

# Search guide

For care leavers



International  
Social Service  
AUSTRALIA

*I found my ISS Australia Social Worker to be informative, supportive, and extremely compassionate throughout this very emotional search journey'*

Quote from a former NSW care leaver.

*"With the limited information I had, searching was always going to be a difficult task. However ISS Australia accessed information and records that opened avenues which allowed me to reconnect with my long lost family member"*

Quote from a NSW former care leaver.

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# Introduction



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

**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.

'**Care Leavers**' is a term that refers to children who were placed in institutional and other forms of out-of-home care. Between 1901 – 2000, approximately 500,000 children lived in institutions or out-of-home care in Australia. The NSW Government managed

over 100 different institutions and homes for children who, for whatever reason could not live with their families. Other children's homes, orphanages, and institutions were run by non-government organisations.

Many children in institutions and out-of-home care experienced abandonment, grief, and loss of family members. Sadly, many children also suffered abuse and neglect. There have been national and state apologies to children who were placed in institutions and out-of-home care. In the 1970's institutions closed down and foster care became the primary type of care for children who could not live with their families.

Former NSW 'Care Leavers' may apply for access to records about their time in NSW care under Section 168 of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998.

To request your records, lodge a request directly with the Care Leavers Records Access Unit, via -

**<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/families/out-of-home-care/about-out-of-home-care/were-you-in-out-of-home-care>**

If you are a relative of a former NSW 'Care Leaver' seeking information about your relative's time in care, you may apply for information held by the Department of Communities and Justice by lodging a formal access application, under the Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009. For more information and to lodge an application online, go to -

**[www.facs.nsw.gov.au/about/gipa/right-to-information-policy/chapters/apply-online-to-access-information](http://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/about/gipa/right-to-information-policy/chapters/apply-online-to-access-information)**

# Preparing for the search



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

You can search for your relative on the Australian Electoral Roll.

There are many motivations to search (i.e. reconnecting with parents or siblings, piecing together your history and 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 a search and reunion professional, as well as support from family and other peers (i.e. others that have previously experienced search and reunion).

# Searching



Hopefully your initial searches at 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 consider other search options.

## 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.

**Making contact is extremely sensitive, therefore using a search and reunion 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 a 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 a 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.

# 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 a search and reunion 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 a search and reunion 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.

*"Being reconnected to my sibling after so many years has been life-changing for me"*

Quote from a person raised in a NSW Children's Home

# 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 a **'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 to look at a person's DNA and compare 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 recommends 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](http://www.iss.org.au)**

## **Alternatively contact:**

- Department of Communities and Justice  
Care Leavers Records Access Unit  
**02 9716 2500 or 1300 137 160**
- Find and Connect **1800 16 11 09**
- Wattle Place **1800 663 844**
- Care Leavers Australasia Network  
**1800 008 774**



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