

The Forgotten Parent

There has been an encouraging increase in the regrettably small number of enquiries about birth fathers fielded by the Search Room staff, which has precipitated what follows.

Firstly, some background facts:

- It takes a man and woman to conceive a child.
- Each adopted person is bequeathed elements of their heritage by their birth mother and their birth father.
- Prior to 1984, it was rare for a birth father's name to be recorded on the birth certificate.
- Typically, the primary outreach by an adult adopted person is to the birth mother.
- If the birth father's name is missing from the original birth certificate, it is unwise to assume categorically that 1) the mother did not know who the father was, 2) the father did not care enough to ensure that his name appeared on the record or 3) that he does not wish to meet and to know his child.
- To search for the birth father, his name is required. Occasionally, his name may be found in the adoption documents, such as the adoption agency records or the Adoption Court Order. However, for births that took place before 1984, most often an adopted person's avenue to the identity of the birth father is via the birth mother.

In the frequent absence of documentation about the identity of the birth father, the birth mother has a pivotal role to play.

However, there are many factors that may cause birth mothers distress when asked by their adopted child to talk about the birth father. The quality of the relationship between the parents before, during and after the conception of the child may have been ambivalent, inconsistent or threatening. In some cases, the birth mother may have been under the age of consent, meaning that the father was liable for prosecution, or the pregnancy may have resulted from rape or incest. Consequently, a birth mother may be reluctant to disclose the nature of the original relationship between the birth parents. If the birth mother has scant information about the birth father, or cannot recall past events, she may feel ashamed and therefore avoid talking about him. In many instances, the birth parents enjoyed a loving relationship, but because of the intervention of others, often the parents of the birth mother, they were kept apart during the pregnancy, the birth and the adoption. In this situation, subsequent enquiries made by the adult child may reactivate the spectre of 'unfinished business' for one or both birth parents. The birth mother may prefer not to revisit the pain of her separation from the birth father. If the birth mother feels insecure in the relationship she has achieved through reunion with her child, she may be reluctant to share knowledge about the identity of the father, for fear of 'losing her child again'. In this circumstance, the birth father may be perceived as a fresh threat, in that the child might establish a closer relationship with him than with the birth mother.

What is typically the primary (and sometimes the only) reunion presents many emotional challenges for birth mothers and adopted persons. It takes courage and compassion on the part of both people to take the next step and include the birth father.

There are some mothers who at the first asking, may feel disinclined to discuss the father. However, after addressing suppressed memories and paying attention to her emotional wounds, a birth mother may be more inclined to provide information about the birth father. The tolerance and patience of adopted persons may give birth mothers the space to process their pain, thus potentially clearing the path to the birth father.

Birth fathers need not maintain their stereotyped passive role, *ie* as the second parent, sometimes sought. There is abundant evidence of adopted persons welcoming contact initiated by their birth fathers. I know of birth fathers who have contacted the birth mother to apologise for their role in the events that culminated in the adoption of the child many years earlier. This outreach has been received warmly by the birth mother and enhanced the emotional healing of both birth parents.

As a concerned birth father, I encourage those birth mothers who recall the father of their child as a mean-spirited person, to contemplate the possibility that he has, with the passage of time and maturity, become remorseful and troubled about his part in those long ago events.

Fundamentally, as in all matters adoption, it is the interests of the child which need to be held paramount. Every adopted person has the right to know the identity of both of his or her birth parents. A child inherits genes, traits and medical history from their male and female antecedents. A birth mother's generosity can help the child to find their birth father, as well as an essential part of his or her identity.

Written by Gary Coles