

Adoptee's Search for Biological Parents

Synthesis Paper: [Adoption Works Well: A Synthesis of the Literature](#)

At some stage, adopted children commonly desire to get to know their birth mother. Because this area of research deals almost completely in subjective appraisals of feelings and perceptions of the child's and other adults' feelings, many of the findings are quite complex and seemingly contradictory. The following is an interpretive overview of this body of data.

Not all adopted children show interest in learning about the history of their birth family. Most children understand that adoptions occur because the birthmother did not see herself fit to emotionally or financially provide for the child. Many adoptees decide to leave the matter aside because it is a "done deal;" others show significant interest in finding out about their birth families. Nothing is wrong with either approach.¹⁾

About 70 percent of adult adoptees express feeling moderate to significant degrees of "uncertainty and ambiguous loss" regarding their birth parents. One study found that 70 percent of adoptees experienced such feelings. The remaining 30 percent "expressed security and no apparent [sense of] loss."²⁾

Adoptees in search of more knowledge about their birth family members frequently express dissatisfaction, anger, and helplessness at their lack of insight into this aspect of their identities.³⁾ Some adoptees say that their family members' disapproval (or their fear of such disapproval) of their desire to search for their birth parents contributes to their avoidance of and secrecy about the subject.⁴⁾ In contrast, those adoptees who do not express such feelings of loss say they experience acceptance and candid communication with their adoptive families. The reason they most frequently cite for their security is "the love and closeness in the adoptive family."⁵⁾

Research from the United Kingdom found a gender difference: While 66 percent of adopted women search for their birth relatives, only 34 percent of adopted men do so. The study found that feeling loved (or not) by the adoptive mother was predictive of whether or not an adoptee would search for his birth parents: Twenty-three percent of searchers reported feeling unloved or uncertain of being loved by their adoptive mothers, whereas only nine percent of non-searchers felt unloved. However, it is worth noting that 77 percent of those who searched—the overwhelming majority—did feel loved by their adoptive mothers.⁶⁾

When adopted children finally make contact with their birth mothers, the likelihood of continued frequent contact with their birth mother correlates strikingly with the age at which the adoption took place: an earlier adoption greatly increases the likelihood of such frequent contact.⁷⁾ Because later-placed adoptees have difficulty with intimacy and attachment, it is not surprising that, should they reunite with their birth mothers, they are less likely to have continued frequent contact with her.⁸⁾ Thus, it would seem that (at least for females) the earlier the adoption takes place, the greater is the capacity for attachment to the birth mother, even while being quite attached to the adoptive mother.

¹⁾ Kathryn Patricelli, "Long-Term Issues For the Adopted Child," *American Addiction Centers* (2007).

²⁾ Kimberly A. Powell, Tamara D. Afifi, "Uncertainty management and adoptees' ambiguous loss of their birth parents," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22 (2005): 129-151.

³⁾ K. March and C. Miall, "Adoption as a Family Form," *Family Relations*, 49(4) (2000): 360.

⁴⁾ K.A. Powell and T.D. Afifi, "Uncertainty management and adoptees' ambiguous loss of their birth parents," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22(1) (2005): 141.

- ⁵⁾ K.A. Powell and T.D. Afifi, "Uncertainty management and adoptees' ambiguous loss of their birth parents," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 22(1) (2005): 138.
- ⁶⁾ D. Howe, "Age at placement, adoption experience and adult adopted people's contact with their adoptive and birth mothers: An attachment perspective," *Attachment & Human Development*, 3(2) (2001): 225, 230.
- ⁷⁾ D. Howe, "Age at placement, adoption experience and adult adopted people's contact with their adoptive and birth mothers: An attachment perspective," *Attachment & Human Development*, 3(2) (2001): 226-227
- ⁸⁾ D. Howe, "Age at placement, adoption experience and adult adopted people's contact with their adoptive and birth mothers: An attachment perspective," *Attachment & Human Development*, 3(2) (2001): 234.

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