The Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents from: http://www.adopting.org/impact.html

This article is addressed to you, the birth parent. Although the adoption community sometimes overlooks your contribution and sacrifice, this article addresses adoption from your point of view. Placing a child for adoption is not an easy thing to do, not at the time of placement nor years later. How do you get through the experience, and how does it affect you later in life?
This article cannot address every aspect of your experience--the topic is just too broad. It focuses on the most common experiences of parents who have voluntarily placed their infants and is divided into four parts.

Part 1 is a brief overview of the impact that adoption may have had on you. It focuses on three topics: coping with grief, romantic relationships, and parenting issues.

Part 2 discusses your experiences during three time periods: (1) the birth and placement of the child, (2) the years after placement but before the child becomes a legal adult, and (3) the time after the child becomes an adult. Specific coping issues for each period are addressed.

Part 3 looks at ways that you can cope with your feelings and gives specific options for facing your grief.

One point to remember is that you are not alone. Many others have felt the same feelings and had the same experiences as you. A number of birth parents have come forward and are willing to offer help, as are others in the adoption field.

Part 1: Overview of the Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents

Coping with Grief

All birth parents must deal with grief. Many are sad about not being able to raise or have a relationship with their child. Some have said that they eventually adjusted to the loss of the child, but that the pain and grief lasted a very long time. Others have said that life was never the same after placing the child. Birth parents' whole lives are affected.

If you are a birth parent whose adoption was arranged confidentially, you may have many questions. You probably do not know what became of your child. You don't know if your child's life with the adoptive family is happy and if the child is loved and treated well. You may wonder if the adoptive parents ever told the child he or she was adopted. If so, you may wonder how they spoke about you. You may question what it would have been like to have raised your child. Unanswered questions such as these can be very difficult to deal with.

Most people at some time in their lives experience grief when they are separated from a loved one. However, in adoption, there are no standard grieving processes or approved rituals to help birth parents cope. When a well-liked co-worker accepts a new job in a new city, there is often a going away party. When a loved one dies, there may be a religious service, a wake, a funeral, and visits to the survivors' home by friends and relatives. But birth parents' grief is distinct from most other types of grief, because it is not always socially acceptable to talk about what happened.

Unresolved grief can cause problems in a number of areas. It can affect romantic relationships, parent-child relationships, the ability to work effectively, and a person's feelings of happiness and usefulness. If you are having trouble in your life, it could be related to your not having fully grieved for the child you placed for adoption.

For most birth parents it takes time to move past the initial grief of placing a child for adoption. Some realize they need professional help to deal with the emotions that accompany the loss. Others feel fairly positive from the beginning about the adoption decision and accept that the decision brought with it certain consequences. But just about all birth parents wonder how their son or daughter is doing, especially when the child has reached the age for important events such as starting school, graduating from school, getting married, or becoming a parent.

Romantic Relationships

According to Merry Bloch Jones' book *Birthmothers: Women Who Have Relinquished Babies for Adoption Tell Their Stories*, many birth parents report difficulty in their romantic relationships following placing a child for adoption. As a group, birth parents seem to do things in extremes. Either they marry the first person who comes along so that they become "respectable" members of society, or they stay away from a partner for years. Some divorce and marry, again and again. Some marry an abusive partner, subconsciously punishing themselves. Some marry a rich partner they don't love so they will have financial security and never again be in the position of having to give up a child because of the lack of money. Some may even marry a decent, loving, supportive person, but get so caught up in their unresolved grief that the marriage falls apart.

Some couples who planned the adoption together get married and have other children. Other birth parents choose not to get too dose to any one person ever again. They go from one relationship to the other on purpose, because to them intimacy and loss are always linked.

A third of the birth mothers that Jones talked to said they have happy marriages. The marriages are happy because their partners continue to be supportive of their need to talk about the birth parent experience and of their search for ways to help them grieve. Some who don't get it right in their first marriage do get it right in the second one. They say a large part of getting it right is learning to forgive themselves.

Parenting Issues

Birth parents also often reflect extremes when it comes to parenting. Many have children

immediately after getting married, others not for years. Some have only one other child, others more than three. Some are overprotective with their child, because they are afraid something will also happen to this child. Others are distant from their children, because getting close reminds them of the child they gave up. Almost all believe that placing a child for adoption affected the way they parent and the way they feel about their other children.

Some do not have other children, either on purpose, because they don't want to be reminded of their adoption experience, or because they or their partner cannot get pregnant again. Some marry partners with children, therefore becoming stepparents. Some even adopt.

Part 2: What Birth Parents Experience

A number of factors may have influenced your decision to place your child for adoption. Yet, although each situation is different, there are common threads that run through all adoptions. Birth parents usually feel powerless and lack monetary and emotional support. They may still feel social stigma, though the shame that once prompted parents to place their pregnant daughters in maternity homes to hide the pregnancy is slowly fading.

The following paragraphs describe experiences that you or those you know may have gone through. These experiences are divided into three time periods, and the specific coping issues for each period are addressed.

Birth and Placement

Under any circumstances, giving birth is an important event in the life of a woman and her partner. But giving birth knowing that the baby will be placed for adoption adds another dimension. The birth experiences of women who placed a child for adoption are varied. Jones' book gives many examples. For some, the birth took place in an ugly back room of a maternity home, with very little medical care. For others, it took place in a bright, cheerful hospital with their partner, family, and preselected adoptive parents. For many it was somewhere in between. Some were allowed to see their baby. Some held the baby, named the baby, and were given some time to say goodbye. Others had their baby whisked away by nurses who said it would be easier that way. Some had lots of emotional support, others did not.

Women interviewed by Jones described a number of reactions and emotions after the baby was placed. For some, after recovering physically from giving birth, the reality of what had happened sank in. To make it hurt less, they denied that what they had gone through was important. Other people also acted like it was no big deal and said the mother should just go back to whatever she was doing before she had the baby. Many women did just that.

Some women became angry, either at their parents, their partner, the adoption agency, or "society." They acted out, stole, lied, stayed out late, quit school, or got involved with a bad crowd. Or, they turned their anger inward and became depressed. They decided that

they were absolutely worthless. They believed the people who said they were no good. They started to take drugs, drink a lot of alcohol, or drive carelessly. Some birth mothers get stuck in this phase for a long time, moving from denial to anger to depression over and over again. Birth mothers who get out of this cycle of emotions usually do so by doing one or more of the following things:

• Going to counseling;

• Talking with supportive family members or friends;

• Attending birth parent support group meetings;

• Writing their feelings down in a story or poem;

• Writing letters, even if they are not sent, to their child; or

• Holding a private ceremony each year on their child's birthday.

All of these are positive methods for dealing with grief and accepting the loss.

When Your Child Is a Minor

The emotions associated with having placed a child for adoption will always be a part of your life. As a way of dealing with your grief, you might decide to try to find out how your child is doing. If you were involved in a confidential adoption and you do not know the identity of the adoptive family, the only way to find your child is to contact the agency or attorney who arranged the adoption. Many birth parents do this, even though the child is not yet 18.

If your adoption was confidential, you can write a letter "to the file" of the child to explain the circumstances of the placement and to tell the child that you love and wish the best for him or her. This can be very therapeutic. And it can be tremendously helpful to the child as well.

In one such case, the adoptive parents of an 11-year-old boy placed as an infant called their adoption agency for assistance because he was having self- esteem problems. He was convinced that since he was placed for adoption, he must be worthless. Though he and his adoptive parents had a good relationship, he expressed to them that he felt "unlovable."

The agency social worker retrieved the boy's file and found that the birth mother had recently sent a letter, her first communication with the agency since the time of the placement. The letter explained why she placed her child, in case he ever asked.

The adoptive parents read the letter to their son and they discussed it at length. His self-esteem "shot up like a rocket." He started to like himself more, do better in school, and get along better with his friends. The adoptive parents were extremely grateful. The

adoptive and birth families have now started writing letters to one another, without disclosing their identities and with the agency acting as an intermediary an arrangement that is working out well for them.

You might decide to actually search for your child during the child's minor years. If you find him or her, you will have to decide if you want to contact the adoptive family or not. You might just want to observe from afar. Those that contact the family get different reactions. Some are positive and some are negative. You must be prepared for both. (See the discussion that follows about contact and reunion with adult adoptees.)

If you already have an open adoption, you have contact with your minor child. Sometimes initial agreements about the amount of contact can be changed. Perhaps you'd like to increase your visits or receive more photos. These changes may or may not be possible, but you can certainly try. Adoption professionals with experience in this area may be able to help you reach a new agreement.

What if you find out new medical information later in life? Many in the adoption field believe that it is definitely a responsibility of all parties in adoption to share medical information. For instance, if you or your partner develops breast cancer and you placed a daughter, that daughter ought to know about it. Some kinds of cancer run in families, and she ought to know so that she can be screened for breast cancer as early as it is recommended. In an open adoption, you can easily contact your daughter and her adoptive family. In a confidential one, it may be more difficult, but you should still try to do so through the adoption agency and/or the attorney.

When Your Child is an Adult

Your child is an adult when he or she reaches age 18. If you've been tempted to search all along you may get an even stronger urge once your child reaches adulthood. The thought that you could approach your daughter or son as an adult is appealing. At this age, he or she might be able to understand more fully what it was like for you when you were faced with the placement decision.

In the past, it was assumed that birth parents would never search for their adult adopted child, and certainly not their minor child. After all, they were expected to forget that the birth and the placement ever happened. But birth parents don't forget, and at least nowadays some do search.

Voluntary Registries

One route to take, short of an all- out search, is to register with voluntary registries for birth parents and adult adoptees. This lets your child know that you would like to be found.~ A registry works like this: You leave the information about the birth of the child along with your address and telephone number. You must keep your address and telephone number current. You can register at any time, even years after the child is born.

When your child is an adult, he or she can call or write this registry. If what the child knows about his or her-birth matches the information the registry has about you, the

registry will release your current address and telephone number to the child, and you could be contacted.

Should You Search?
According to leaders of national search and support organizations, more people are searching now than in the past. However, you may still wonder if you should search. You worry that your child may not be interested in hearing from you. You worry about the adoptive parents. How will they explain who you are to their family and friends? What about your own family members? What will the effects of a search be on them? How will they deal with a long lost sister, brother, stepson, or stepdaughter, and how will he or she fit in with your family?

While you may want to take other people's feelings into consideration when deciding to search, your own feelings are also important. In cases where you felt forced by others to place your child and thus felt a lack of control over your and your child's futures, searching is a way for you to get back some of that control, fill in missing pieces, and move on. If you have a strong urge to seek out your adult child, many adoption therapists say you should follow it, as long as your actions are within the law and you undertake the search with some understanding of how your son or daughter might react. If you have a supportive spouse, adult children, friends, a therapist, or a birth parent group, they can help you deal with the reaction you get, whether it is positive or negative.

You may be worried that intruding into your child's life might harm the child, but research shows that a reunion often brings adoptive parents and children closer together The child learns that all the parent figures in his life care about him and his happiness. It can be quite beneficial.

Goals of Searching
If you do search, your goal should be truth. You must be willing to face whatever you might find out, even if it's the death of your child. The information you learn may be painful; however, peace of mind most likely will come with the pain. If you search for your child only to find that he or she won't take your calls, answer your letters, or send a photograph, at least you tried. Others before you have found that the process still helped them set aside their fantasies and accept their current life situation with a more positive attitude.

Reunions
If you do find your child and have a reunion, you will finally get the answers to your most pressing questions. You can be sure that your child knows why you placed him or her for adoption, and you will learn how the child turned out. But finding a son or daughter doesn't solve everything. It will not magically restore self-esteem, erase the guilt you may have felt through the years, or make up for the time you didn't spend together. These issues still need attention. And practical matters need attention, too. Deciding how to spend time with your child after finding him or her, and how to combine that relationship with your other family relationships, can be tricky.

Not searching is also okay. Searching is presented here as one way that some birth parents have dealt with their feelings. Dirck Brown, Ed.D., a nationally known leader in the adoption reform movement, a reunited adult adoptee, and a therapist, says, "Reunion promises no happy endings, only new beginnings, each with the promise that those involved may become more fully themselves."

Part 3: How Birth Parents Cope

You have probably found a number of positive ways to cope with your situation. You may attend support group meetings and conferences, go to counseling, search for your child, and communicate with other birth parents. The sections below discuss each of these.

Support Group Meetings/Conferences

Some national birth parent support organizations have local chapters. One well-known organization is Concerned United Birthparents (CUB). Other birth parent support groups are not part of a network and are independent, local organizations. Two examples are Birth Mothers of Minors (B.M.O.M.S.) in New York City, and Birthparents in the Open in Santa Cruz California. Other groups are sponsored by adoption agencies, such as the Barker Foundation in Cabin John, Maryland, and the Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan in Milwaukee.

No matter how they are organized, birth parent support groups generally have the same purpose in mind: to offer comfort, sympathy, and an opportunity to talk with others and exchange information. For many, a support group is one of the few places where everyone understands the birth Parents' point of view and people express their feelings openly. It is an environment in which you can tell your stories and hear about otner people's experiences. Said one birth mother after she attended her first support group meeting, "I never knew there were other women walking around with my same guilt and rage. For the first time in over 20 years, I didn't feel so utterly alone!"

Some of the national birth parent support groups hold regional and national conferences. These meetings offer the opportunity to get support and information from a larger group of people. While some focus on political or policy issues, others cover a wide range of topics designed to enhance the quality of life for birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. A birth father attending a conference of the Council of Equal Rights in Adoption in New York City said, It's a chance to mingle with many more birth parents than the core group of 10 or so that show up at my local support group meeting. You hear speakers with a national reputation, and you're sitting in a large hotel ballroom filled with birth parents and adoptees. There's still not enough birth fathers there, but it's a start.

A birth mother in California named Curry Wolfe started another organization with a very specific purpose in mind. Even though she had found her adult child and had been a member of birth parent support groups, she wanted to connect with other women who lived in the same maternity home that she lived in while she was pregnant. When she did

that, she experienced even further healing. She started Birthparent Connection because she wanted to help other women heal, too.

A birth father now in Florida started the only national organization specifically designed to help birth fathers. Jon Ryan started the National Organization for Birthfathers and Adoption Reform (NOBAR), which predominantly provides support and advocacy to birth fathers concerning their legal rights. Says Ryan, "Birth fathers have most of the same feelings as birth mothers about adoption. Many are angry and unhappy being separated from their children.... In my contacts with birth fathers I've found them to be the total opposite of the stereotype of the uncaring, neglectful guy who is relieved not to have to support a child he fathered." NOBAR helps fathers in a number of situations, encouraging them to get good counseling during their partner's pregnancy, to be involved in the placement decision if adoption is their choice, and to get legal counsel to prevent the placement of a child they want to raise.

Counseling
You might find individual or group counseling with a counselor who is knowledgeable about adoption issues to be very helpful. An experienced therapist can help you untangle which of your concerns are adoption-related and which are adjustment issues that many people in your stage of life go through. You might work on relationship, self-esteem, or parenting issues, as well as discuss whether to search for your child. The outcome of a search can lead to many different emotions that a therapist can help you sort through.

Searching
Searching is another way that birth parents cope. Some of the issues related to searching were discussed above. Searching can take a number of routes: using support groups; hiring an investigator or search consultant; reading literature; surfing the Internet; contacting agencies or attorneys' offices; or hunting down clues yourself.

Communicating
Adoption issues often receive a large amount of media coverage. But more importantly, there are a number of books, newsletters, magazines, and on-line information services that concentrate specifically on birth parent issues. These can be especially helpful and comforting if you live in an area where there is no support group or if you are not able to travel to national or regional conferences.

Until recently, there weren't many books about birth parents issues available in public libraries. Now there are a number of books available written by birth parents about their experiences. There are also some books by journalists or researchers who interviewed birth parents.

The larger, nationally based support groups have published newsletters for a number of years. Recently some new newsletters have become available. At least two are for more recent birth mothers who are maintaining contact with their minor children. Their concerns are somewhat different than those of older women whose children are grown and whose adoptions were confidential.

There are also a number of magazines that focus on adoption. Some have a general focus but have specific articles that are of interest to birth parents. Some are about adoptee-birth parent searches and reunions. So far there are no magazines that exclusively address birth parent issues, but who knows what the future will bring?

On-line information services are another tool birth parents can use to communicate with one another. There are general adoption "forums" or Conferences on these services and specific subsections for birth parent issues. People share stories, information, and resources and become fast friends traveling on the adoption portion of the information superhighway. All you need is the hardware, the software, and a little training to learn how to communicate using this technology.

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