

SEARCH AND REUNION

Your step-by-step guide



Bethany®

Beginning your search

You're at the beginning of an important journey that you've been thinking about for a long time. You may be feeling a variety of emotions about what you'll find, who you'll meet, and how this process will change your life.

Searches and reunions can be filled with questions and uncertainty. That's why we've prepared this guide, to walk with you through the emotional and procedural steps ahead.

INSIDE, YOU'LL FIND INFORMATION ABOUT:

- Preparing mentally and emotionally
- Steps of the search and reunion process
- Frequently asked questions
- Social media and searching
- And other helpful resources

FAMILY CHANGES EVERYTHING

Bethany is a global nonprofit—in more than 30 states and more than a dozen countries—dedicated to helping families thrive.

Our services include pregnancy counseling, adoption, foster care, and strengthening families through family preservation. We also serve refugees around the world—some who are fleeing violence and others who have been forced from their homes. Internationally, we partner with several countries to support people, right where they are.

Together, we can change the world through family.

ACCREDITATION

Bethany is accredited by the Council on Accreditation (COA) which works with organizations worldwide to improve services by developing, applying, and promoting accreditation standards. We are also accredited by the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability which sets standards for responsible stewardship.



Preparing mentally and emotionally for search and reunion

Set appropriate expectations

Finding a birth relative may provide answers to medical, ancestry, and identity questions and help you fill in other unknowns. While you may not have all your questions answered or expectations filled, you'll likely find more than you expected in other positive ways.

Expect a flood of emotions

No matter how much you prepare, the emotions and issues that surface during this process may be more than you anticipate. A search and reunion can affect you (the person initiating the search) as well as biological family members, adoptive parents, and siblings. Be respectful of all those affected but remember it's your process. You have the right to search for information about your biological family.

Prepare for various outcomes

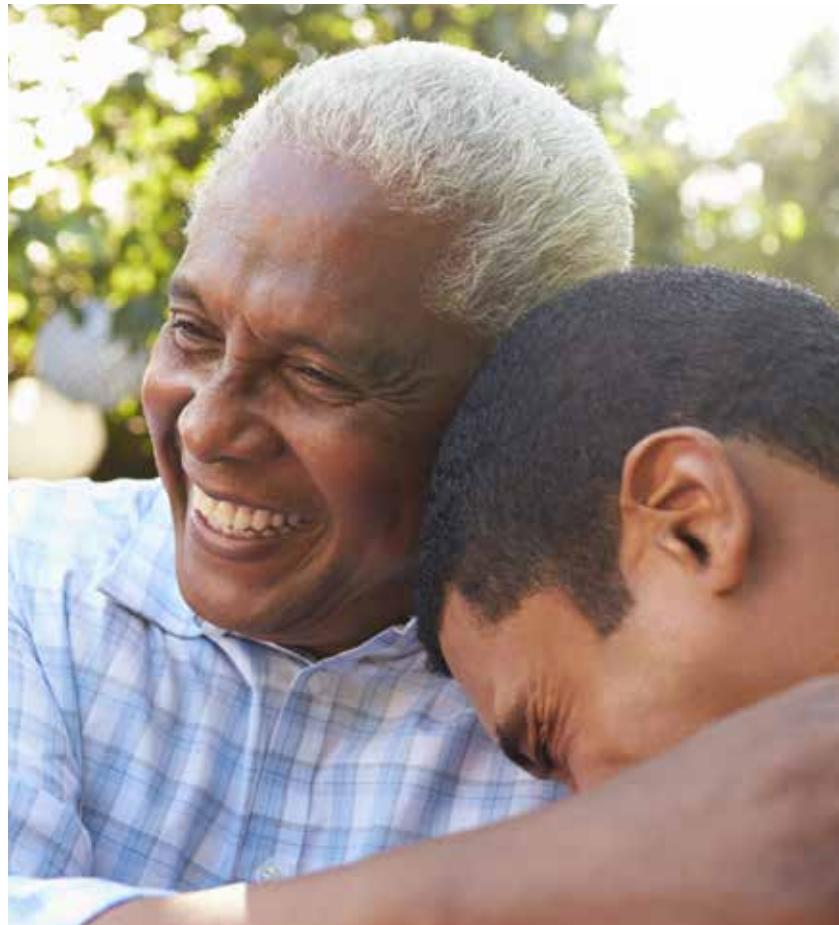
A search can result in a dead end, a one-time contact, or an ongoing relationship. The outcome depends on multiple people. When you find a birth relative, they may respond with fear, anxiety, excitement, or hope. There's no way to know in advance if this person will play a role in your life or even welcome contact. Likewise, you may not know if you want a relationship until you after you've made contact. Communication is key for all parties. Whatever the outcome, an ideal search experience will help you process parts of your past and strengthen your sense of identity.

Take things slowly

You may be a person who likes to move "full steam ahead." But in this process, it's always best to take things slowly. Keep in mind that while you and your birth family are related by blood, you've only recently become acquaintances. A reunion may consume your thoughts, emotions, and time in the beginning—this is typical. As time goes on, emotions even out, real life continues, and hopefully, your reunion will hit a natural stride.

Rely on your support network

Whether it's friends, family, church, or your social worker, seek support to help you navigate this significant process. If you are struggling emotionally in your reunion, professional counseling can help you sort through your feelings and emotions. There will always be unknowns that you can't fully prepare for. If you initiate contact slowly and thoughtfully—setting boundaries and expressing your needs and expectations—your reunion is more likely to go smoothly.



Steps of the search and reunion process

1. Contact us to get started

If you haven't already contacted us, please complete a web form at Bethany.org/Contact-Us if you're interested in beginning a search for birth relative information. Our staff will need to verify certain information, such as location of the adoption and the adoptee's date of birth, to determine if and how we can help. Even if the adoption was not through Bethany, we may still be able to assist or refer you to other resources.

2. Complete documents

If Bethany can assist you with your information request or search services, our staff will provide required documents which you must complete and return before we can begin a search. These include the following:

- Notice of privacy practices and acknowledgement form
- Birth record information/search form
- Copy of photo identification (such as driver's license or passport)
- Service contract and fee agreement
- Additional forms as required

3. Search for information

The first step is searching for identifying or nonidentifying information. Once we receive your completed forms, we'll identify what information we can provide.

NONIDENTIFYING INFORMATION:

May include date and place of the adoptee's birth and the following birth parent information:

- Age and general physical description (e.g. eye and hair color, race, ethnicity)
- Religion
- Medical history
- Educational level and their occupations at the time of the adoption

- Reason for placing the child for adoption
- Existence of other children born to each birth parent

This type of information is generally provided to the adopting parents at the time of the adoption.

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION:

May include current or past names of the person, addresses, employment, or other similar records or information. This includes information that may lead to the positive identification of birth parents, the adoptee, or other birth relatives.

4. Search for individuals

If desired, the next step is a search for the individual(s). This is often the longest part of the process, and how we go about a search will depend on the type and location of the adoption. Contact us to learn more about the specific process for your request.

5. Individual(s) located

If we can locate the individual(s), we have many options for determining mutual interest in initial and ongoing communication. Bethany can support and guide you through this process.

6. Conclusion of search and reunion process

We consider the process closed when the individual feels comfortable with the status of the search and reunion and no longer requires Bethany's services. The process may also close if all efforts to make a connection have been unsuccessful. If an individual would like to search again in the future or request additional services, we'll be available.



Search and reunion FAQs

IS MY SEARCH CONFIDENTIAL?

You have the right to determine who is involved in your search for a birth relative. While some individuals may wait to share with others about their search and reunion, we do not advise total secrecy; we encourage individuals to lean on friends and family who can provide support throughout the process.

HOW DO I LEARN MORE ABOUT SEARCHING FOR MY BIRTH RELATIVE, AND WHAT INFORMATION I CAN ACCESS?

Know the law: State or country governments establish laws and procedures about accessing adoption records. For individuals born in the U.S., the search process is determined by the state where the adoption was finalized. Each state has specific requirements about who can request information, the age an individual must be in order to make a request, and the process for receiving information. Contact the adoption agency or vital records department in the state where the adoption was finalized. For individuals born outside the U.S., we follow the birth country's established search process.

The state or country may use these methods to release identifying information:

Original birth certificate: Some states will provide an adult adoptee with an original birth certificate that includes the birth mother and/or father's name. Other states limit original birth certificate access based on when the adoption finalized or the reason an adoptee is requesting information. Bethany's search and reunion staff stay informed about legislation changes regarding access to identifying information.

Mutual consent: Some states require that both parties submit consent to contact forms to a registry before a match can be made. This process may involve use of a passive registry that the state, the adoption agency, or a third-party organization maintains.

Confidential intermediary: In some situations, individuals can use a confidential intermediary to obtain the consents required to release identifying information. An intermediary can conduct a search, confidentially contact birth family members, and release current medical history as well as identifying information upon receiving consent. Depending on state laws, some intermediaries are court appointed, while others may be identified staff within an adoption agency.

WHAT IF I CAN'T GET IDENTIFYING INFORMATION THROUGH THOSE FORMAL METHODS?

The following methods may result in some success, but they generally come without professional, experienced guidance:

Private investigators and search angels: In situations where an agency or intermediary cannot provide identifying information, individuals may seek services from private investigators. Another potential resource is a search angel—a volunteer who searches a variety of research avenues such as databases, yearbooks, and other records.

Social media: Social media is a popular avenue to search for birth family, but individuals should use caution and may want to seek guidance when communicating with a potential birth relative. Please refer to the "Making Contact" article link on the following page.

DNA testing: Now more accessible and affordable, the adoption community is increasingly using DNA testing to identify birth relatives. You may not find the individual you intended, but you could potentially connect with extended family or distant relatives. Please review the link about DNA testing in the resources section of this booklet.



Search and reunion FAQs continued

WHAT MAY AFFECT THE OUTCOME OF MY SEARCH?

Accurate information: The likelihood of obtaining sought-after information depends on the accuracy of the information available. An adoption record may have missing or incomplete information which could slow the search process. In some cases, adoptees and birth parents share updated contact information with their adoption agency or groups that facilitate birth relative searches, which expedites the search process.

An organized system: There are many procedural steps to obtain birth relative information. Experienced search and reunion professionals will provide direction throughout the process and coordinate logistics. Individuals who are searching for birth relatives often find it helpful to have their own tracking system for paperwork, fees, and contact information for the professionals who are involved.

Obtained consent: When mutual consent is required by state or country laws, having the other individual's consent will allow the process to continue. If a contact denial is on file, the search process will end. The process may also end if a confidential intermediary does not receive communication back from the other birth relative or if the intermediary receives a response declining contact at this time.



Social media and searching

Adoption is emotionally complex for each person involved. Before you begin using social media tools to connect with birth relatives, think through how they might experience the contact. The following considerations will help you proceed with caution and sensitivity.

PACING OF CONTACT:

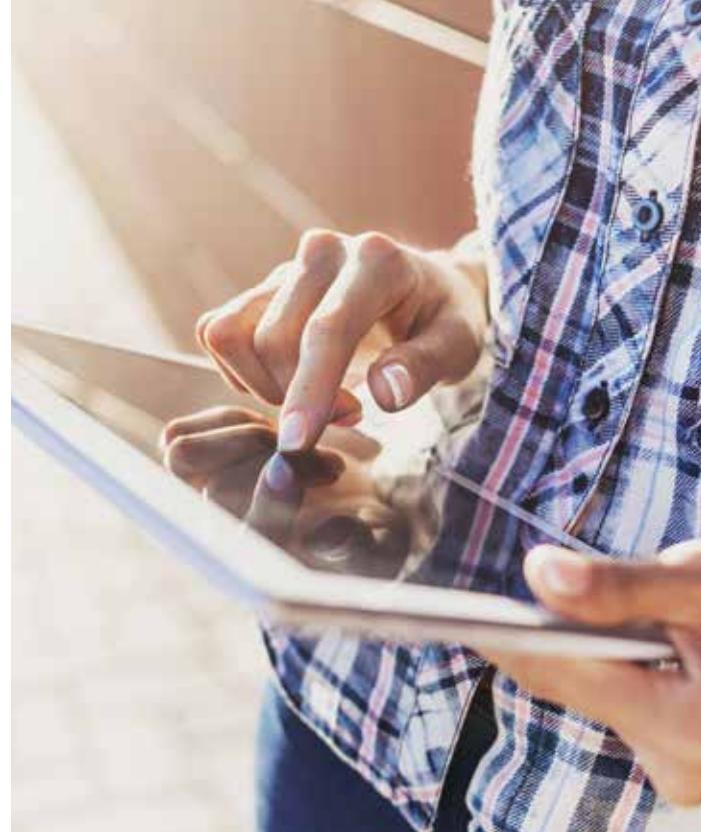
Research suggests that reunions are more likely to be successful long term when initial contact is made gradually (Affleck & Steed, 2001)¹. The nature of communication through social media sites and online tools like instant messaging creates situations where contact proceeds very quickly and can evolve into an intense relationship before all parties are ready (Fursland, 2010²).

MAKING CONTACT:

Instant conversations initiated through social media sites and other online tools can bring up issues either party is not prepared to face right away (Fursland, 2010). Reuniting with birth relatives can bring new information that requires time to process before responding. Instant messaging does not allow time for well-thought-out responses. **See Making Contact for guidance on what to say when reaching out for the first time: www.americanadoptioncongress.org/pdf/making_contact.pdf**

PRIVACY:

Privacy can be a concern, particularly when using social media sites with ever-changing privacy policies. Don't assume communication on social networking sites is private. Comments made on someone's Facebook page may be visible to their entire network—or yours—depending on privacy settings. Even with high privacy settings, communications can be forwarded to others and shared in other ways. Facebook profiles



also appear in search results on Google and other search engines. There are many sources that address protecting online privacy. **See the Resources section on the following pages for more information.**

SAFETY:

As with any online activity, keep safety in mind. People are not always honest on the internet. Some people may not be who they say they are.

POSTING PHOTOS:

Photos of birth relatives can hold special significance to adopted people who may not have had a previous connection with a relative who looks like them. Before posting photos on the internet, educate yourself about geotagging. Some photos taken with smartphones may be embedded with a geotag that reveals the latitude and longitude of the location where the photo was taken. This geotag can be accessible to the public when the photo is posted online. **More information about geotagging and the steps to disable this feature on smartphones is available in About Geotagging: www.lifewire.com/what-is-geotagging-3486187.**

¹ Affleck, Marian & Steed, Lyndall. (2001). Expectations and Experiences of Participants in Ongoing Adoption Reunion Relationships: A Qualitative Study. *The American Journal of orthopsychiatry*. 71. 38-48. 10.1037/0002-9432.71.1.38.

² Fursland, E. (2010). Facing Up to Facebook: A Survival Guide for Adoptive Families. British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

Resources

Beginning a search

TEN QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

www.holtinternational.org/mcginnis.shtml

A list compiled by Hollee McGinnis, an adult Korean adoptee, for adoptees to consider before participating in search and/or reunion

A GUIDE TO SEARCH AND REUNION IN ADOPTION

www.njarch.org/wpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/A-Guide-to-Search-and-Reunion-in-Adoption-Final-rev-8-30-16.pdf

A packet with information on search and reunion, including issues associated with search and reunion, issues associated with relationship building, international searches, support groups and related conferences, as well as a recommended reading list

ACCESS TO ADOPTION RECORDS

www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/infoaccessap

A packet of helpful information on the decision to search, steps in the search process, hiring a professional searcher, international searching, social media and searching, reunion issues, and additional resources

DNA TESTING FOR ADOPTEES

www.familysearch.org/blog/en/how-to-find-birth-parents-through-dna

Helpful steps as well as resources for support

Beginning a reunion

REUNITED: 19 STORIES OF SEARCH AND REUNION

www.adoption.com/reunion-ebook-download

Real stories about the process and experience of finding birth family members after years—often decades—of separation

SEARCH AND REUNION FORUMS

www.adoption.com/forums/42/search-and-reunion

Connect and participate in discussions with others who are interested in search and reunion

WHAT NOW? COPING WITH SEARCH, CONTACT, REUNION AND AFTER...

www.isrr.org/PDFs/Booklets/What%20Now%20Booklet.pdf

A packet about deciding to search, how to make the first contact, participating in a reunion, and establishing relationships



Resources

State and country resources

ACCESS TO ADOPTION RECORDS: SUMMARY OF STATE LAWS

www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/state

A summary of each state's laws regarding the release of records from adoption files

AMERICAN ADOPTION CONGRESS: STATE ADOPTION LEGISLATION

www.americanadoptioncongress.org/state.php

An overview of birth certificate access for adopted adults in all states

NATIONAL FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION DIRECTORY SEARCH

www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/index.cfm?event=viewSearchForm

A user-friendly, searchable site that can help you find contact information for the agency that handled your adoption

ADULT INTERNATIONAL AND TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES: PERSONAL STORIES, EXPERIENCES, AND ARTICLES

www.karensadoptionlinks.com/adoptee.html

Scroll to "International Adoptee Search and Reunion Resources" for the most applicable links

Additional Reading

ADOPTEE READING RESOURCE

www.adopteereading.com/books-about-search-and-or-reunion

Links to books written, recommended, or reviewed by adoptees

BETHANY MAGAZINE— SEARCH AND REUNION ISSUE

<https://bethany.org/resources?searchTerm=search+and+reunion&culture=en-US>

Stories and articles from adoptees, birthparents, and professionals on experiences with search and reunion



Contact your local branch for more information.

Bethany.org/contact-us

Please note: fees for search and reunion services may apply.



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