

Search guide

For people separated by adoption



International
Social Service
AUSTRALIA

“ISS has the knowledge, experience and contacts that an individual is unable to access. Also an adopted person can be emotionally involved and therefore may rush the process if searching on their own, where a social worker is detached and would consider all parties involved.”

Quote from an adopted person

“Attempting to trace my biological parents was always going to be a sensitive and challenging journey, my ISS Australia Social Worker was compassionate and deeply understanding with helpful and insightful advice.”

Quote from an adopted person

In this guide

Introduction	1
Preparing for the search	2
Searching	4
Making contact	6
Reunion	8
What is DNA?	10
Support	Back page



Introduction



International Social Service (ISS)

Australia is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with nearly 60 years experience in providing professional social work services to children and families separated by international borders.

ISS Australia's **NSW Special Search Service** provides search and reunion support to people separated by government intervention in NSW, for example through adoption, being under the care of the Minister, foster care, or being placed in a children's home in NSW.

Our goal is to locate and reunite family members and facilitate contact (when appropriate) in a supportive, respectful and empathetic manner.

Our service is **free** through funding from the NSW Government's Department of Communities and Justice.

Approximately 100,000 children have been adopted in NSW, with the majority occurring between the 1950's to the 1970's. Many of these adoptions are referred to as 'Forced Adoptions', a practice of taking babies from unmarried mothers and placing them for adoption. There have been Federal and State formal apologies to people affected by past forced adoption practices.

In NSW adoptions, adopted persons and biological parents can apply for identifying details and information about each other under the provisions of the NSW

Adoption Act 2000 and NSW Adoption Regulation 2015.

To see what adoption information may be available to you, go to - <https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/adoption/finding-info>



Preparing for the search



Once you have obtained the identifying details of the person you are searching for, through making formal applications to the Department of Communities and Justice, we suggest you attempt your own initial searches.

This includes searching the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and the Australian Electoral Roll.

There are many motivations to search (i.e. natural curiosity, building your identity, medical reasons etc) that could arise at any stage in your life (i.e. adolescence, marriage, the birth of a child, family death etc).

While each person's search is unique, it is important to be aware that the search and reunion process can be onerous and could take a very long time.

You need to be prepared for a range of possible outcomes, not only for yourself but also for those you are searching for.

This may include:

- both parties desire contact; an arranged reunion may have positive results or challenges could emerge
- the person you are searching for cannot be found or is deceased
- the person is found but does not want contact or needs time

In order to prepare for the next stages, we recommend guidance and emotional support from an adoption professional, as well as support from family and other peers (i.e. others that have previously experienced adoption search and reunion).

Searching



Hopefully your initial searches at the NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM), and the Australian Electoral Roll have produced some results.

If you have not been able to find information on the person you are searching for in NSW, you should check the BDM in the other states.

Additional searches could include:

- Online, social media platforms and White Pages
- The State Library
- The Ryerson Index
- Ancestry.com
- Australian National Library's Trove
- National Archives of Australia.

If you do not obtain any results from your searches, or are unsure how to proceed, contact our NSW Special Search Service on 02 9267 0300 for further advice.

Our NSW Special Search Service has additional searching tools, including restricted access to NSW BDM, paid online search databases and access to volunteer searchers.

If we **'hit a brick wall'**, we may **'cast the net wider'**, by searching and discreetly contacting extended family members of the person you are searching for.

Making contact



Once a possible address for the person you are searching for is found, you need to carefully consider how to make contact.

Adoption is extremely sensitive, therefore using an adoption professional to make the initial contact can be less intrusive and a good way of respecting the other person's privacy and wishes.

Whether you use an adoption professional or decide to make the initial contact yourself, the contact needs to be discreet and mindful of the other person's privacy.

Remember they may not have told their family and friends about you.

We recommend sending a **discreet letter** to the person's home address, as opposed to contacting them by telephone or at their work.

Due to the multitude of people using social media, you may find the person you are searching for online and consider sending a direct message. If you use this avenue it is still important to **be mindful of the person's privacy and confidentiality.**

If you are using an adoption professional, it is important to have prepared an **'Introductory Letter'** for when contact occurs. If the person we contact does respond, your **'Introductory Letter'** allows us the opportunity to give them something from you, in your words, right from the start.

An **'Introductory Letter'** is merely the first form of contact, it provides a little bit of information about yourself and motivation for contact. Consider including photos as they can be powerful.

To obtain our Tip Sheet and advice on how to write an 'Introductory Letter', contact our NSW Special Search Service on 02 9267 0300

Reunion



The post-reunion experience is often profound, and a range of emotions may surface.

It is important you have enough stability in your life as well as support from family, friends or an adoption professional to deal with complex emotions.

Remember if you instigated the contact you are likely to be more emotionally prepared, and the other person may need more time to digest the contact and consider how they would like to proceed.

We recommend you consider the use of an adoption professional to manage the initial contact with the other person, as a way of respecting their confidentiality

and possible need for privacy. This also offers both you and the person found an opportunity for support from a neutral third party. Remember they may not have told their family and friends about you.

Relationships take time to build and **you may want more contact** than the other person, therefore we recommend you **proceed at the pace of the 'slowest' party.**

The reunion journey can be **'like an emotional rollercoaster'** for you and the other person, however it is possible to develop a meaningful long-term relationship with your family member. If this doesn't work out, most people are still glad they attempted contact and had some questions answered.

"... it's been so important to reconnect with my family and learn about my history ...

... I've had a lot of depression from feeling unwanted. This journey has been so important for my mental health."

Quote from an adopted person

What is DNA?



Put simply, DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) is genetic material in all human beings. It is like a genetic fingerprint that contains the unique material that is passed down through biological family members. On average people inherit half of their DNA from their biological father and half from their biological mother.

What is a DNA test?

A DNA test is when a sample of your genetic material (usually saliva) is examined by scientists who compare your sample with others. In the case of genealogical tests, scientists will try to match your DNA sample, with others in their database.

Things to consider

DNA comes with **many benefits**, but there are **some things to consider** before testing.

There is some uncertainty around the privacy protection with DNA samples, and DNA testing can open **'Pandora's Box'** by revealing unexpected results. While you may feel supported to manage the emotional impact; this doesn't mean your potential match/es will be in the same situation.

With all this in mind, DNA testing can **knock down genealogical brick walls** especially when more **traditional searches have been unsuccessful**. DNA can **help identify paternity** when the identity of a biological father is not known. DNA can also help to narrow down which geographic location your ancestry comes from and **confirm your ethnicity**.

Types of DNA tests and providers

Generally speaking, DNA tests can be divided into laboratory tests and genealogical tests. The type of test depends on what the user wants to find.

A **laboratory test** uses saliva (sometimes blood) from two or more individuals in order to confirm if they are biologically related, for example confirming if a person is your father.

When searching for biological relatives, a **genealogical test** uses only saliva and looks at a person's DNA and compares it to others on their DNA database, for example AncestryDNA or 23andMe. Results give information about **genetic connections and**

personal ancestry, for example you could be genetically linked to other relatives who have provided their DNA to the database, i.e. 3rd, 2nd, 1st cousins or even siblings and parents.

DNA Providers

There are many providers of DNA testing. ISS Australia uses DNA Bioservices for laboratory tests.

AncestryDNA is the largest genealogical testing provider, with over 15 million people in their database making it a good option when wanting to connect with relatives. Other major providers include 23andMe, LivingDNA and MyHeritage.

It is important to remember that the major DNA providers databases are widely Eurocentric, which means they are not always a good option for people of colour.

If you choose to DNA test, research which provider suits your needs or call ISS Australia's NSW Special Search Service to discuss.

Support

If you have any questions regarding the information contained in this guide, or are unsure how to proceed with your search, **contact ISS Australia's NSW Special Search Service on 02 9267 0300 or 1300 657 843 for further advice.**

www.iss.org.au

Alternatively contact:

- Department of Communities and Justice
Adoption Information Unit
02 9716 3005 or 1300 799 023
- Post Adoption Resource Centre
02 9504 6788 or 1300 659 814
- Forced Adoption Support Service
1800 21 03 13



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Published by
International Social Service Australia (2020)
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