimes impossible – for same-sex couples to adopt.

Frank Gomez comments on his experience when considering adoption:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUSTRALIAN LAWS ON ADOPTION BY SAME-SEX COUPLES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Same-sex couple joint petition</td>
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<td>ACT</td>
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<td>Victoria</td>
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<td>Western Australia</td>
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Notes:
* Even a de facto opposite sex couple cannot jointly adopt a child under the law of the Northern Territory.
* No individual or single people are allowed to adopt a child, only a married or de facto opposite sex couples under the law of South Australia.
I have over the years enquired about adopting a child, as I think this would be an option I would like to entertain if I was ever in a long term, serious relationship again. However I have found that it is impossible for gay men to even be considered for adoption, regardless of income, character or [the] seriousness of their relationships.35

In his submission Marcus Blease discusses the issues of surrogacy and adoption for gay male couples:

My partner and myself would like to adopt a child. We would consider surrogacy from the US, however this is too expensive. We are however prohibited from adopting here and may have to move to the UK to do this if the law isn’t changed within the next 5 years. If I sold a house I own in the UK we will consider surrogacy as a last resort, however this brings a set of discrimination as long as your arm. We would receive no family tax breaks as heterosexual couples, one of us would receive little federally recognised parenting rights of the child (the non-biological one).36

ENDNOTES

26. Adoption Act 1994 (WA), ss 38-39; Adoption Act 1993 (ACT), s 18(1). In Tasmania, a same-sex partner can apply to adopt a child if that child is related to his or her partner: Adoption Act 1988 (Tas), s 20(1)-(2A). See section 5.2.4(b).
28. In 2005-06 there were 576 adoptions in Australia: 73% were inter-country, 10% were local and 16% were ‘known’ child adoptions: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), Adoptions Australia 2005-06, Child Welfare Series, no. 39, 2006, p.vii.
31. See for example, Adoption Act 1993 (ACT), s 18(2).
32. See Adoption Act 1994 (WA), s 68(1)(a); Adoption Act 1993 (ACT), s 18(2); Adoption Act 2000 (NSW), s 30; Adoption of Children Act 1964 (Qld), s 12(3); Adoption Act 1984 (Vic), s 115(5), (6); Adoption of Children Act 1994 (NT), s 15; Adoption Act 1988 (SA), s 12(3)-(4). The Tasmanian provisions for registered significant relationships do not appear to be subject to this qualification: Adoption Act 1988 (Tas), s 20. See also J Millbank, ‘Recognition of Lesbian and Gay Families in Australian Law – Part Two: Children’, Federal Law Review, vol 34, no. 2, 2006, p.249 and footnote 247.
34. Dr James G Dowty, Submission 99.
35. Frank Gomez, Submission 216.
36. Marcus Blease, Submission 111.
Coping with finding out you are adopted

Each adoptee’s response is individual, according to this Reach Out! fact sheet

Finding out you’re adopted

People find out that they’re adopted in different ways. These days, it’s not uncommon to find out when you’re so young you might not remember being told.

Or you might find out when you’re older, or find out accidentally, potentially resulting in shock, disbelief, or perhaps anger.

However you find out you’re adopted, at some stage you might start to think about whether or not you want to contact your birth parents.

People feel differently about this, and might have mixed emotions. Some people might have an instant desire to find out more about their biological parents and background, whereas others may not feel the need or urge, or may in fact feel strongly that they do not want any contact.

Everybody’s response is individual, and can depend on a number of factors, including the way you find out about your adoption, or the stage of life you are at.

Open adoption

It is becoming more common for Australian-born adoptees to grow up in ‘open’ adoption situations. This is where there is some level of contact between adoptive families and birth families as the adoptee grows up.

This contact can happen in different ways – sometimes there is regular face to face contact with birth relatives, other times the families exchange letters and photos over the years, and sometimes there is just the possibility to exchange information.

This is happening more often because the authorities have learned that it is good for people to grow up with access to information about their past, while at the same time having the possibility of knowing biological relatives.

It’s not always easy in practice though – sometimes contact with your birth parents can be hard work. You might find that the contact is not as regular as you would like, or that you feel a bit distant from your birth relatives when you have contact with them.

You might even worry about them or get angry with them – it’s important to get some help with these feelings, especially if you don’t feel okay talking to your adoptive parents about it.

If you have had contact with birth relatives in the past, but have lost contact, speak to your parents or the government department that holds the records on this.

Intercountry adoption

Most adoptions that happen these days are intercountry adoptions, i.e. when a baby from another country (Korea, China or Ethiopia for example) is adopted into an Australian family.

In these cases often the adoptee is growing up with a family that is of a different race and culture to their heritage. For some people this can cause some difficulties; for example, if they live in an area where there are few people from other cultures and they encounter some racist views.

It is really important to keep some links to the country of your birth. You might want to learn the language, look for friends with a similar background, learn about the history or visit the country. For intercountry adoptees, there is often a much smaller chance that birth relatives can be located if the adoptee decides to search for them.

This can be quite a hard thing to come to terms with. It is certainly not impossible to trace relatives, but in
many cases there are not good records available in the countries the baby came from.

Some adoptees go to their country of origin as adults and make their own search, occasionally visiting the orphanages they were looked after in.

Contact the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) www.bensoc.asn.au for more information about searching for birth relatives overseas.

**How finding out you’re adopted might affect you**

When you find out that you’re adopted you may be experiencing a range of emotions.

These may include feeling:

➤➤ Angry
➤➤ Stressed and/or anxious
➤➤ Surprised or shocked
➤➤ Confused
➤➤ Curious
➤➤ Excited
➤➤ Down or depressed
➤➤ Isolated
➤➤ Embarrassed to tell others
➤➤ Ashamed
➤➤ Worried.

If you are experiencing these feelings it is important to look after yourself. Take time out to do something that you enjoy. Even though you may not feel like it, exercising and eating well can help.

If the way you are feeling is affecting your day to day routine, it is a good idea to talk to someone you trust. This may be someone like a friend, school counsellor or family member. See the section ‘Things that may help you cope’ on page 18 for more tips.

**Feelings around your birth parents**

You might be experiencing a whole range of feelings around your birth parents, including excitement, anger, curiosity, worry, and rejection.

Feeling angry or rejected is not uncommon, and you might have various thoughts and be asking a number of questions.

However, if you do have these feelings it is important to find ways to express your anger safely.

Being violent is never okay; if you are finding that you are lashing out or growing violent it may be a good idea to talk to someone like a counsellor, youth worker or local doctor.

If you are feeling worried about what might happen if you do decide to contact your birth parents, it might be helpful to keep in mind that a lot of adoptees do successfully reunite with their birth parents.

Even where reunions have ended badly, most people say that they are still glad they searched.

You might be experiencing a whole range of feelings around your birth parents, including excitement, anger, curiosity, worry, and rejection.

**Feelings around your adoptive parents**

You might also be experiencing a whole range of feelings around your adoptive parents, including appreciation, betrayal, or anger.

If your adoption was revealed to you at a later stage of your life, it is possible that you could feel angry towards or betrayed by your adoptive parents. You may be asking questions such as “Why didn’t they tell me earlier?” or, “Why didn’t they trust me with this information about my life?”

Find a time when you are feeling calm to ask your adoptive parents these questions. By talking through the circumstances and letting your adoptive parents know how you are feeling, it might help for you to resolve these feelings.

In most circumstances your adoptive parents are likely to feel as if they were acting in your best interests, and if they kept the truth about the adoption from you, it didn’t mean that they were untrustworthy people.

It is a good idea not to have these conversations if either you or your adoptive parents are angry. It might be helpful to find some safe ways to express your anger before talking with them. That way the outcome is likely to be more constructive.

You may be feeling worried that wanting to find your biological parents might offend or be disloyal to your adoptive parents, or you may have found your birth parents and be unsure about how to tell your adoptive parents.

Talking to your adoptive parents may help sort out any issues you have. If your adoptive parents do not have the reaction you were hoping for, it may be necessary to give them some time and space. Remember while you have probably given this a lot of
thought, this may be a very new issue to them.

You may need to have the discussion with your adoptive parents a couple of times – just because you have said something once doesn’t mean that it is heard.

Over time, your adoptive parents may be ready to listen and understand the importance of this for you. Try to be patient.

**Your identity**

Part of growing up is discovering your identity. As someone who is adopted, it is natural to want to find out about your birth family as well as the family you grew up with. You may be happy to ask your adoptive parents questions about your background, or you may wish to actually meet your birth parents.

Aside from searching for birth relatives, there are other identity questions that can come up for adoptees. It can feel strange growing up without knowing other people who look like you, or who share your genes and characteristics.

This is particularly hard for inter-country adoptees who may be of a different race to their parents. Some adoptees feel a lack of connection with the family they are raised in, or question whether they belong.

**Talk to someone**

It may be helpful to talk to someone about how you are feeling. This may be a friend, or family member, or else you might prefer to speak to someone who is not so closely involved in your situation, for example, a school counsellor, school nurse or teacher.

**A support group**

Support groups give you a chance to talk with other adoptees who are going through similar situations or have already decided to find their birth parents.

This may help you with your decision to find your birth parents. The Post Adoption Resource Centre [www.bensoc.asn.au](http://www.bensoc.asn.au) lists different support groups within each state.

**Things that may help you cope**

**It can feel strange growing up without knowing other people who look like you, or who share your genes and characteristics.**

If you would rather speak with someone anonymously, you could call the Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 (free call from landline) or visit their website. Try Lifeline on 13 11 14 (cost of local call from landline). Both of these services are open 24/7. Other services may also be available depending on which state you live in.

**Keep a diary**

If you don’t feel comfortable talking to someone, try writing it down – this may help you keep track of your feelings.
Access to adoption information in Australia

The advice below from The Benevolent Society gives brief legislative summaries and contact details for major agencies that provide adoption information in Australian states and territories

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY


All applications to:
Office for Children, Youth and Family Support
ACT Adoptions and Permanent Care Unit
GPO Box 158
Canberra City ACT 2601
Phone: 02 6207 1335
Email: adoptions@act.gov.au
Web: www.dhcs.act.gov.au

NEW SOUTH WALES

For orders finalised before 1 January 2010:

The NSW Adoption Act 2000 allows for the release of identifying information to adopted persons (18+) and acknowledged birth parents about one another. Adopted people over 18 may also access identifying information regarding siblings also placed for adoption. Eligible parties will be issued with a Supply Authority containing identifying information from time of adoption and allowing further searches (BDM marriage and death searches). Next of kin may apply to inherit the rights of a deceased adopted person or birth parent. Adopted persons and acknowledged birth parents may place a lifetime contact veto if the adoption was finalised before 26 October 1990.

For orders finalised after 1 January 2010:

2008 Amendments to the above legislation allow for greater access to adoption information for adopted children and adults, birth parents, siblings and adoptive parents in respect to adoptions finalised after 1 January 2010.

As this comprehensive information is difficult to summarise here, for more information, please visit: www.community.nsw.gov.au.

All applications to:
Adoption Information Unit
NSW Community Services
Locked Bag 4028, Ashfield 1800
Phone: 1360 799 023 / 02 9716 3000
Fax: 02 9716 3400
Email: adoption.information@community.nsw.gov.au
Web: www.community.nsw.gov.au

NORTHERN TERRITORY

The Northern Territory Adoption of Children Act of 1994 allows for the release of identifying information to adopted persons and birth parents for any adoption that took place both after and prior to 1994. Prior to 1994 adoptees and birth parents where the adopted person is 18 years old may have access to identifying information, non-identifying information and original/amended birth certificates. Before attaining the age of 18 years consent may be given by adoptive parents to access information.

Prior to 1994 there is provision for adopted persons and birth parents to lodge a veto to prohibit the release of their identifying information. After 1994 it is not possible to place a veto to prohibit the giving of information. Applicants will not be supplied with identifying information until they receive mandatory counselling.

The NT Adoption Information Service does not charge any fees for the provision of information concerning adoption. Applicants are required to provide proof of their identity.

The Contact Register is administered by:
Family and Children’s Services
Adoption Unit
PO Box 40596
Casuarina NT 0811
Phone: 08 8922 7077
Fax: 08 8922 7480

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QUEENSLAND

On 1 February 2010 the Adoption Act 2009 took effect allowing for the release of identifying and non-identifying information to birth parents and adoptees over the age of 18, and adoptees under the age of 18 with consent from their adoptive parents. Parties to the adoption can lodge a contact statement with Adoption Services Queensland that expresses what type of contact they are interested in having e.g. face to face, by telephone initially or no contact at all. Adoptees and birth parents can also receive the original birth certificate. Non-identifying and medical information is also available on request.

For further information and application forms contact:
Adoption Services Queensland
Department of Communities (Child Safety)
GPO Box 806
Brisbane QLD 4001
Phone: 07 3224 7415
Free call: 1800 647 983
Web: www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/adoption

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Legislation enacted in 1988. Allows adopted adults, birth parents, adoptive parents and relatives of birth parents to receive identifying information about each other if they wish. The Act allows adopted people and birth parents, where the adoption was legalised prior to 1989, the right to restrict the release of information. The Department may assist in searching, the facilitation of contact and also runs a contact register. There are charges for registration for adoption information. These can be waived in cases of hardship.

Write to:
Adoption and Family Information Service South Australia
Families SA

TASMANIA

Legislation enacted in 1988. Allows adopted adults (18+), birth parents and birth relatives to receive identifying information about each other. The Department of Community and Human Service’s Adoption and Information Service may assist in searching and/or the facilitation of contact. This Department also runs Tasmania’s Adoption Information Register (contact register).

Write to:
Department of Health and Human Services
Adoption and Permanency Services
Street address:
3rd Floor
86 Murray Street
Hobart TAS 7000

Mailing address:
GPO Box 538
Hobart TAS 7001
Phone: 03 6233 2273
Fax: 03 6223 1343
Email: Adoption.Service@dhhs.tas.gov.au

VICTORIA

Adopted adults (18+) are entitled to their original birth certificates, and court and agency records, after attending a mandatory interview (individual, group or telephone for interstate or overseas applicants). Adopted persons under 18 are entitled to apply and can...
receive information, with the written permission of their birth and adoptive parents.

Birth parents and relatives are entitled to non-identifying information from records about the adopted person. Current and identifying information is given with the agreement in writing of the adult adopted person or the adoptive parents, if the person is under 18 years of age.

The adult children of adopted persons have the same rights as adopted persons. The agency must advise the adopted person that the application has been received unless evidence of the death of the adopted person is provided. The Department maintains a register through which those entitled may express their wishes about providing or receiving information, and their feelings about contact. Adoptive parents are encouraged to register to facilitate the timing of approaches while the adopted person is under 18. The Department provides a Search Guide and has a website.

Information is available from:
Adoption and Family Records Service (AFRS)
Street address:
Level 20, 570 Bourke Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

Mailing address:
PO Box 588
Collins Street West
Melbourne VIC 8007
Phone: 03 8608 5700
Email: afrsduty@dhs.vic.gov.au
Web: www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au
(look under ‘Placement and Support’)

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Amendments to the Adoption Act 1994, in 2003 brought changes to Adoption Information Vetoes. As of 1 June 2005 the vetoes ceased. Previously, a lodged veto meant that parties to an adoption were able to prevent the release of identifying information. Access to this information is now available. Existing contact vetoes will remain in force. Prior to any identifying information being released to a person affected by an information veto, they are required to attend an information interview. If they are also affected by a contact veto they will be required to sign an undertaking that they will not contact the person who placed the veto. The undertaking is a legal agreement and breaking it is an offence. Post Adoption Services can provide further information.

Adoption Service of the Department for Community Development
PO Box 6334
East Perth, WA 6004
Phone: 08 9222 2870
Fax: 08 9222 2607
Toll-free: 1800 640 555
Web: www.community.wa.gov.au

Adoption Research and Counselling Service (ARCS)
38 Queens Crescent
PO Box 187
Mount Lawley WA 6029
Phone: 08 9370 4914
Fax: 08 9370 4917
Email: arcs@adoptionwa.org.au
Web: www.adoptionwa.org.au

Adoptions International of Western Australia
Specialising in pre and post intercountry adoption
Suite 6, St Brigid’s Centre, 60 John St,
Northbridge WA 6003
Phone: 08 9328 2555

Adoption Jigsaw WA Inc
(counselling, mediation and search services for Australian and UK adoptions, operates an independent contact register)
91 Hensman Road
Subiaco WA 6008
PO Box 403
Subiaco WA 6904
Phone: 08 9388 1922 (9am to 4pm, Monday to Friday)
Fax: 08 9388 3364
Email: jigsaw@jigsaw.org.au

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

NSW/ACT

Post Adoption Resource Centre
PO Box 239
Bondi NSW 2026
Phone: 02 9365 3444
Fax: 02 9365 3666
Email: parc@bensoc.org.au
Web: www.bensoc.org.au

QLD

Post Adoption Support Queensland
PO Box 5347
West End QLD 4101
Phone: 07 3170 4600 or 1300 914 819
Fax: 07 3255 2953
Email: pasq@bensoc.org.au
Web: www.bensoc.org.au

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As someone who is adopted, it is natural to want to find out about your birth family as well as the family you grew up with. A fact sheet by Reach Out!

**DISCOVERING OUR IDENTITY**

Part of growing up is discovering more about our identity. An important component of identity is knowing your family and their history.

As someone who is adopted, it is natural to want to find out about your birth family as well as the family you grew up with. You may be happy to ask your adoptive parents questions about your background, or you may wish to actually meet your birth parents.

**DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO LOOK FOR YOUR BIRTH PARENTS**

Making the decision to search for your birth parents may be a big one with many different things to consider. For example, you may be worried your birth parents do not want to meet you, or you may not be sure whether or not you want a relationship with them.

Your decision may also be influenced by the laws relating to adoption, which vary from state to state.

Whatever you decide, it is important you make the decision that is best for you and have support to manage all the possible outcomes.

**THINGS THAT MAY HELP MAKE YOUR DECISION**

**Talk to someone** – It may be helpful to talk to someone about how you are feeling. This may be a friend, or family member, or else you might prefer to speak to someone who is not so close to your situation, for example, a school counsellor, school nurse or teacher.

If you would rather speak with someone anonymously, you could call the Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 (free call from landline) or Lifeline (local call cost from landline). Other services may also be available depending on which state you live in.

**Speak to your adoptive parents** – Being worried about how your adoptive parents may feel about you wanting to find your birth parents is normal. Talking to your adoptive parents may help to sort out any issues you both have. Your adoptive parents may also be a good support for you if you decide to search for your birth parents.

**Keep a diary** – If you don’t feel comfortable talking to someone, try writing it down – this may help you keep track of your feelings.

**A support group** – Support groups give you a chance to talk with other adoptees who are going through a similar time or have already decided to find their birth parents. This may help you with your decision to find your birth parents. The Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) lists different support groups within each state.

**YOUR OPTIONS**

**Deciding to search for your birth parents**

You might decide you want to find your birth parents for any number of reasons. You could be interested in finding out a bit more about your family background, or about where you got your talents from, or a bit about your family medical history.

Once you have made the decision to search for your birth parents, you may have mixed feelings about it. You may feel excited, relieved or anxious. These feelings might change over time.

Try to remember that meeting your birth parents may not change the way you feel about being adopted. It takes time to work through those feelings. Talking to someone you trust about how you feel may help. This person may be a friend, your adoptive parents or members...
in a support group. A counsellor or psychologist may also be helpful.

**The search process**

For some people who search for birth relatives, the search may be fairly straightforward and quick, especially if the person they are searching for has put their name on an adoption contact register.

In most cases, however, it is more complicated. It’s important to be prepared for all kinds of scenarios – there are no guarantees about whether you will be able to find the person, or what will happen when you do. The person may have died, or may be impossible to trace for some reason. They may have given a false name at the time of adoption, or may have moved overseas.

 Mostly, however, people are able to be located. There may also be the possibility of finding other relatives such as siblings, who may or may not have been told about you.

For more state-specific information on how to find your birth parents, have a look at the Post Adoption Resource Centre website (www.bensoc.org.au).

**Searching for birth parents from different countries**

For people who were adopted into Australia from other countries, searching can be much more difficult. Some countries do not keep good records of birth relatives, and sometimes it was not clear who the parents were at the time of adoption.

It is still worthwhile to search, because it is certainly possible for some intercountry adoptees to locate their birth relatives, but the process will probably be quite complicated. Some adoptees go to their country of origin as adults to do their own search.

In most states of Australia the law states that adopted people cannot be told the names of their birth mother until they have reached the age of 18. In some cases, adoptive families will have already known these details.

**Contacting birth parents or other relatives**

Once you have found the address of the person you are searching for, you need to think carefully about how you are going to approach them. It is always better to write a letter in the first place rather than phone or turn up on their doorstep, because people need time to digest information and you don’t want to shock them.

You need to be aware that other family members may not have been told about you, so your approach may be bringing up a big family secret. It’s very important to be sensitive to how the other person may feel about your approach to give you a better chance of establishing a lasting relationship with them.

There are organisations (such as the Post Adoption Resource Centre – PARC) that will act as intermediaries by making contact with your birth relative sensitively on your behalf until both parties feel ready for direct contact.

**REACTIONS FROM BIRTH PARENTS**

Like you, it is possible that your birth parents will have a variety of reactions about being contacted. They may feel excited, nervous, guilty or surprised. It might take them some time and space to manage these feelings.

Remember, you may have given your decision to find your birth parents a lot of thought, but it may be new to them. It is possible that you are ahead of them in the process of working through how you feel about being adopted and having a relationship with your birth parents.

They still may have unresolved feelings and may need time to work through what it means to have you back in their life. Try to be patient with them.

Once you have decided to find your birth parents, you might find that your birth parents have taken out a ‘contact veto’. This means that even though you may be provided with information about your birth parents, you are not allowed to contact them.

It is not uncommon to feel hurt, angry, shocked or helpless and to have questions about why they have chosen to do this. Managing these feelings can be hard. Talking to someone you trust can help to work through these feelings.

It is also a good idea to find ways to look after yourself. Remember, their decision not to meet you does not mean you are any less of a person.

**DECIDING NOT TO SEARCH FOR YOUR BIRTH PARENTS**

While many adoptees choose to search for their birth parents, it is also not uncommon to decide that you do not wish to search for your birth parents.

This might be for any number of reasons. For example, you might be satisfied with your life the way it is, and see no reason to contact your birth parents. Or, the timing might not be right, or else you might simply not be interested in finding your birth parents.

Just as your birth parents might be able to register a contact veto against you, (laws vary from state to state), you might be able to prevent your biological parents from contacting you in the same way.

Deciding whether or not to search for your birth parents might be a relatively straightforward process, or might be complex and take a long time.

Whatever you decide, it is important you make the decision that is best for you, and that you try to prepare for all of the possible outcomes.

*Thanks to the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) for their feedback and assistance in preparing this fact sheet.*

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Are you wondering how to respond to contact from a birth relative?

The decision about whether or not to have contact is often not a simple one, but there are some things you can do that will help at this time, according to this information sheet from The Benevolent Society.

You are party to an adoption; perhaps an adopted person, a birth parent or an adoptive parent. You now know that a birth relative would like contact and this may or may not be appealing to you. Perhaps contact is something you never gave much consideration to. Perhaps it is something very precious and you are frightened it may ‘go wrong’. Perhaps it seems likely to complicate your life in ways you don’t feel prepared for.

On the other hand, you may have a desire to know something about your birth relative. What is your birth mother like and why did she place you for adoption? Was your child’s adoption a success and what is his/her life like now? Why does your birth relative want contact now?

The decision about whether or not to have contact is often not a simple one to make, but there are some things you can do that will help at this time.

Face your feelings about contact

If your birth relative who wishes contact seems very keen, you may feel uncomfortable that such a momentous issue for you is apparently ‘easy’ for them. You may wonder what their expectations will be, and if they will intrude in your life. While you may want to know ‘the truth’ about your adoption, you may be anxious that there will be information you would prefer not to know.

For example:
Adopted people sometimes fear that they may have been conceived by rape or incest or that their birth father abandoned their birth mother or that their birth mother abandoned them.
They may fear that contact with their birth family will cause them to ‘lose’ the self they know and understand and not have something they value to replace it with.
Birth parents may fear that they will learn the adoption was not a success and that their child had a difficult life. They may fear the adopted person will resent them or not be prepared to listen to their explanations. They may find the thought of future contact causes them to remember the shame, guilt and pain of the adoption placement. They may fear that others in their present life will reject them if they know of the adoption.

Adoptive parents may fear they will lose their child to birth relatives, or at least lose the specialness of their parent-child relationship. They may want to protect their child from unpleasant information. They may fear intrusion in their child’s and their own lives. They may find themselves faced with many feelings from the past about their own infertility and the adoption. If they adopted children believing contact could never occur, they may feel angry, cheated and unprepared for the present circumstances.
There may be other people in your life that you presently feel need to be ‘protected’ from your birth relative, people such as your parents, children and spouse.

A ‘reunion’ is about information, understanding, knowing, ‘the truth’ and resolution. Where a willingness to share exists, even a little, it’s hard not to achieve some measure of success.
If you, yourself, would like contact, you may feel guilty at entertaining this thought, when you feel others around you would not want the contact.

This may have made it hard for you to discuss this issue with those people who usually support you through difficult times. The result is that you might feel isolated.

You probably don't know anyone else who's been through this situation, so it's hardly surprising you would feel that way.

**Gather information you need**

You are at a stage in your decision-making when you need to gather information – about your options, other people and their expectations.

You may already know a little about your birth relative and why they are seeking contact. It may help you to see some photos and know who else in the person's family is seeking contact with you, what your birth relative hopes contact with you will be like, and how they feel about the adoption.

Your own desires for information and understanding about the adoption and your birth relative will now have to be balanced against any desire you have not to have contact. You may also have some understanding of your birth relative's needs and feel you would like to put that person's mind at rest too.

An intermediary could assist you to gather information from your birth relatives if you do not wish to have direct contact at this time.

If you have exchanged some information with your birth relative, you can already claim to have been successful. It's not fair for you, or your birth relative, to perceive a desire by either of you not to pursue the contact further, as a failure.

What type of contact do you want to have? Every reunion is unique. A 'successful reunion' is one in which both parties have their questions answered AND feel comfortable with the level of contact that is established.

**You may find it reassuring to know that most people report a feeling of satisfaction following their reunion, even if the reunion did not go well.**

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Some people have letter or phone contact only, some have a lot of initial contact that peter's out, some have birthday and Christmas contact, and some become firm friends over time. Some reunions happen in days, others months. Some are short lived, others become lifetime involvements. Only you will be able to determine what your reunion will be like.

It is extremely rare for people to establish a ‘parent child’ type of relationship and few people seem to want that. For both parties to feel comfortable, no doubt some compromises have to be made, but of course no one should be forced into contact they do not want. It is common for one person to want more contact, but to accept the level of contact the other person feels comfortable with.

You may find it reassuring to know that most people report a feeling of satisfaction following their reunion, even if the reunion did not go well.

For many people, ‘not knowing’ has produced many fears, fantasies and feelings of emptiness. People who ‘just want to know the truth’ invariably feel some sense of satisfaction when they finally do know, even if part of the truth is painful.
A RELINQUISHING MOTHER – ROBYN’S STORY

After 34 years the effects of losing her baby to adoption are still being felt. The journey toward healing and resolving the grief and loss is not over yet, explains Robyn Cohen

I am now 60 years old and I still feel the effects of losing my baby to adoption in 1969 when I was 18 years old. My story is similar to that of thousands of other ‘unmarried mothers’ who were deemed by society to be unfit mothers and therefore lost their babies to adoption.

I was disgraced and I had disgraced my family. I was living in a flat in my home town and at five months pregnant I finally plucked up the courage to tell my mother and to ask if I could move back home. To her credit she welcomed me back but great shame was felt. I continued to work in the typing pool up until two weeks before the baby was due. As I was still in my home town there was no point in pretending by wearing a wedding ring so I was a very visible ‘unmarried mother’. Everywhere I went I felt and heard the animosity toward me. Society could not see past ‘unmarried mother’ to see the pleasant, quiet young girl that I was.

My human and legal rights were ignored by public hospital staff who felt free to judge, condemn and shame me. I was treated without respect and my treatment differed to that of married mothers. I was discriminated against at clinic appointments and during my confinement. I was made to feel inferior.

During my 21-hour labour I was left totally alone and was in so much pain that I wanted to die. The gas mask was shoved into my hand and they left the room. I could not use the mask. After hearing me scream for hours a nurse finally put her head in the doorway and said “stop being a silly girl and get on with it.” That was the extent of my care in labour until I felt the head crowning and called out for help saying “something is happening.” The staff were shocked that I was ready to push and the room was then a hive of activity as they gathered around for the birth.

The baby was removed from me at the moment of her birth despite me saying “I want to see my baby”. They literally ran out of the room with her. I never saw her or heard her cry. I was told “it’s best for you not to”. The staff would not tell me if I had a boy or girl. I will never forget my loneliness and emptiness when I was transferred to the ward without having seen the baby or knowing what sex it was. Over the next several days I continuously begged to know the sex of my baby and to see her. All my requests were denied. To add to their cruelty I was placed in a ward with married women caring for their babies. This was torture and I could not escape it. Looking back I can see that this was when I started to disappear into myself. Watching the other mothers care for their babies was too much for me when I was desperate for, and could not gain access to, my own baby. The staff had all the power, I had none.

Several days later (I am unsure of the time frame but it must have been before I signed the consent) I was unexpectedly taken to a room and the baby was placed in my arms. A nurse stood watching me and I felt her animosity toward me. I can’t remember if it was said, but I felt acutely aware that I should not be seeing the baby. By this time I was in a state of extreme psychological distress and was numb. I sat in the chair with the baby in my arms and was unable to do anything. I did not remove
her blankets, touch her face, explore her and I have no memory of what she looked like. Her face is blank to me. I know now that it was my legal right to have my baby with me whenever I wanted to as I was her legal guardian until I signed the consent form. I could have at least had a sense that I had had a baby and that she was mine. The staff ignored my legal rights. During therapy I received a copy of my daughter’s original birth certificate which had a blank space where her name should have been. I was devastated to discover that I had had the right to name my baby. Again, I was not informed of my legal rights.

During my hospital stay I was bombarded by comments from the staff such as “your baby deserves the best”, “it’s best for the baby”, “it’s best for you”, “if you love the baby you will adopt it”, “what can you give the baby”, “the baby deserves two parents”, “the baby needs a family”, “how can you look after a baby”. Coercion to adopt at its best!

My human and legal rights were ignored by public hospital staff who felt free to judge, condemn and shame me.

Again, with no warning, I was taken to a room and put in a chair facing the Justice of the Peace for the signing of the consent. I cried uncontrollably and sobbed during the entire process and could not hear what the JP was saying. I was alone, with no representation from my family. I was also under the legal age of majority (which was 21) and therefore the consent to adopt was not legally enforceable (nobody was bothered by this). The staff in the room ignored me and the JP pushed the papers toward me and through my tears I signed. This was not informed consent. In view of my distress the proceedings should have been stopped and the JP should have made sure that adoption was what I wanted. Of course, this did not happen as the only outcome possible was adoption.

I was given no options other than adoption, which “was best for the baby”. How can one argue with that? For years I whipped myself with the fact that I signed the consent form and thought that keeping my baby was as easy as not signing. Now I know that I was psychologically shocked and traumatised by the birth, the loss of my baby and my experiences in hospital. After all of this I was easy prey for a society determined to punish me and at the same time provide a healthy baby for an infertile married couple. I was totally alone, unsupported and powerless against authority.

After I signed the consent I asked to be discharged saying “I can’t watch the babies anymore”. Due to a medical condition I was told that I had to stay but no one offered me any support in my distress. I went back to my room to watch the babies. When I left the hospital they said “forget the baby and pretend it never happened.” I could not do this and I don’t know any mothers who lost their babies to adoption who managed to forget that they had had a baby. I left the hospital feeling bad and worthless; my self esteem was at zero.

The secrecy of adoption began and the baby was a shameful episode in my past. I went off the rails for a couple of years. My life was so abnormal without the baby but the baby was never mentioned and had disappeared. Everyone acted as if nothing had happened and nobody, including my family, acknowledged that I had had a baby. I managed to pull myself together, got married and had two children but of course they did not replace my lost baby. I began drinking (I am a recovering alcoholic). I understand that I drank to numb myself and bury my feelings. After I managed to stop drinking six years ago (after several attempts) I had nothing to numb me and my grief, loss and buried emotions began to surface.

The baby was never spoken of by me or my family until my daughter and I were reunited 20 years later. For those 20 years she was never out of my mind. I constantly wondered: Is she still alive? Is she happy? Is she well? What does she look like? Does she know about me? Will she want to find me? We both started searching when she turned 18 and were reunited by Jigsaw when she was 20. I was walking on air. I was finally going to see my baby, but of course she was no longer a baby. I did not begin to deal with this fact until I began therapy.

Reunion did not bring peace to either of us although I...
thought at the time that it would. Both my daughter and I have been damaged by adoption. We have a very on off relationship and are currently not in contact (my decision). At this point in time I cannot deal with our relationship. She is angry with me for adopting her. She feels abandoned and has said to me “there must have been something you could have done to keep me.” In 1969 there was not, but it seems that the idea of mothers losing their babies to adoption simply because they are unmarried is so bizarre that it is beyond the comprehension of society now. I hope that one day my daughter and I can get past our issues and enjoy a fulfilling relationship based on mutual respect and understanding.

I was given no options other than adoption, which “was best for the baby”. How can one argue with that?

Six months after I stopped drinking I plucked up the courage to see a therapist and finally, after 34 years, I began to talk about the baby and my experiences. It was like a dam had burst and I was completely overwhelmed with repressed emotions. I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, complicated grief and depression. I have a better understanding of how I came to lose my first born baby to adoption, the effects of this loss, the psychological damage caused to me and my buried feelings. I am facing my ongoing grief and loss and trying to make some sense of the inhumane adoption practices I endured in hospital. Therapy is agonisingly painful and expensive but I have a much better understanding of what happened to me when I lost my first born daughter to adoption and how it changed me forever.

My journey toward healing and resolving my grief and loss is not over yet. Society said that adoption was in my and my baby’s best interest. It was not. The cruel and inhumane ordeal that was labeled adoption separated and damaged thousands of mothers and their babies. The abuses and violations of the legal rights of these women need to be officially acknowledged and documented and the perpetrators of these crimes and inhumane practices need to understand how their actions seriously damaged women in their care.

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A relinquishing mother’s reunion – Alison’s story

I was three weeks old when I was adopted from the Ballarat Children’s Home and taken to live in Melbourne with my new parents and an older brother who was also adopted. My new parents gave me every opportunity to experience life and the best of everything possible. I was told I was adopted from a very early age however the reality of this information did not sink in until I was 11. A personal account of adoption by Alison Wright

I can remember being totally confused, angry and upset. So many questions and no answers. As I grew into my teenage years the need to know my ‘real’ mother became more and more intense. I realised that as far as my adoptive parents were concerned I was ‘second best’ – after all, if they had been able to have their own children, there would have been no interest in adopting any child.

Teenage years can be difficult as we all try to search for our own identity. When you have been adopted, that identity is even harder to establish. Questions I asked myself were ‘why was I given up’, what is my cultural background’, ‘who do I look like’ – the list goes on.

Just prior to turning 16 I wrote a promise to myself that I would find my ‘real’ mother by the time I was 18, or I would leave home. I hid this note behind a picture in my bedroom. Over the next few days I felt more and more guilty about being disloyal to my parents and went to retrieve the note but to my horror the note had gone. This incident was never spoken of and I became increasingly nervous, believing I would be thrown out of home for showing my disloyalty but this never happened.

I spent the next six months feeling nothing but numbness. I knew I couldn’t keep my baby – that’s not how things are done. It seemed completely normal to me to give my baby away; after all I had been given away too.

When I was 16 I became pregnant. My parents shipped me off to Adelaide to a couple who took in unwed pregnant girls to help with the domestic chores and look after their children. My boyfriend wasn’t ‘going to ruin his life’ just because I was pregnant. As an adoptee, I was terrified of being abandoned and rejected and this experience confirmed my worst nightmares. I believed, as an adoptee, that I didn’t deserve the best – if I had been good enough, I wouldn’t have been given away. My parents blamed my birth mother for my sin – I came from ‘bad blood’.

I spent the next six months feeling nothing but numbness. I knew I couldn’t keep my baby – that’s not how things are done. It seemed completely normal to me to give my baby away; after all I had been given away too.

The birth was induced due to the fact that my parents wanted me home for Christmas so my absence didn’t have to be explained. I was completely naïve regarding the birth procedure but as it turned out, it didn’t matter anyway as I was drugged from beginning to end. The only thing I knew was that I had given birth to a boy and that he was healthy. I never saw him and I never asked to see him. I didn’t believe I deserved to ask any questions.

I returned home to Melbourne and life went on. I started working, married the father of my child because I didn’t think anyone else would want me. We went on to have two daughters but the marriage failed and my ex-husband fought for custody of the girls. Again, I simply gave them away because that’s what you do. They were eight and eleven years old at the time. I didn’t even cry when they left, much to the shock of my friends who expected me to be distraught but I done it before, and knew how to cope by simply becoming numb and blocking out any emotions.

The need to find my birth family was still great and when the Victorian Adoption Act (1984) became legislation I joined the queue of thousands wanting their records. I waited four years for my number to come up. When I am
It’s been a long, hard road with many lessons to be learned along the way but the end result has led to feelings of inner peace – feelings I treasure and will hold on to for as long as possible.

Thirteen years passed and then one day, while I was on a Mediterranean cruise, my daughter received a message on Facebook from Jenny, James’s wife. She thought James was now ready for a relationship. Needless to say, I was extremely wary as I knew I couldn’t go through the heartbreak again. To cut a long story short, James and I are now slowly building trust between one another. He now lives in Arizona, USA so distance stops us from a face to face meeting but I am hopeful he and his family will return to Australia one day. I have a beautiful granddaughter who I have yet to contact but I’m patient – I can wait.

Reunion with my son put the smile back on my dial and I now feel content. All the loose family ends have been tied together and while we all have our own lives and are separated by distance, we are connected for life. It’s been a long, hard road with many lessons to be learned along the way but the end result has led to feelings of inner peace – feelings I treasure and will hold on to for as long as possible.

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I was born in 1949, grew up in a loving family – married in 1970, had a son in 1975, he was born developmentally disabled. Years followed with specialists, physio, genetics clinics. No syndrome was ever diagnosed. Another son was born in 1985, he had no medical problems, only asthma periodically. Mum was diagnosed with an eye condition which rendered her visually impaired, so my eye specialist was vigilant in my eye examinations.

Mum died 1994, and in November 1995 Dad moved into Aged Care, my brother (who was 13 years older and the biological child of my adoptive parents) and I were cleaning out Dad’s garage where we laughed at old pay dockets, newspapers etc. I came across adoption papers dated 1950 I thought Mum had tried to adopt a child after I’d been born. Wrong – they were my papers!

I was in shock, my brother just held me – after, he told me he’d had to promise never to tell me of my adoption. My mind was in a daze, later thinking of how, when getting married I was asked where I was born, I’d said a local hospital, Mum had said no they were on a Sunday drive and I was born in a town 30kms away, in an ambulance (we’d laughed about that for years). My husband and I were the only ones who didn’t know of my adoption. I found the kids I’d gone to school with had heard rumours, my nieces/nephews knew, it was general knowledge in my neighbourhood – amazing someone didn’t say something to me, thinking I knew.

I came across adoption papers dated 1950 I thought Mum had tried to adopt a child after I’d been born. Wrong – they were my papers!

Here I was aged 46, not knowing who I was – I felt like an actor who’d played a role for a long time, and then when the play had finished can’t work out whether they’re the role that they’ve played or Joe Blow the actor, and of course now I had no medical history and the ‘history’ I’d given the genetics clinics was useless.

January 1996 I received my original birth certificate, it had that I had two older brothers A, born 1944, and B, 1946 (deceased). I checked the electoral roles for A – found him and rang, I was lucky the call went well. He rang back several days later after verifying with one of his aunts the story of me being born in the ambulance, and other information. We spoke several more times before meeting; he lived about two hours away. He told me of the story as much as he knew. My birth Mum had become pregnant with me, knowing I wasn’t his, A’s father signed the adoption papers anyway. Their marriage eventually broke up, and she placed A in various Boys Homes through these years (we managed to track some of his records from these years). He explained to me there were brothers and sisters born after me, who he’d grown up with. He remembered his favourite Aunt telling him “there are more kids than you realize”.

A explained my birth Mum had 10-11 kids that they knew of. In March 1996 I received from the Department paperwork telling me of a child C born after me in 1951 this child too was adopted out. I found him living 20 minutes away. C and I had several phone calls before A, me and C met. It was interesting as A had asked my birth Mum for information on C – she’d said to him C’s dad was a Fijian sailor she’d met in Sydney. I wrote my birth Mum a letter telling her of my good life growing up, explaining I didn’t want
to intrude on her life but would like medical info and gave her the option of phoning me or giving the info to A. She rang, I told her I’d contacted C to me she told a story of how she fell pregnant with him – she’d gotten drunk in a sly grog shop, in Brisbane, and had a night with a guy she met there and fell pregnant. Totally different to the Fijian sailor story!

I wrote my birth Mum a letter telling her of my good life growing up, explaining I didn’t want to intrude on her life but would like medical info ...

The phone call from her didn’t deliver any medical info, except she and A had asthma. Most of what she also said I knew were lies, or wasn’t relevant but I did thank her for ringing. When A, C and I met, C and I were so alike – tall, dark haired, facial features similar, and same largish ears. A showed his Aunt photos of me and she knew who my birth dad was – her husband. C and I were full brother/sister. My birth Mum had an affair with him through many years, and I’m not sorry I made it. I also chose not to meet two of her daughters for a similar reason, but have met the other kids of birth Mum. C and his family I have regular contact with, we are very special to each other. Many of birth Mum’s other kids wish they too had been adopted out and maybe had a better life. There are four to five birth fathers between birth Mum’s kids, she married one of them in 1980s. She herself was eldest of 14, so I guess life had been hard for her from an early age. She had told medicos that she’d had at least 11 kids, I’ve tried to find the eleventh, but as she’s used various surnames, it is difficult, and sometimes just too hard to explain. Possibilities include a birth in Queensland, she’s given the child away, or maybe sold it (as she’d attempted to sell a grandchild of hers 25 years ago, till the baby’s Mum changed her mind).

I’m so lucky to have been adopted out and given the opportunity of a better and happier life ...

I’m so lucky to have been adopted out and given the opportunity of a better and happier life (which I certainly had). I know of some cases where the adoptee didn’t have a good experience of adoption, but in my case all I can say is “thank you” for what you’ve done for me.
I am 65 years of age, mother of three and grandmother of four. My story began in 1945 when I was born in the Royal Womens Hospital Melbourne to an 18-year-old girl from the Grampians, living in Melbourne single, alone and without family support.

After attempting to care for me for two months whilst working with the help of the ‘the Haven’, The Salvation Army Home for Girls and Babies, my mother signed her consent for me to be adopted and one day in June 1945 took me on the tram to the Community Welfare Dept in Flinders Street where she handed me to an officer and left via the backdoor. The officer took me into the adjoining room and gave me into the arms of the 43-year-old woman who was my ‘Mum’. Alone, my ‘Mum’ took the tram home to Coburg and to the house where I lived until my marriage in 1965.

I never had one single moment of doubt that I was my parents’ daughter and the fact that my parents were older than most seemed to have passed unnoticed.

As a much loved only child, my father was a detective in the Victoria Police Force and our home was shared by my beloved Nan who helped with the feeding and nappy changing routine with my mother.

I grew up in a house with older people, was studious, bright and loved books and animals. I never had one single moment of doubt that I was my parents’ daughter and the fact that my parents were older than most seemed to have passed unnoticed. I had many aunts, uncles and cousins who visited often to see their ‘Nan’.

My world blew apart Friday 13 December 1955 when my wonderful Dad suffered a very severe stroke in his office where he was in charge of a Melbourne police station. Taken to the RM Hospital we did not know for 10 days if he would survive. Each day a police car collected my Mum and myself and took us to visit him and returned us home. Dad did survive, following two long years in the Police Hospital in the days when there was no rehabilitation whatsoever he returned home in 1957. Mum and I had visited him in hospital every night after dinner and at weekends for two years, taking a bus, a tram and then the long walk from Flinders St Station down St Kilda Road to the Police Hospital. We got home at 10pm every night.

Dad was ‘decommissioned’ from the Police Force in 1957 owing to his incapacities – he was paralysed down the right side and his speech was affected. He was given a medal and sent home to us.

Our family life resumed with an invalid in the house who required all of my mothers’ attention 24/7. Dad was not my Dad after that, he was sometimes angry, abusive and very sad and could barely walk. My mother cared for him without any help, support or respite for another 7 years.

At the end of Grade 6 just before Dad returned home I sat for an exam for a local selective school and along with six others from my school gained entry. My parents were very proud of me. Unfortunately some ‘girlfriends’ of mine were not accepted and there ensured a ‘bitching’ session when I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not even my parents’ child. I confronted Mum who denied it of course and nothing more was said about the matter. I did not believe her and went into a world where I cried myself to sleep each night and talked to my dog. I was a sad and lonely little girl who began high school and did not do well at all although I had topped my primary school in every year.

There was a lot of anger in the house – I had nowhere to study in peace and my mother became very hard towards me. Her life was very difficult. As well my Nan was getting very old and in 1961 I found her having suffered a fatal stroke in her bedroom. She was 92 and I missed her dreadfully.

Rhonda Folkes has found it very beneficial to tell her story in the hope that it may help someone else who has had a similar experience.
My Mum was extremely strict, overprotective and hard on me and I was rarely allowed to go out even after I began work. Mum did not go anywhere but in her garden as she was afraid Dad would find some sleeping tablets and take an overdose. Mostly her friends did her shopping for her.

I left school at the end of Year 9 as I detested it and studied at a secretarial college and immediately got a job in an insurance company at 16. I had already met the boy who was to be my husband, he had been in Year 12 when I was in Year 9 and lived further down our street. He was the only person I was eventually allowed to go out with and the following year he began a degree in mathematics at Melbourne University.

Hearing adoption discussed distressed me terribly and I never talked about it with anyone apart from my closest girlfriend, and then not very much.

One day out of the blue the word ‘bastard’ was used by my Dad in one of his anger fits. I turned to Mum and asked point blank if he meant me. She admitted for the first time that I had been adopted but that I had never been in an orphanage. Again this was never mentioned afterwards. It was as though we had never had the conversation and I was too frightened to ask questions. She said she never had any intention of ever telling me.

Every time I heard the word ‘adoption’ mentioned on the tv or wireless I froze, my heart thumped, I became hot all over and immediately left the room. Hearing adoption discussed distressed me terribly and I never talked about it with anyone apart from my closest girlfriend, and then not very much.

When I was 19 my Mum was told to place Dad in a respite home and take a short holiday. She did, she stayed with her sister-in-law and became very ill. I think it was a mental breakdown. She returned home after a few weeks but was not well enough to have Dad back at home. I visited him each day with his cigarettes and clean clothing. He was very distressed as he thought he had been left there for good. Mum was not well enough to visit him as he would have put pressure on her to return home.

Shortly after the RM Hospital rang to say that he had been rushed in for surgery as he had had an aortic aneurism. He took three weeks to die. I was working as Secretary to the Chief Engineer at the Children’s Hospital nearby and each lunchtime and after work I sat with him, held his hand and waited for him to die. It broke my heart and still does, I miss him terribly. He was a really wonderful man loved by everyone who knew him. And I knew him for such a short time.

Well the following year I married aged 20. Poor Mum, she was then all alone after all those years and I was so happy I didn’t even realise how she had been affected.

I moved with my husband and baby to Canberra, followed by the birth of another little boy 16 months later and then two years in Italy. Numerous sabbaticals in Europe, US and the UK followed. I still could not listen to a discussion about adoption, until I heard about Jigsaw.

After plucking up courage to ask my Mum if she knew anything about my birth mother or my name she said she remembered the name that I had been born with. She was shocked that I had asked her and tried to make me feel guilty for her asking her “at her age”. She said “I thought you loved me!” I felt really bad but not enough to not go ahead. After a brief search via the telephone I found my birth mother and half sister 10 years my junior. I could now discuss adoption, the difference was amazing.

My mother was very angry with me and we had some terrible arguments, she seemed afraid she would lose me to my birth mother which was ridiculous, as I said I am a mother and I live interstate, how could anyone replace you. She calmed down after I promised never to call her ‘Mum’. After that she was pretty wonderful about it.
The relationship with my birth mother broke down after a few years as we could not obtain my original birth records as the laws had not been changed at that stage. Even though both my birth mother and adopted mother signed their consent it did not happen for another eight or so years by which time my birth mother had changed toward me. She began to have doubts that I was her biological daughter and acted very strangely toward me. I did not know at the time that she was a schizophrenic. The relationship ended quite nastily and I no longer heard from my sister either. It eventually turned out that she had told my sister and cousins that I was an impostor planted by her ex-husband in Norway. Alarm bells had begun to ring loudly.

My birth mother would never divulge who was my birth father and according to some notes that she had made she had “fed me incorrect information to see how I would react”.

Despite some television programmes which depict happy ever afters, the reality is often very different ...

I was given my original birth papers confirming my birth mother’s name about eight years after applying. I sent her copies, she never responded. It was a shock for me to find that according to my papers I had not been adopted at two months. I was 16 at the time Mum legally adopted me. I had not been fostered, nor had I had a ‘guardian’ appointed. In fact no one from the Department ever came to our home or contacted my parents to enquire after me or to enquire as to why they had not adopted me. No money had ever been received by my parents. My birth mother had not been told that there had not been any adoption either, although she had signed adoption papers in 1945, and she must have been shocked to see that I was adopted aged 16.

My birth mother did not believe the papers were legitimate and the Community Welfare people contacted me to tell me that she had driven from Stawell to Melbourne to tell them that I was an impostor and that the papers were forgeries. They were rather upset and didn’t know how to react to her, but assured her that the papers were legitimate. I had no contact with her after that.

When many years later I contacted Community Welfare to obtain any other information they emailed me to say that they were very sorry “that I had obviously fallen through the net!” In fact from two months when I was given a new name, until my legal adoption at 16 I did not have any legal name at all. If I had applied for a birth certificate I would not have existed. This fact distresses me and I wonder how many people out there have been unknowingly in the same position.

The reason given by my mother for not adopting me at two months was that she and my Dad were afraid that my birth mother would claim me back. That of course does not make sense as she had signed papers. My father, being in the police force had made all the arrangements for me to be ‘fostered’ and my Mum knew very little of what had taken place.

There is a footnote to the above story as an aunt confessed at my eldest son’s marriage “that he looked the image of my Dad at the same age”. My Mum had died 5 years previously and apparently all our family believed for all those years that ‘Dad’ was my birth father but of course could not say anything while Mum was still alive.

I had imagined a likeness to my Dad, but put the thought aside as wishful thinking, so was really rocked by my aunt’s suggestion. Consequently I arranged for a DNA test of blood samples from myself and my Dad’s nephew for compatibility. The result was negative. But I have my doubts still and can’t help comparing both my sons’ mannerisms to those of my Dad. I suppose I will die with the question unanswered.

Knowing my birth origins has been very beneficial to me despite the sadness and unhappy ending. Four years ago my birth mother died without ever speaking or writing to me again. She died believing I was an impostor. My half sister asked me to go to Queensland for her funeral which I did but although I cried, the tears were not for her but for all the sadness caused. I have no feelings for my birth mother whatsoever. I should pity her because she was obviously ill, but I do not recognise her as my ‘mother’. Since the funeral my relationship with my sister has broken down. No hard feelings, but we simply had nothing in common.

Despite some television programmes which depict happy ever afters, the reality is often very different I have found. Fortunately I can discuss adoption these days and find it very beneficial to tell my story in the hope that it may help someone else.

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In Australia, the processing of intercountry adoptions is the responsibility of State and Territory adoption authorities such as departments of family services. These authorities manage arrangements for adopting children from overseas including assessing and approving prospective adoptive parents. The Australian Government, through the Attorney-General’s Department, has the responsibility for managing existing programs and negotiating new programs with other countries.

If you live in Australia and are considering adopting a child from overseas, contact your state or territory adoption authority.

The eligibility requirements for overseas adoptions are different in each state and territory and may include criteria concerning partner relationship status, age, citizenship and health. Relative and known child adoptions are a matter for each state and territory adoption authority to consider on a case by case basis, and are conducted in accordance with the Hague Convention and state and territory legislation.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship cannot help with adoption arrangements. The department’s role is to assess and decide applications for visas in accordance with the requirements of the Migration Regulations 1994.

This fact sheet provides an overview of requirements for entry of children who are adopted overseas, or are to be adopted in Australia by Australian citizens, permanent residents or New Zealand citizens. Separate information is available if the child was adopted before the sponsor became an Australian citizen, permanent resident or New Zealand citizen.

**Hague Convention**


The objectives of the Hague Convention are to eliminate abduction, trafficking or sale of children, and to make sure that intercountry adoptions take place in the best interests of the children, and according to consistent law and practices.

State and territory adoption legislation and Australia’s immigration laws are designed to uphold the principles of this convention.

**Adoption visa**

An Adoption (subclass 102) visa is for a child who has been formally adopted by an Australian citizen or a person who is permanently resident in Australia. To be eligible for an Adoption visa, the overseas adoption must have been arranged through an Australian state or territory adoption authority. There is no provision to grant a visa to a child outside Australia who has been adopted under private arrangements, unless the adoptive parent has been genuinely resident overseas for 12 months at the time of the visa application.

An Adoption visa can only be applied for by children outside Australia. To be granted an Adoption visa, the child must be under 18 years of age at the time of application and the time of the decision. The child must meet health requirements before a visa is granted.

**State and territory supported adoptions**

Adoptions arranged by state and territory adoption authorities are known as intercountry adoptions and fall into two main categories:

- Hague Convention adoptions, between Australia and another country which has ratified the convention
- Bilateral agreement adoptions, from another country which has an agreement with Australia. Adoption authorities negotiate these agreements.

Adoption and immigration procedures vary depending on the country and the category under which the adoption takes place. The usual procedure is:

- Prospective adoptive parents are allocated a child from the overseas country through their state or territory adoption authority
- If accepted, they may lodge an Adoption visa application for the child and pay the current visa application charge. The application may be lodged at any departmental office in Australia, and will be forwarded to the relevant departmental office overseas for processing. Alternatively, it may be sent directly to the overseas
office with evidence that the application fee has been paid

➤ The child is required to undergo medical checks. The child may not be granted a visa if the health requirement is not met, unless there is a waiver of the health requirement. If the health requirement is not waived, the Adoption visa will be refused and the visa application charge can neither be refunded nor transferred to another child

➤ The adoption is finalised in the overseas country or the overseas authorities approve the child’s departure for adoption in Australia

➤ A visa granting permanent residence to the child is granted and appears in the child’s foreign passport.

Privately arranged adoptions

The only circumstance where an Adoption visa may be granted to a child adopted privately overseas is where the adoptive parents have been living overseas for more than 12 months at the time they made the visa application.

These private adoptions, which are known as expatriate adoptions, have specific legal requirements that the adoptive parents must meet, including:

➤ Their residence overseas was not contrived to deliberately bypass any requirements concerning entry of adopted children into Australia

➤ They have lawfully acquired full and permanent parental rights by the child’s adoption. This means that the adoption order must sever the legal relationship between the child and its natural parents, and

➤ The relevant authorities in the overseas country have approved the child’s departure to Australia.

The child also needs to meet the standard migration requirements including health criteria.

Caution

State and territory adoption authorities do not generally support privately arranged adoptions. They will not help sponsors meet the requirements of the Migration Regulations for granting a visa to an adopted child.

‘Full and permanent’ adoption does not exist in the laws of some countries, for example, many Islamic countries. An adoption order that does not grant full parental rights to the adoptive parents is not acceptable for the grant of a visa.

If you wish to proceed with an adoption that has not been arranged by your state or territory adoption authority, it is strongly recommended you first seek legal advice both in Australia and in the overseas country.

You must ensure the adoption meets the requirements as set out in the Migration Regulations and that the child will be eligible to enter Australia. There is no provision to grant a visa to a child who does not meet the requirements of the Migration Regulations, even if the adoption has already occurred and is lawful in that country.

Guardianship of children

Overseas adoptions by Australian citizens and permanent residents are not automatically recognised under Australian law. The exceptions are adoptions completed overseas under the Hague Convention. In the case of other adoptions, once the adopted child has entered Australia, adoptive parents can apply to an Australian court to be recognised as parents of the child under Australian law.

A child who enters Australia holding an Adoption visa where the adoption is to be finalised in Australia, or where the adoption is not recognised, is officially under the guardianship of the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. This guardianship is delegated to state and territory welfare authorities.

This arrangement is set down in the Immigration
(Guardianship of Children) Act 1946. The Act provides a framework for state and territory governments to supervise the adoption process in Australia and ensure that arrangements are in the best interests of the child.

You will be advised when a decision is being made on the child’s application as to whether the child falls within these guardianship provisions, and what action you should take. The welfare authority in the state or territory in which you usually reside will also be advised of the child’s details.

The guardianship arrangements cease to apply once the child obtains Australian citizenship, or the child turns 18 years of age or in most cases when an Australian adoption order is made for the child.

**Australian citizenship**

The way in which an adopted child becomes an Australian citizen depends on the adoption process.

**When an adoption is finalised in Australia**

Where an adoption order is made under Australian law after the child arrives in Australia as a permanent resident, and at least one of the adoptive parents is an Australian citizen, the child will automatically acquire Australian citizenship. An application for Australian citizenship is not required, but parents may apply for evidence of Australian citizenship at any office of the department.

**When an adoption is finalised overseas**

A child adopted overseas by an Australian citizen under the Hague Convention may be eligible to become an Australian citizen if an adoption compliance certificate has been issued and the adoption is recognised in Australia for the laws of the Commonwealth and each state and territory. Applications can be lodged overseas or once the child is in Australia.

A child adopted overseas by an Australian citizen under other arrangements may be eligible to apply for Australian citizenship by conferral. The child must hold a visa that permits them to reside permanently in Australia. Applications can be lodged overseas or once the child is in Australia.
Legislation in each State and Territory governs intercountry adoption matters. The intercountry adoption process used in each State and Territory is similar, but not identical. Differences in process and requirements may also occur in each overseas country that Australia has a program with. Please contact your State or Territory authority for specific process information.

A general summary of the process is as follows:

1. Initial contact
2. Education seminars and formal application
3. Adoption assessment
4. Decision regarding the approval of an application
5. Preparation and forwarding of adoption application overseas
6. Waiting period
7. Placement proposal (the matching of a child with a family) issued by the overseas authority
8. Immigration application process
9. Travel to meet the child
10. Post-placement support, and
11. Finalisation of the adoption (where required).

Please note that the timeframes for adopting a child vary for a range of reasons and are subject to change. Prospective adoptive parents should be aware that the process can take a number of years.

1. **Initial contact**

   Prospective adoptive parents make initial contact with their State or Territory authority by email, telephone or via their website. Initial information is available electronically or by post. Some States or Territories may require the lodgement of an expression of interest form and/or attendance at initial information sessions.

2. **Education seminars and formal application**

   State and Territory authorities provide detailed education seminars in order to provide prospective adoptive parents with a range of information regarding intercountry adoption. Issues covered include the specific needs of adopted children, bonding and attachment and country program information. Formal adoption applications require a range of detailed information to be provided by prospective adoptive parents.

3. **Adoption assessment**

   Detailed information on the assessment process, requirements and criteria are available from each State and Territory authority.

   An adoption assessment considers a family's suitability to parent an adopted child and to meet the child's specific needs. Assessments usually involve a number of interviews with an adoption assessor (a social worker or psychologist), culminating in the assessor completing a report.

   Adoption assessments consider a variety of elements relevant to the parenting of an adopted child, including: parenting capacity, physical and psychological health, motivations and expectations, current and past relationships, and an understanding of and ability to meet the specific needs of adopted children. The Australian Government Attorney-General's Department supports a rigorous and transparent application and assessment process. These practices ensure that Australian families are appropriately prepared to parent children adopted from overseas.

4. **Decision regarding the approval of an application**

   Each State and Territory is responsible for making the decision regarding the approval of adoption applications, based on the information prospective adoptive parents provide, and in accordance with the relevant legislation. State and Territory authorities have clear and transparent processes for decision-making.

5. **Preparation and forwarding of adoption application overseas**

   Each overseas authority has specific requirements regarding the content of adoption applications (dossiers). Some countries use a quota system which limits the number of applications that can be sent by Australia to that country in any given year. This can create a waiting period before an application can be sent overseas. Where applicable, quotas are usually limited to
those seeking to adopt younger children without special needs.

6. Waiting period
Waiting periods for applications between approval and a placement proposal (allocation) are influenced by a number of factors. These may include the number of children identified as being in need of intercountry adoption (by the overseas authority), the number of applications received by the overseas authority, and the resources of the overseas authority. These timeframes are outside Australia’s control.

7. Placement proposal
The overseas authority forwards the placement proposal, including social and medical information about the child to the State or Territory authority for approval. Once approved, the State or Territory authority will contact the prospective adoptive parents for their acceptance of the proposal. The amount of information included in placement proposals varies considerably amongst country programs and depends on the child’s individual circumstances.

8. Immigration application process
The ability of an adopted child to enter Australia depends on immigration requirements being met. The process followed may vary depending on the country involved. Prospective adoptive parents will usually commence the immigration application process prior to travelling to the overseas country.

9. Travel to meet the child
The timeframe between accepting a placement proposal and travelling to meet the child varies between countries. Travel arrangements should not be confirmed until advised to do so by the State or Territory authority. The amount of time families are required to spend in the overseas country also varies. These timeframes are determined by the overseas authorities.

10. Post-placement support
State and Territory authorities will provide support and supervision following placement. It is recommended that all adoptive parents seek a full medical for their child, from an appropriately qualified and experienced doctor, as soon as possible after they return to Australia.

11. Finalisation of the adoption
Finalisation of an adoption refers to the legal process whereby the prospective adoptive parents become the legal parents of the child. The way in which an adoption is finalised depends on the process used in the country of origin and the procedures of the State or Territory.

Final adoption decision made in the country of origin
For some of Australia’s intercountry adoption programs, a final adoption order or decision is made in the country of origin. Where an adoption has been finalised in the country of origin, the adoption order may be recognised under Australian law. A period of post-placement supervision takes place after the child enters Australia.

Adoption order finalised in Australia
For some of Australia’s intercountry adoption programs, the adoption is not finalised in the country of origin. In these cases, the adoption needs to be finalised in line with appropriate State or Territory processes (usually in a State or Territory court) after the child arrives in Australia.

This occurs after a period of post-placement supervision. For children whose adoptions are not finalised in the country of origin, the Australian Government Minister for Immigration and Citizenship assumes guardianship of the child until the final adoption order is made. This guardianship is delegated to State and Territory authorities.
While intercountry adoption has many rewards, there are a range of issues that prospective adoptive parents need to consider before deciding to adopt a child from overseas. The authorities in your State and Territory can discuss these issues with you. Intercountry adoption support organisations also exist in each State and Territory and can provide information and support on a range of issues that applicants may face in the intercountry adoption process.

Prospective adoptive parents should consider a number of broad themes prior to making a decision to adopt a child from overseas. This includes a thorough understanding of:

➤ Grief and loss
➤ Attachment and bonding
➤ Openness in adoption
➤ Development of cultural/racial identity, and
➤ Racism and discrimination.

There are no guarantees that applying to adopt a child will result in a child being placed with you. Prospective parents should consider the financial and emotional pressures that can be associated with raising a child adopted from overseas. Families can find the process of intercountry adoption a challenging and anxious one.

Children may have experienced significant trauma in their country of birth. Some children may find it difficult to adjust to a new family and country. Others, especially older children, may have physical and mental disabilities, significant developmental delays, or other special needs. These factors can mean that additional medical help and resources may be needed to raise an adopted child. In addition, there is often limited knowledge of a child’s medical background.

Many adopted children will also face issues about their identity as they grow up. This may prove difficult for the child, the parents and their extended families.

Despite these challenges, adoption can be a rewarding and joyous experience and there are many adoption support organisations that volunteer their time to support those on the adoption journey.

Further information about intercountry adoption is available from State and Territory Authorities and Intercountry Adoption Support Organisations.

**Foster care and permanent care**

Intercountry and domestic (local) adoption provides permanent families for children unable to remain with their biological families, but adoption is just one of a range of options used to provide ongoing care for children in need of families.

Long-term foster care and/or permanent care are an important part of the provision of services for children and young people unable to remain with their biological families. For people looking to open their home to a child, foster care and permanent care are alternative options to consider.

For further information about long-term foster care and/or permanent care programs please contact your State or Territory government department responsible for the care and protection of children. A number of Australian non-government organisations are also accredited to provide long-term foster care programs and offer information to families and individuals about these options.

Please see the links below for further information regarding foster and permanent care in your State or Territory:

➤ New South Wales Department of Community Services
➤ Victorian Department of Human Services
➤ Queensland Department of Child Safety
➤ Western Australia Department of Child Protection
➤ South Australian Department of Families and Communities
➤ Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services
➤ Australian Capital Territory Office for Children, Youth and Family Support
➤ Northern Territory Family and Children’s Services
Australia’s poor adoption record

Ordinary Australians are probably not aware of how unjust and dire the intercountry adoption program in this country is, and how many people it affects, writes Deborra-Lee Jackman.

I am thrilled that there are very few children to adopt in Australia. I wish there were no babies to adopt anywhere in the world. But unfortunately, there are millions of orphans and unwanted children needing a safe and loving family environment. In Australia, there are many families who would desperately love to provide that care but they are being stopped by the system.

As it stands, Australia has the second lowest number of intercountry adoptions in the world. The only one below us is the United Kingdom. Considering our immense resources, this is a great shame. We think of ourselves as a generous nation and yet this low ranking in terms of adoption says something else. We need to step up to the plate and make a difference to the global crisis of unwanted children.

The major problem in regards to adopting in Australia is the waiting time from the beginning of the process to actually picking up your child – it can take up to eight years. It is expensive too – costing up to $40,000 to adopt a child.

The process is also very invasive and intrusive in the way potential adoptive parents are put through the wringer in regards to their personal life. From every account, their treatment was far from kind or supportive.

As it stands, Australia has the second lowest number of intercountry adoptions in the world. Considering our immense resources, this is a great shame.

When I attended a meeting in Melbourne years ago about how to adopt a child, the woman who spoke about what to expect was extremely negative and aggressive, and from what I could see did her best to deter everyone from the gruelling process they would have to endure. One woman I spoke to said they delved into her previous relationships and questioned her morals. People feel very vulnerable when starting out and the atmosphere that is created around this procedure is not caring.

Ordinary Australians are probably not aware of how unjust and dire the intercountry adoption program in this country is, and how many people it affects. I have been personally involved in the adoption issue after experiencing my own problems when I tried to adopt in Australia eight years ago. I have since been blessed with two beautiful children that I adopted from the United States.

I now work with orphanages in Africa and have established The Rafiki Fundraising Society, a foundation for an orphanage in Kenya. I am sure if people witnessed the reality of a two-year-old walking the streets homeless with no one to care for them, they would jump at the opportunity to save a child’s life.

One has to ask why other countries in the world can facilitate the
necessary procedures in much less time, much less expense and much less bureaucratic nonsense. I understand due diligence needs to be in place but I feel the Australian government is hiding behind this excuse.

I am thrilled the new government lead by Kevin Rudd has chosen to take the adoption issue on board and has announced the establishment of a federal peak body to oversee all the states, which will now be operating under the same rules. It is a great step forward. However, it is only the first step and there are many more to go.

The Hague Convention is a treaty that governs adoptions around the world and Australia can only adopt from countries that are signatories. Many poor countries do not have the infrastructure to pursue membership and Australia should play a role in researching and assisting in bringing poorer countries on board.

I would also like to see the Attorney-General’s office consider tax benefits to families who adopt from overseas – something that happens in many other countries. As this requires large amounts of money, I suggest re-routing the funds from foreign aid. The age of the baby bonus should also be lifted. As it currently stands, it is two years of age but due to the long waits, the children arrive here older and adopting families should not be penalised.

The government should also subsidise agencies in the private sector that already have an infrastructure in place in relation to intercountry adoptions. They have the passion, knowledge and contacts to facilitate an expedient service. As it stands, the government requires huge fees and requirements from these private agencies, which they cannot possibly come up with.

These agencies are not-for-profit and only wish to assist in looking after both the adopting parents and children. They are helping out people that are going through the system as they have relationships with various orphanages around the world and know what is involved with adopting a child.

In New South Wales, intercountry adoption is managed by the Department of Community Services. They have come under a lot of scrutiny in the press in the last few months for their mismanagement and neglect in several child abuse cases. It would seem evident that if our local children are not being looked after properly by this department then kids from overseas don’t stand much of a chance.

We live in a global community, where we share global ethics and have a global responsibility. We cannot say that orphaned and unwanted children are not our problem – they are all our children, and our future.

This issue needs to be a priority. It is urgent. Every month we sit around discussing this, another child gets left behind in the paper trail, and hopeful parents give up. We live in a global community, where we share global ethics and have a global responsibility. We cannot say that orphaned and unwanted children are not our problem – they are all our children, and our future. This delineation of separatism, this ‘them and us’ keeps us trapped in ignorance. As soon as we perceive ourselves as one, it will allow us to move forward.
**THE PARENT TRAP**

Why does overseas adoption seem so easy for celebrities and so hard for everyone else? An opinion piece from ACTNOW

Madonna has done it. So have Nicole Kidman and Meg Ryan. Angelina Jolie is famous for it. It’s not acting I’m talking about. It’s overseas adoption. And the big question is: why is it so easy for them, and so hard for ordinary folk in Australia? The answer is that celebrities who adopt from overseas aren’t applying within the Australian system.

Australia currently has the second lowest rate of overseas adoptions amongst developed countries. In fact, the number of adoptions in Australia has fallen drastically from a peak of almost 10,000 in 1971-72, to just 576 in 2004-05. While this drop has a lot to do with fewer Australian mothers putting their children up for adoption, it also speaks of an adoption system gone awry.

In the United States, adopting a child from overseas normally takes about nine months. Here, it can take more than six years. ABC journalist Tim Gavel knows only how arduous the process can be. In 2004, Gavel and his wife adopted two children from Ethiopia, but it took two years before they could finally bring them home. “In Australia, you wait until a child is allocated to you,” he told the *Canberra Times*. “You don’t pick or choose. It’s absolutely different to the whole Madonna thing,” he says.

In late 2005, a report by a House of Representatives’ standing committee, *Overseas Adoption in Australia*, found there was general attitude against intercountry adoption in government departments, “which [ranged] from indifference or lack of support to outright hostility”. The reported stated that in NSW a department representative had told prospective parents they should consider fostering Australian children instead. And in Western Australia, parents were told they’d be better off donating money to developing countries.

While there’s no doubt the Australian adoption system has plenty of room for improvement, it should be noted that some of the red tape is there for good reasons. Unfortunately some parents in developing nations feel pressured to give their child a ‘better life’ in the western world.

“It seems to many prospective parents as if the government agencies responsible are screening out families, rather than screening them in,” says psychologist Trudy Rosenwald, who specialises in adoption issues and is herself a mother of two children adopted from overseas.

The problem is compounded by the lack of a national adoption system. “Each state and territory in Australia has its own procedure to follow when approving applicants,” says Ricky Brisson, Chief Executive Officer of Australian Families for Children. In fact, the policies vary so much there is different legislation concerning the minimum and maximum age prospective parents; whether singles, de facto or homosexual couples can apply; and, would you believe it, whether or not you have to be an Australian citizen!

A further difficulty for adoptive parents is that they aren’t provided with the same amount of government financial support as birth parents. For example, many adoptive parents miss out on welfare payments like the maternity payment and the baby bonus, usually because their children are too old when they finally arrive in Australia. And adoptive parents could do certainly with the extra cash. Peter Gogarty, a father of two children adopted from overseas, says overseas adoption already costs parents an average of more than $40,000. “Our financial needs are far greater than someone breastfeeding a baby in a cot, yet we get no financial support.” He and his wife had to redraw on the equity of their home to foot their $75,000 bill. “We have really weathered the storm of adoption,” he told the *Sunday Telegraph.*
While there's no doubt the Australian adoption system has plenty of room for improvement, it should be noted that some of the red tape is there for good reasons. Unfortunately some parents in developing nations feel pressured to give their child a ‘better life’ in the western world. Shockingly, a number of parents are also hoodwinked into adoption, or paid to give up their children.

In order to put a stop to such practices, the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption was established “to protect children and their families against the risks of illegal, irregular, premature or ill-prepared adoptions abroad”. Australia signed the treaty in 1998, agreeing to play the role of gatekeeper with even greater consideration for the adopted child.

While there's no doubting the Convention's importance, its presence has made intercountry adoption more difficult; Australia can only deal with the limited number of nations that have also signed up. Yet as Australian actress Deborra-Lee Furness argues, there's an easy solution to this problem. Many poor countries don't have the infrastructure to meet adoption standards and pursue membership of the Convention, so the Australian government should put their resources into helping these nations join. This will not only make adoption a safer practice worldwide, but also shorten Australian waiting lists.

“It breaks my heart to think there are thousands of abandoned children overseas waiting for loving families to take them but the government is making it so hard,” says Furness, who has two adopted children with husband Hugh Jackman. She has been a vocal advocate for change ever since. And recently her lobbying paid off when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced the formation of federal peak body, which will oversee the states so that they operate under the same rules.

This is a good start. But we need to get the ball rolling faster. As Furness warns, “every month we sit around discussing this, another child gets left behind in the paper trail, and hopeful parents give up.”

HOW DO I KNOW THIS?


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Maggie Millar has a problem with Deborra-Lee Furness’ work. Supported by her movie star husband, Hugh Jackman, Furness has cranked up a campaign to open up overseas adoption for Australian couples. Part of this campaign has been creating National Adoption Awareness Week, which will be running this coming week.

Maggie Millar is an artist and an actor, too, though she never reached the heights of fame of Furness and Jackman. You might remember seeing her in Bellbird or Prisoner, or you might remember her in Neighbours as the Reverend. Millar has also been a stalwart of Australian theatre and has been praised by critics as warm, lusty and downright brilliant.

One reason, perhaps, for the brilliance of her acting was that she had plenty of practice, even as a little girl. You see, Millar was adopted and she never quite got the knack of being part of her adoptive family. “All of my relatives were like aliens to me; as I no doubt was to them,” she says. After a troubled childhood, Millar found out at 17 that she was adopted.

It wasn’t until many years later, when she read a book by Nancy Verrier, that she finally understood her anguish. Verrier is a US psychotherapist specialising in adoption issues. She is also an adoptive parent. Her first book, The Primal Wound, has been welcomed by adoptees worldwide as their bible.

According to Verrier, the infant and mother are still connected outside the womb – physiologically, psychologically and spiritually. The infant, she says, knows the mother’s smell, voice, heartbeat, energy and skin. On adoption, the separation results in a terrible feeling of abandonment that is indelibly printed upon the unconscious mind of the child. The grief of separation is so profound that it causes a searing wound, a primal wound.

It is because of the fear of being abandoned again that adopted children often display two types of behaviour. They will either be provocative, rebellious and angry, or they will become withdrawn, compliant and forever on guard. Sometimes they will display a combination of both behaviours.

Millar says the pain of separation and the subsequent loss of identity is accentuated for intercountry adoptees. “The statistics around these adoptees are only now coming to light and they are disturbing,” she says. “They have much higher rates of suicide and depression than children who are adopted within their own countries. Many of these adoptees go back to their country of origin but even there they do not feel at home, they are dispossessed, their identity stolen.”

Furness’ organisation is called Orphan Angels. She has quoted UNICEF figures claiming there are 103 million orphans in the Third World. That number is a misrepresentation. UNICEF defines an orphan as a child who has lost one parent. The true figure for what most of us would regard as orphans is closer to 13 million children, and most of these are living with extended family – in poverty.

Trafficking, kidnapping and exploitation of children and their parents abound when agencies offer huge sums of money in an impoverished country. Graphic cases of corrupt practices connected to the adoption industry in Ethiopia were exposed by the ABC’s Foreign Correspondent program in September.

When Madonna and Angelina pick out babies from orphanages like dolls from a shelf, they are sending a message that children are a commodity. “Wealthy people have the power and means to buy a child,” Millar says, “but the child and her family have little or no power over what is happening to them.” Adoptees, she says, are the only people suffering from a profound trauma who are supposed to be grateful.

Millar feels for gay or infertile people who long for a child, but she asks them to think of the rights of the child they are adopting. “Someone else’s child is not a cure for infertility. No one is entitled to a child, especially to someone else’s child. Adoption should be a last resort and should be done with eyes wide open. Be aware of the consequences … Be educated and be prepared for a long journey. Not all adoptions are unsuccessful but all adoptions take a lot of work.”

Reform of adoption procedures was a hard-won battle resulting in the 1984 Victorian Adoption Act. This gave adoptees access to their records. When the legislation came into force, some 7,000 people in Victoria alone queued up, waiting to find out who they were. Now the general benefits of this hard-won battle are being eroded.

The push for intercountry adoption is generally misguided. People who wish to help children of the third world should start by helping them within their own country, their own culture and their own tribe.

For more information on overseas adoption, visit NancyVerrier.com and Vanish.org.au.
An Australian parent hoping to adopt an orphan from a foreign country today must endure a heartache-and-hurdles trial of gruelling waiting times and red tape. Yet with more than 130 million unparented children in the world, it shouldn’t be this hard.

About 40,000 children are placed through intercountry adoption across the world every year – yet only around 330 on average find their way into an Australian home.

Intercountry adoption began in Australia in 1975, when 292 Vietnamese orphans were placed with Australian families after the Vietnam War.

Towards the end of the 1970s, however, there was a shift in attitudes as the practice of adopting children, either through domestic or international programs, was bound up with a sense of shame. Adopted children with different racial backgrounds were often raised as white Australians and their adoption was rarely acknowledged, causing considerable damage to their sense of identity and self-esteem in later life.

In Australia today we can boast a variety of immigrant groups and racially diverse schools. Bilingual skills are valued, overseas travel is affordable and cultural diversity is prized. It’s now much easier for intercountry adoptees to maintain and cultivate their birth culture, racial identity and original language from within Australia.

Yet our federal government, which manages Australia’s overseas adoption programs, still lingers in a state of inertia. Despite the Attorney-General’s Department’s investigation into more than 30 potential new countries we have not had an increase in the number of children finding Australian families.

The Department appears to focus on the risks of child trafficking scandals in the media rather than the risk of neglect and damage to children who are institutionalised and who genuinely have no other opportunity for a permanent family other than through intercountry adoption.

Being slow to create new adoption programs with overseas countries, while being quick to suspend existing programs over irregularities (such as what happened with the Ethiopia program last month), harms the very children who need our help.

It may be time to stop viewing overseas adoption in isolation but instead as part of a comprehensive, long-term country-to-country relationship where aid and welfare for children are the focus and adoption is just one small aspect of this.

Such a strategy could include services to help families stay together as well as assistance towards in-country welfare systems and improving options for domestic adoptions and foster care.

Investing in a more comprehensive strategy means we may be better positioned to encourage laws and procedures to reduce adoption abuses such as the kidnapping and trafficking of children.

It also means we could expedite the process of finding these children permanent carers and preferably permanent families from a range of options, with intercountry adoption just one of those options.

A short-term approach to overseas adoption programs, however, means that only those countries with enough funds to provide very good welfare systems qualify to deal with Australia. That excludes the very countries that most need assistance with their orphan crisis.

Janine Weir is an adoption advocate and has adopted three children from South Korea.

Source: NineMSN News, 22 December 2009
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EXPLORING ISSUES

ABOUT THIS SECTION

‘Exploring issues’ features a range of ready-to-use worksheets relating to the articles and issues raised in this book.

The activities and exercises in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond.

As the information in this book is gathered from a number of different sources, readers are prompted to consider the origin of the text and to critically evaluate the questions presented.

Does the source have a particular bias or agenda? Are you being presented with facts or opinions? Do you agree with the writer?

The types of ‘Exploring issues’ questions posed in each Issues in Society title differ according to their relevance to the topic at hand.

‘Exploring issues’ sections in each Issues in Society title may include any combination of the following worksheets: Brainstorm, Research activities, Written activities, Discussion activities, Quotes of note, Ethical dilemmas, Cartoon comments, Pros and cons, Case studies, Design activities, Statistics and spin, and Multiple choice.

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WORKSHEETS AND ACTIVITIES

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Brainstorm, individually or as a group, to find out what you know about adoption in Australia.

1. What is adoption?

2. What are some of the reasons for why adoption might occur?

3. Define the following terms and consider how their meanings differ from one another.
   - *Intercountry adoption:*
   - *Local adoption:*
   - ‘Known’ child adoption:
   - *Open adoption:*
   - *Foster care:*
1. Read the article on pages 11-12 entitled *Impact of past adoption practices*. Create a list of past harmful adoption practices and explore possible personal perspectives of the children who were adopted, and their relinquishing birth parents.

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2. Research the current adoption process in your own State or Territory and provide a brief explanation of this process.

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The rate of adoptions in Australia has declined considerably since the 1970s. Refer to the latest information from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare concerning Australian adoption trends, and offer reasons for the decline in adoptions.

Explain how the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption relates to the overseas adoption process in Australia.
DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine that you are now in your early twenties and have just found out that you were adopted shortly after birth. Discuss your reaction to this discovery and explore the feelings you may have about your birth parents, your adoptive parents, and your own identity.

2. Imagine that you were coerced into offering your child up for adoption, at a time when past practices encouraged unwed single mothers to relinquish their child. How might you respond to being contacted by your (now adult) adopted child a number of years later?
DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

1. While intercountry adoption has many rewards, there are a range of issues that prospective adoptive parents need to consider before deciding to adopt a child from overseas. Discuss the possible ethical issues involved in intercountry adoption.

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2. Adoption laws in various states and territories make it extremely difficult and sometimes impossible for same-sex couples to adopt. Compile a range of arguments for and against same-sex adoption in Australia.

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After reading each of the following statements, consider your own position on the opinions expressed and explain why you agree or disagree. You may wish to discuss the statements in pairs, or use them as starting points for group debates.

1. Dealing with issues around adoption is often a lifelong journey of discovery and healing for some people, while others find it less troubling. (Children, Youth and Women’s Health Service, p.2)

2. All parents have problems raising kids, and the problems of adoptive parents are much the same as those of ‘natural’ parents. (Raising Children Network, p.10)

3. In hindsight, it is believed that if knowledge of the emotional effects on people was available during the period concerned, then parents may not have pushed for adoption to take place and birth mothers may not have, willingly or unwillingly, relinquished their children. (Parliament of Tasmania Joint Select Committee, 1999, p.12)

4. In theory, adoption should be a powerful tool for same-sex families who face biological challenges to being birth parents. However, in practice, the adoption laws in the various states and territories make it extremely difficult – and sometimes impossible – for same-sex couples to adopt. (Australian Human Rights Commission, p.13)

5. You might be experiencing a whole range of feelings around your birth parents, including excitement, anger, curiosity, worry, and rejection. (Reach Out!, p.17)

6. You might be experiencing a whole range of feelings around your adoptive parents, including appreciation, betrayal, or anger. (Reach Out!, p.17)

7. Part of growing up is discovering more about our identity. An important component of identity is knowing your family and their history. As someone who is adopted, it is natural to want to find out about your birth family as well as the family you grew up with. (Reach Out!, p.22)

8. You are party to an adoption; perhaps an adopted person, a birth parent or an adoptive parent. You now know that a birth relative would like contact and this may or may not be appealing to you. Perhaps contact is something you never gave much consideration to. Perhaps it is something very precious and you are frightened it may ‘go wrong’. Perhaps it seems likely to complicate your life in ways you don’t feel prepared for. (The Benevolent Society, p.24)

9. There are no guarantees that applying to adopt a child will result in a child being placed with you. Prospective parents should consider the financial and emotional pressures that can be associated with raising a child adopted from overseas. Families can find the process of intercountry adoption a challenging and anxious one. (Attorney-General’s Department, p.41)

10. As it stands, Australia has the second lowest number of intercountry adoptions in the world. The only one below us is the United Kingdom. Considering our immense resources, this is a great shame. (Deborra-Lee Jackman, p.42)

11. While there’s no doubt the Australian adoption system has plenty of room for improvement, it should be noted that some of the red tape is there for good reasons. Unfortunately some parents in developing nations feel pressured to give their child a ‘better life’ in the western world. Shockingly, a number of parents are also hoodwinked into adoption, or paid to give up their children. (ACTNOW, p.45)

12. The push for intercountry adoption is generally misguided. People who wish to help children of the third world should start by helping them within their own country, their own culture and their own tribe. (Dianne Dempsey, p.46)
Complete the following multiple choice questionnaire by circling or matching your preferred responses. The answers are at the end of the next page.

1. How many adoptions were there in Australia in 2009-10:
   a. 212
   b. 412
   c. 2,212
   d. 4,212

2. Of the following countries of origin, which are the three most common for intercountry adoptees?
   a. South Korea
   b. Great Britain
   c. Philippines
   d. China
   e. Ethiopia

3. Which of the following Australian states and territories currently allow same-sex couples to register for adoption of an unrelated child?
   a. New South Wales
   b. Victoria
   c. South Australia
   d. Queensland
   e. Western Australia
   f. Northern Territory
   g. Tasmania
   h. Australian Capital Territory

4. Place the following 11 steps in the Intercountry Adoption Process into the correct order:
   a. Initial contact
   b. Decision regarding the approval of an application
   c. Education seminars and formal application
   d. Waiting period
   e. Post-placement support
   f. Placement proposal
   g. Adoption assessment
   h. Travel to meet the child
   i. Preparation and forwarding of adoption application overseas
   j. Immigration application process
   k. Finalisation of the adoption
Complete the following questionnaire by matching your preferred responses. The answers are at the end of this page.

5. Match the following terms to their correct definitions:
   a. Local adoption
   b. Intercountry adoption
   c. ‘Known’ child adoption
   d. Closed adoption
   e. Private adoption
   f. Open adoption

1. Adoptions of Australian children, i.e. children who are born in Australia or who are permanent residents of Australia before the adoption takes place, who are legally able to be placed for adoption, but who generally have had no previous contact with the adoptive parent(s).

2. Adoptions of children who are Australian residents, who have a pre-existing relationship with the adoptive parent(s) and who are generally not able to be adopted by anyone other than the adoptive parent(s).

3. The process by where an infant is adopted by another family, and the record of the biological parent(s) is kept sealed.

4. An adoption in which the natural mother or parents and adoptive family know the identity of each other. There is usually some level of contact between adoptive families and birth families as the adoptee grows up.

5. This type of adoption arrangement is illegal in most States and Territories.

6. Adoptions of children from countries other than Australia who are legally able to be placed for adoption, but who generally have had no previous contact with the adoptive parents.

MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWERS

1 = b; 2 = a, c, d; 3 = a, e, h; 4 = a = 1, b = 4, c = 2, d = 6, e = 10, f = 7, g = 3, h = 9, i = 5, j = 8, k = 11; 5 = a = 1, b = 6, c = 2, d = 3, e = 5, f = 4.
People adopt a child because they want a family. They may adopt a child because they cannot have any of their own, or they may feel they are in a position to make a difference in a child’s life. (p.1)

Birth parents may decide to put their child up for adoption for many reasons, usually because they want their child to have the best quality of life and do not feel they can provide it. (p.1)

In Australia, there are more intercountry adoptions than local placement adoptions. (pp.2,9)

The ‘Stolen Generation’ is the name given to the indigenous children who were removed from their families under child welfare legislation. (p.2)

Since the early 1970s, there has been a 21-fold decrease in the number of adoptions in Australia – from 8,542 in 1972-73 to 412 adoptions in 2009-10. (pp.4,6)

Intercountry adoptions have increased overall in the last 25 years, and have emerged as the dominant category of adoptions – representing 54% of all adoptions in 2009-10, compared with 16% in 1984-85. (p.4)

In 2009-10 there were 412 adoptions in Australia – 54% were intercountry, 15% were local and 31% were ‘known’ child adoptions. (p.4)

In 2009-10 65% of adopted children were aged under 5 years. (p.4)

3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were adopted in 2009-10, with a total of 63 indigenous children being adopted over the last 15 years. (p.4)

Children from African countries made up 15% of all intercountry adoptions in 2009–10, up from less than 1% in 1991–92. (p.7)

After Australia signed a bilateral agreement with China in 1999, the number of children adopted from China increased. (p.8)

Although adoption in Australia has dropped dramatically since the late 1960s, nearly 450 families adopt every year. (p.9)

In the year 1971–72, there were nearly 10,000 adoptions. In 2007–08, there were 440. (p.9)

In 2007–08, 97 children were adopted by people they already knew: 67 by step-parents, 26 by carers or foster parents and 4 by other relatives. (p.9)

More than 70% of the 104,000 adoptions since 1968–69 occurred before 1980. (p.9)

Research shows that there is little difference in the quality of attachment between adopted children and non-adopted children. (p.10)

The adoption laws in the various states and territories make it extremely difficult – and sometimes impossible – for same-sex couples to adopt. (p.13)

Western Australia (WA), the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), and most recently New South Wales (NSW), allow same-sex couples to register for adoption of an unrelated child. (pp.13,15)

The outright prohibition of adoption by same-sex couples in some states and territories breaches Article 21 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (p.14)

It is becoming more common for Australian-born adoptees to grow up in ‘open’ adoption situations. This is where there is some level of contact between adoptive families and birth families as the adoptee grows up. (p.16)

Australian Capital Territory Adoption Act (1993), implemented July 1993 allows access to identifying information, for adopted persons (18+), their birth parents and adoptive parents. (p.19)

The Northern Territory Adoption of Children Act of 1994 allows for the release of identifying information to adopted persons and birth parents for any adoption that took place both after and prior to 1994. (p.19)

In Queensland, on 1 February 2010 the Adoption Act 2009 took effect allowing for the release of identifying and non-identifying information to birth parents and adoptees over the age of 18, and adoptees under the age of 18 with consent from their adoptive parents. (p.20)

In South Australia, legislation enacted in 1988 allows adopted adults, birth parents, adoptive parents and relatives of birth parents to receive identifying information about each other if they wish. (p.20)

In Australia, the processing of intercountry adoptions is the responsibility of state and territory adoption authorities such as departments of family services. (p.36)

The eligibility requirements for overseas adoptions are different in each state and territory and may include criteria concerning partner relationship status, age, citizenship and health. (p.36)

The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (known as the Hague Convention) came into force in Australia in December 1998. (p.36)

An Adoption (subclass 102) visa is for a child who has been formally adopted by an Australian citizen or a person who is permanently resident in Australia. (p.36)

Overseas adoptions by Australian citizens and permanent residents are not automatically recognised under Australian law. (p.37)

The Australian Government shares responsibility for intercountry adoption with the states and territories. (p.38)

Private adoption arrangements are illegal in most states and territories. (p.38)

Finalisation of an adoption refers to the legal process whereby the prospective adoptive parents become the legal parents of the child. (p.40)

Australia has the second lowest number of intercountry adoptions in the world. (p.42)

About 40,000 children are placed through intercountry adoption across the world every year – yet only around 330 on average find their way into an Australian home. (p.47)

Intercountry adoption began in Australia in 1975, when 292 Vietnamese orphans were placed with Australian families after the Vietnam War. (p.47)
Adoptee
A person who joins a family through adoption.

Adoption
A permanent, legally binding arrangement whereby persons other than the birth parents parent a child.

Adoption order
An adoption order is a judicial or administrative order, made by a competent authority under adoption legislation, by which the adoptive parent(s) become the legal parent(s) of the child.

Adoption plan
The individual plan a particular set of birth parents makes for the adoption of their child.

Adoptive parent(s)
A person or persons who become the permanent parent(s) of a child. They have all the legal rights and responsibilities incumbent upon a birth parent.

Arranging body
An agency authorised under adoption legislation to make the decision about the placement of an adoptive child. Adoptions can be arranged by state and territory departments responsible for adoption, or by an authorised non-government agency. There are two categories of arranging bodies – government and non-government agency.

Birth parent(s)
The parents who gave birth to a child. They may have made an adoption plan for the child, and subsequently placed the child for adoption.

Carer
The term ‘carer’ includes foster parents or other non-relatives who have been caring for the child and have had the responsibility for making decisions concerning the daily care and control of the child for the relevant period (as specified by the relevant state/territory department) before the adoption.

Closed adoption
An adoption in which there is no contact between the birth parents and the adoptive parents. Closed adoption may also be referred to as a ‘traditional adoption’.

Foster care
Fostering is a temporary arrangement in which persons other than the birth parents care for a child for a period of time. Foster parents do not have the legal rights of birth or adoptive parents.

Guardianship/custody order
An order sought through the court that has the impact of transferring guardianship or custody of the child to an authorised department or an individual.

Hague Convention (intercountry adoption)
The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption establishes uniform standards and procedures for adoptions between countries. The Convention includes legally binding safeguards and a system of supervision, and establishes channels of communication between countries. The Convention came into force in Australia on 1 December 1998. An intercountry adoption is classified as a ‘Hague’ or ‘non-Hague adoption’.

Intercountry adoptions
Adoptions of children from countries other than Australia who are legally able to be placed for adoption, but who generally have had no previous contact with the adoptive parents.

Kinship adoption
A form of adoption where the adoptive parents are biologically related to the child, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other relatives.

‘Known’ child adoptions
Adoptions of children who are Australian residents, who have a pre-existing relationship with the adoptive parent(s) and who are generally not able to be adopted by anyone other than the adoptive parent(s).

Local adoptions
Adoptions of Australian children – that is, children who are born in Australia or who are permanent residents of Australia before the adoption takes place, who are legally able to be placed for adoption, but who generally have had no previous contact with the adoptive parent(s).

Open adoption
Open adoption allows some form of association between the birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents. This can range from picture and letter sharing, to phone calls, to contact through an intermediary, to open contact between the parties themselves.

Special needs adoption
Special needs adoptions include children and young people who: exhibit a range of physical, intellectual or cognitive disabilities that require interventions in the domains of learning and development; or have conditions that are deemed to pose potential barriers to permanent placement and/or affect the outcome of an adoption, such as behavioural disorders, one or more diagnosed severe medical conditions, being part of a sibling group that is to be placed with the same adoptive family, and older children.

Step-parent
The spouse of the child’s natural parent or adoptive parent. Foster parents are not included in this category.
Websites with further information on the topic

Attorney-General’s Department  www.ag.gov.au/intercountryadoption
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  www.aihw.gov.au
Australian Intercountry Adoption Network  www.aican.org
Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs  http://fahcsia.gov.au
National Adoption Awareness Week  www.adoptionawarenessweek.com.au

ACT
Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services  www.dhcs.act.gov.au/ocyfs/services/adoptions

New South Wales
Department of Community Services  www.community.nsw.gov.au/parents_carers_and_families/fostering_and_adoption.html
NSW Post Adoption Resource Centre  www.bensoc.org.au/postadoption

Northern Territory

Queensland

South Australia

Tasmania

Victoria
Vanish Inc  www.vanish.org.au

Western Australia
Department for Child Protection  www.community.wa.gov.au
Adoption Research and Counselling Service (ARCS)  www.adoptionwa.org.au

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