

Impact of Being Adopted at Birth



Being adopted is something I've known about my whole life – there was no one moment, just the knowledge that some babies come from their mother's tummy and others are 'chosen' in the hospital. Fortunately for me, my parents were always open and honest, telling me what they were told; that my birth parents were young and wanted to marry but couldn't afford a wedding. They also told me that they chose me in hospital because I smiled at them. There were a number of other adopted children in my school cohort so it all seemed normal to me.

I have always been very reconciled with my adoption and it seemed reasonable that my birth parents would offer me up to a better life than they could provide; I was, of course, born into an era where adoption was normalised practise. If I had been asked about the impact of being adopted when I was a child or young adult I would have said it was minimal. However, a number of significant impacts have become evident throughout different stages of my life and will be lifelong.

Before I outline these impacts, I wish to make it very clear that I am incredibly fortunate to have been placed with my lovely parents, who were absolutely devoted to me and provided me with a good life during theirs. This submission on how adoption has affected my life in no way reflects on my parents and the family life we shared. Throughout my submission I will preface biological family members with the term 'birth'; otherwise, the family members being referred to are those from my adopted family.

I have recently read the *Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) 'Past Adoption Experiences'* report (August 2012) to inform myself on historical adoption practices to avoid being blindsided by the findings from this inquiry, as the topic of adoption is very raw and emotional for me. This is the first time I have explored this topic outside of mainstream media articles, which had only in the last decade or so slightly raised my awareness of the concept of forced or coerced adoption practices. The contents of the AIFS report have blown me away and triggered intense emotions across many aspects, including:

- the thoughts and feelings of adoptee respondents which resonate so strongly with me and how I have felt throughout my own life,
- the stories of adoption circumstances and how adoptees were told, which eerily mirror mine,
- evidence of the coercion of, discrimination against and mistreatment of unwed mothers,
- the exclusion of biological fathers from the pregnancy and decisions,
- drug experimentation on newborn adoptees.

Stories of experiences in other articles and reports I have read correspond to those in the AIFS report. This has been incredibly disturbing and distressing; my story and the reconciliation and peace I have always felt with the circumstances of my adoption has been completely eradicated. I now feel that my history was a fabrication perpetuated by the child welfare authorities and fed to my lovely, compassionate parents and then to me. At the age of 56 I am now questioning how my life really started.

From around 1985 to 1998 I had the forms to request information about my adoption and birth parents. I needed to be in the right mindset to deal with this, which only occurred intermittently, so I completed them in stages over many years until I felt mentally prepared, that it felt the right time, to submit them. I was conflicted in seeking further information in:

- not wanting to hurt my parents – my mum was very supportive but my dad feared that I wanted my adoption history because I didn't love them.
- not knowing what I might find in my biological past. The emotions around this process were difficult to deal with - trepidation, anticipation, uncertainty about whether to proceed or not. At times it has seemed that it's easier living without knowing the facts rather than risking finding birth parents who may reject me, are deceased or just not good people.

The impacts of being adopted are woven throughout my life physically, mentally and emotionally, as outlined below:

- Gaining an awareness of the past adoption practices has left me feeling anguish at what my birth parents, particularly my birth mother, may have gone through, with the doubt created by details of past practises now totally undermining my belief that she wanted to relinquish me. Although I understand there was a vast spectrum of relinquishment, coercion and forcible removal; it comes down to whether my birth mother had a choice, which is doubtful given the societal views of unwed mothers and lack of financial support available to them. The stories I've read about the treatment of unwed mothers are horrific and I'm absolutely heartbroken at the thought of how my birth mother may have been treated.
- My father is not named on my original birth certificate, but his name and details are included in my archived file, with the post-adoption information I received in 1998 stating that he denied paternity. In researching past practices, I've discovered that it was common practice to not inform fathers of the pregnancy or to prevent them from having contact with the mother, and for the authorities to purposely omit their name on the birth certificate (Past Adoption Practices, *Vanish*). I'm now left wondering if my birth father knew about me or was included in decisions about my adoption. Although I was easily able to find his Perth address in 1998 and could have

established contact, I chose not to based entirely on his paternity denial. I felt that I shouldn't bother with someone who wasn't interested in me. If that information provided to me is false, and he didn't know about me or was excluded from the adoption decision, then I have potentially lost 25 years of knowing him or even meeting him, depending on whether he is still alive or not, and feel guilty for making the choice I did at that time.

- Unexpectedly, shockingly and amazingly, my post-adoption information revealed that I have a fully biological birth sister, born the year before me and also adopted out. I have wanted a sister my entire life, so it was an absolute gift to discover that she existed. I sobbed for hours after reading that letter, with excitement and overwhelm along with sadness at being deprived of growing up with her. I couldn't believe my birth parents had another baby before me and wonder if there are any more siblings born since. Unfortunately, my birth sister's reaction when contacted by Adoption Services telling her about me was anger. She had previously placed a veto against our birth parents so extended this to include me; additionally banning Adoption Services from contacting her for any purpose at all, including providing genetic information. I can understand that she may not have been in the right mindset, as it took me so long to be in that place, but it's just too cruel to discover I actually have a birth sister, then to find that we will likely never meet. This will be a heartache and regret which will be with me forever, along with the hope that she may change her mind and initiate contact.
- It never ceases to cause me offense and hurt when people talk about blood being thicker than water, as if those of us who are adopted are of lesser worth than blood relations. The lack of biological links within my family meant differing core values and behaviours, resulting in total estrangement with my brother to avoid his toxicity after the death of my mum, who he was estranged from after treating her very badly some years before; with my brother using my adoptive status as a point of an attempted will contest, stating that as mum's biological son he should have inherited all or the majority of her estate.
- I am extremely concerned and disturbed at the strong possibility that the official information about my adoption is not accurate nor true, stemming from the numerous similarities to the respondent adoptees' details in the AIFS report. Most distressing was an adoptee's story of how seeking post-adoption information led to the discovery that her biological mother was told she died at birth; the authorities reversed the birth mother's first and middle names on her birth certificate and forged the adoption papers. This is incredibly distressing for me because my birth name is my birth mother's names reversed, so I now fear that my adoption arose

from the same situation, as research indicates that the same practices were widespread across that period of time.

- The AIFS report reveals that babies being adopted out were kept in hospital for an average of 10 before being given to adoptive parents, and in this time were used for drug experimentation. Reading this has been such a shock and I feel ill at the thought of what might have been done to me in the hospital in the 16 days between birth and being given to my parents. I was a newborn baby under the control of hospital staff, with no family member looking out for me. I want to establish without doubt whether any experimentation was carried out on me and if so, whether it has had an impact on my health; but I doubt that any records exist so I am left worrying about this with little hope for peace of mind.
- When I received my post-adoption information in 1998, the details did not align to the details my adoptive parents were told by adoption services authorities. Again distressingly, many of the stories in the AIFS report match what my parents were told, strongly indicating that there was a common story, lies, told to adoptive parents. My parents were good people, they would be horrified to think that they may have received a baby because my birth mother was a victim of force, coercion or lies, rather than being a willing participant. When my mum discovered I have a birth sister, her first reaction was that she would have loved to have adopted and raised us both together.
- I have suffered low self-esteem my whole life, which seems to be common for adoptees (AIFS Report), feeling as though I don't quite fit in anywhere. I envy the close family connections my friends have with their siblings and extended family members as I don't have contact with any extended family at all. My brother was 21 when I was born (he was from my mother's first marriage which ended when her husband deserted her and my brother when he was 6 weeks old) and my cousins were all in their teens, so I was completely outside of their generation. I often feel less than totally connected in my own relationships and also felt like the lesser, odd one out in social circles; this again seems a common thread amongst other adoptees.
- I have an embedded flight or fight response which research strongly indicates results from the trauma caused from separation from the mother at birth (Relinquishment Trauma: The Forgotten Trauma n.d., *Marie Dolfi*). This has been compounded by traumatic events in my adult life, however I can track this response back to childhood memories. I am trying hard to overcome this for my current and future health, but it's difficult to do. Recent blood tests indicate potential health issues which may be connected to this flight or fight response. There are a great number of behavioural and emotional commonalities in the AIFS report which resonate with me; I have been

aware of these feelings throughout my life but never associated them with my adoption.

- The lack of biological health and medical history has had a substantial and ongoing impact on my own health and somewhat on my children's too. I was diagnosed with coeliac disease in 2017 at the age of 51. I can trace symptoms of coeliac disease, which is genetic, back to my childhood. Diagnosis would likely have occurred far earlier with available genetic history. This disease has had a significant impact on my body, health and wellbeing, and will continue to do so:
 - My very short stature at 150 cm tall
 - My extremely low pre-diagnosis body weight - never more than 45 kilos except during pregnancy
 - Inflammation and other damage within my body from poor absorption
 - Long term low iron and anaemia – leading to constant exhaustion and fatigue from my early 20s until post-diagnosis recovery of my villi, affecting my parenting and physical capacity.
 - Presumed hyperemesis gravidarum (severe, clinical morning sickness) – which led to me dropping to 39 kilos and barely able to function on a daily basis until around 22 weeks gestation with my last 2 pregnancies.
 - Ongoing health issues which are either evident or latent as a result of the damage from lack of nutrition during the first 51 years of my life
 - The health issues which have or may affect my own children. My third child, my son, was born with a unilateral lip and alveolar cleft, with the very strong possibility that this anomaly arose as a result of the undiagnosed coeliac disease and hyperemesis gravidarum, with the lip formation occurring at 7 weeks which is when my sickness was so severe I was hospitalised. My son carries the coeliac gene and now has the risk of cleft in his DNA. My daughters were not initially referred for the coeliac gene test because only my son had shown gluten reaction and neither the referring doctor nor I had awareness of the need to test all biological relatives, but they too may be at risk of becoming coeliac and passing the gene onto their children.
 - The other possible cause of the cleft is a genetic history of cleft within my birth family, which then increases the risk of cleft for any babies my own children have; however, I have no way of knowing this. This is currently very relevant as my first grandchild is now on the way.
 - I am asked about my family history at almost every medical consultation or for any procedure, to which I can only reply that I don't know. This affects medical risk assessment, treatment options and decision making, as well as informing preventative measures for my and my children's future health. I am currently dealing with blood test results which family history would provide great insight into addressing, but with no way of accessing that history.

- This lack of biological health history means that there is a lack of information for my own children and for their children.
- My first child was born in 1995, the first biological family member I had ever met. It was a new and incredible feeling, and the first time that I really comprehended how difficult it must have been for my birth mother to adopt me out and questioned how she could have done so. I continue to experience a fascination with, and wonder of, the biological and genetic link I share with my children, something that most other people take for granted. There is a new source of excitement as I await the birth of my first grandchild this year, only the fourth person in my life to whom I'm biologically related.
- It's easy to push the thoughts about my adoption circumstances out of my mind, to just live life, but sometimes something happens to expose that raw fragility - on a TV show, movie, media, conversation - and you rethink and revisit. It's an unresolved subject - who are my parents, my sister, are they alive, what are they like, do they think about me, where are they, what really happened? These often trigger emotions and tears, like something is stuck inside and I can't get it out. It's not a good feeling contemplating that that these questions may never be answered, and I'm now feeling turmoil about whether to embark on finding my birth parents.
- In my opinion, past adoption policy and practises are on par with the stolen generation but with far less public focus, awareness and acknowledgment of the power of the authorities at that time and the ongoing affect to so many lives and generations. I welcome this parliamentary inquiry into the historical adoption policies and practises with the hope that further information and support may help those affected to resolve and reconcile the past within themselves. The actual facts may be confronting but are better than the mental torment of our minds dealing with the unknown situations and scenarios which we consider. That adage 'ignorance is bliss' has never been less true. The many answers I am seeking are probably in the records which were either never kept or have since been destroyed, so I doubt that I will ever have peace of mind in regard to the truth about my adoption. The best chance lies in finding my birth parents, if they are still alive and of sound mind, but this path opens me up to further emotional uncertainty and pain.

I'm incredibly concerned about the impacts and conflicts which will arise from the abolishment of the veto system. A veto is standing in the way of many obtaining identifying information to which they feel entitled to; however, vetoes offer security to those wanting to close themselves and their families off from history. Mandated lifting of these will cause immense distress to those who cannot or will not deal with their adoption history; from birth parents to adoptive parents to adoptees. While a veto abolishment would work for me,

as I would cherish the opportunity to find out everything I can about my birth family members, my focus is on how it will affect my birth sister to lose that protection she currently has. Veto abolishment also threatens positive reunification if someone searching gets in touch while the other person is not open, not in the right head space, to being contacted. There are so many complexities that no singular veto outcome is going to be the best for everyone affected by adoption.

The most heartbreaking impact from the past adoptive policies and practices is that what has been done can never be undone nor repaired, no matter what the findings of this inquiry are. The moment of each baby's birth is like a stone dropped into water, with the ripple effect spreading and continuing indefinitely. Reading the AIFS and other reports has been very confronting and it has taken me almost 3 months to finalise this submission due to the mental and emotional drain and fragility, which takes some time to recover from. However, this is just part of the tapestry of my life, which has been exceptionally good and somewhat privileged compared to others, despite the missing pieces.

I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to share these aspects of my life and your time given to consider them.

Thanks and regards,

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Sources

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