Center for Adoption Support & Education welcomes you to

Strengthening Your Family
an empowering and inspiring webinar series

Search and Reunion in Domestic and International Adoption

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Center for Adoption Support and Education

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JOCKEY BEING FAMILY®

Jockey Being Family generously funds our monthly Strengthening Your Family webinar series.

Who is Jockey Being Family?
Jockey International is a manufacturer, distributor and retailer of underwear and sleepwear for men, women, and children and is active in more than 120 countries. Jockey® created Jockey Being Family, a foundation that helps adoptive families remain strong and stay together-forever because Jockey believes that even one failed adoption is too many. To learn more about Jockey Being Family, please visit www.jockeybeingfamily.com

Jockey International’s C.E.O., Debra Waller, was adopted herself as an infant.

“Jockey Being Family is about bringing people together and it is exhilarating to have impacted the lives of so many families. We set out to strengthen adoptive families but we here at Jockey have also been equally touched by this program, the families, and their stories.”

-Debra S. Waller
With decades of experience, our mission is to strengthen the well-being of children and families of all adoptive experiences by providing them the adoption-centered services and resources they need, including:

- Pre- and post-adoption counseling, assessment and therapeutic services
- Individual and group therapy for kids, teens and adults
- Crisis intervention, support and assistance with school issues
- Training, education & interactive workshops – for families, educators and professionals
- Nationally recognized post-adoption models
- TAC: Training for Adoption Competency
- Our newest Game: 52 Ways to Talk about Adoption
- Award-winning print publications, articles, newsletters and online resources

For more information, visit www.adoptionsupport.org
WE WILL ADDRESS

• What is “search”?
• Reasons for search
• Preparation for search/reunion
• What happens in reunion
• Special considerations in international search and reunion
• Adoption-competent professional support
WHAT IS SEARCH?

The word search for an adopted person carries with it multiple layers of meaning. For some, “searching” means attempting to find non-identifying information about birth parents’ characteristics or one’s own medical history with no attempt for a meeting.

For others, search means reunion- a face-to-face meeting. For still more adoptees, the meaning and process move them profoundly deeper. The word search is not limited to its literal meaning of a physical effort to make a connection. The meaning expands to include all that is part of the adoptee’s quest, for it is an emotional, psychological, and spiritual quest.

Searching For a Past: The Adopted Adult’s Unique Process of Finding Identity

-Jayne Schooler
Why is it important?
What does it involve?
REASONS FOR SEARCH

- The adoption story “Why did you place me?” “Why couldn’t you care for me?”
- Who carried me/gave birth to me?
- Biological/genetic connection/Who looks like me?
- Identity – the missing puzzle piece. Who am I? Who am I like? What is my heritage?
REASONS FOR SEARCH (CONT.)

• Medical information/medical problem
• Desire to meet siblings
• Death of adoptive parents
• Developmental milestone – e.g. getting married, having children
• Time is ticking away/personal readiness
REASONS FOR SEARCH (CONT.)

• Problems with adoptive family relationships
• Personal problems
  • Relationships: friends, significant others (spouses), work;
  • Mental health issues: anxiety, depression, addictions, feelings of alienation/low self-esteem, “emptiness”

“Never a day has gone by when I don’t think of him/her.”

-Birth Parents
PREPARATION: FEARS AND FEELINGS

Hurting adoptive parents

- Feelings of disloyalty, betrayal - “I thought I might die.” Zara Phillips, author of *Mother Me*.
- Communicating with adoptive parents to get their support
- What adoptive parents can do to help themselves
- Teens always need adoptive parents’ support
PREPARATION: FEARS AND FEELINGS

Fear of Rejection

• Birth parent wanted closed adoption – indicated no desire for future contact
• Birth parent hasn’t tried to contact adoptee*
• Birth parent may have kept pregnancy/placement a secret
• Adoptee may remind birth parent of painful past
• Don’t want to intrude on birth parent’s life
• Birth siblings may feel resentful
• Birth parent may not approve of them/like who they are
• They rejected me once, could I handle being rejected again?
“BIRTH PARENT HASN’T TRIED TO CONTACT ME”

• May not feel entitled to search for birth child
• Placement may be a secret
• Feelings of shame, guilt
• Too painful
PREPARATION: FEARS AND FEELINGS

Loss and Grief

- Contemplating what might have been
- New or resurfacing intense feelings of rejection, abandonment, sadness, anger, confusion, ambivalence
- I don’t really belong/fit with either family
- Birth parents’ loss and grief/guilt/remorse/shame
- Do I have the right to search?
- Adoptive parents’ loss and grief/guilt
Other Fears/Concerns

- I won’t like who they are – Pandora’s Box
- I don’t know how I will feel
- They will have expectations of me I don’t want to fulfill – they will want more of a relationship than I do – they will disrupt my life – I will end up hurting them by opening then closing the relationship
- I have other things that need my focus/attention right now – can’t devote time or emotion to this.
PREPARATION: IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS AND NEED FOR UNDERSTANDING/SUPPORT

- What significant others (spouses, partners, extended family members, friends, children) think
- Who you share with/what you share with others
HELPING PARENTS AND OTHERS UNDERSTAND

• Adoptees can ask others to step into their shoes – e.g. imagine not knowing anyone who looks like you. .. Imagine not knowing your medical history. Birth family – imagine losing child to adoption

• Reassure your parents that you are not trying to replace them

• Give books and articles to read on this subject; good movies on this subject – *Secrets and Lies, Antwone Fisher, Then She Found Me, Loggerheads, Superman, Philomena*

• Ask them to speak with other families with a family member involved in search/reunion

• Consider professional assistance from an adoption-competent therapist
PREPARATION: OTHER ISSUES

• Use of intermediary or direct contact?
• E-mail, letters, phone calls, FACEBOOK
• Matters of practical decisions – where to meet, when, who should be included, how long a visit, etc.
“REUNION”...CAN HAPPEN WITH

- Birth mother/
- Birth father / Adoptive family members (for bf)
- Siblings
- Grandparents
- Other extended relatives/family friends
- Adoptive family of birth sibling
- Foster families
- Orphanage staff
- Place of birth
WHAT HAS BEEN GAINED FROM REUNION

• New relationships
• Invaluable information
• Healing
CHALLENGES IN REUNION

• Honeymoon phase
• Loss and grief (*following slide*)
• Coping with differences
• Coping with difficult information/disappointment (romance fantasy)
• Integrating new relationships/impact on adoptive family, significant others, adoptee’s children, etc.
• Impact on identity
• Coping with long distance relationships
• When reunion isn’t possible – rejection, death
• When continued relationship is not desired by the adoptee/birth parent or there are ambivalent feelings
REUNION: FEARS AND FEELINGS

Loss and Grief

- Contemplating what might have been
- New or resurfacing intense feelings of rejection, abandonment, sadness, anger, confusion, ambivalence
- I don’t really belong/fit with either family
- Birth parents’ loss and grief/guilt/remorse/shame
- Adoptive parents’ loss and grief/guilt
IMPACT ON IDENTITY

• What does new information mean about who I am?
• Integrating birth and adoptive family into cohesive identity
• Loss and grief
CHALLENGES IN INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION REUNION

- Locating information/birth family
- Country’s laws around contact
- Cultural/religious and other differences (e.g. poverty)
- Language barrier
- Culturally-based perceptions of adoption
- Long distance relationships
GENETIC SEXUAL ATTRACTION (GSA)

• In reunion, especially the early, honeymoon phase, intense emotional feelings have the potential to result in physical/sexual attraction. This can occur between birthmothers and sons, birthfathers and daughters, and the adoptee and birth siblings. Certainly if either party is homosexual or bisexual, attraction can happen in same sex relationships as well.

• The intensity of emotion without the incest taboo that exists between family members who have lived as family members; the strange “familiarity;” the feelings of loss and grief for the physical relationship that never happened – e.g. birth parents did not physically care for their babies –cuddle them, bathe them, dress them, etc. can all contribute to GSA.
• It is important that anyone going into reunion understand that this is NORMAL – as these feelings can be understandably upsetting, confusing, etc.

• IT IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT, OF COURSE, THAT NEITHER PARTY ACT ON THESE FEELINGS. If acted on, the relationship will be severely compromised as there is no place for this “romance” to go. All parties may ultimately feel betrayed, and the adoptee (the “child”) may feel abused even if there was mutual consent– the potential for seriously damaging hurt and rejection is great – A sexual relationship is not going to undo feelings of loss and grief, and rejection, and will instead complicate the healthy resolution of these feelings.

• These sexual relationships are still considered incest and the legal consequences vary by state
SUCCESSFUL REUNIONS

- Good preparation – for both parties – may not be the case for the party being found – need time to “catch up”. Some birth parents may initially deny they are the birth parent or ask not to be contacted. Many move from this position with time and help.
- Respectful boundaries
- Respect and Empathy
- Patience and flexibility – it can take years for the relationship to feel comfortable
- Good communication skills
SUCCESSFUL REUNIONS CONT.

- Good support systems – including their respective families
- Birth parents respect adoptee’s “need for control”
- Birth parents are protective and enforce appropriate boundaries with their extended family and friends
- Both parties feel a shared sense of common ground
- Adoptive families and birth families also have a relationship or are at least mutually supportive of each other and the relationship the adoptee has with each family
ADOPTION-COMPETENT SUPPORT

• Individual therapy should include meetings with significant other/spouse, adoptive parents/family members
• Family therapy
• Search/support groups
• Internet support groups
• Reading resources
SUSAN L.

Susan is a 53 year old Caucasian woman. She is an adoption-competent therapist in private practice in Olney, Maryland and for C.A.S.E. She is married with two daughters, ages 22, 20 and a son, 18. Susan met her birth family almost 20 years ago.
SUSAN G.

Susan is a 70 year old retired school teacher who is married and lives in Maryland. Susan was reunited with her birth daughter 5 years ago.
KEITH

• Keith Silverstein, 44, is a voice actor in Burbank, California who was adopted transracially as an infant in 1970.

• He’s happily married and a father of three children, and recently connected with his biological family.
Simone is 43 years old and was adopted from Korea by a Caucasian family when she was 4.5 years old. She grew up in Switzerland and came to live in the United States in 1998. She is married and has two sons. She met her birth relatives last June – 2014.
BRIAN AND CYNTHIA

Brian Bomster-Jabs, 25, is the middle child in the Bomster-Jabs family. He has an older brother and a younger sister, both in their 20’s. All were adopted from Korea as infants and all currently live with their parents in Baltimore, MD. Brian is a freelance artist, specializing in logos, graphic design and custom painted apparel. After graduating from college, he taught English in Korea for more than two years, during which time he met his birth family.

Cynthia “Zanti” Jabs, Brian’s mother, works as an acupuncturist and teaches Qi Gong (“Chee Gung”) movement. Brian’s father, Mark, works as a journalist in Washington, D.C. Two summers ago, Cynthia and Mark traveled to Korea to see Brian and met his birth family.
If you would like to speak to Ellen Singer about your specific questions or concerns, you may request a telephone consultation.

C.A.S.E.’s fee is $125/hr.
She can be contacted at 301-476-8525 x112 or singer@adoptionsupport.org.
Certificates of Attendance

Email your request to Burke@adoptionsupport.org
For information on our monthly “Strengthening Your Family” webinar series, please visit

adoptionsupport.org/strengtheningyourfamily

Registration is FREE for first 300 registrants thanks to a generous grant from Jockey Being Family! The codes will be available on the last Tuesday of each month.

For a schedule of our pre-recorded webinars on our most requested topics, please visit

adoptionsupport.org/indemand
THANK YOU!

Please take a moment and complete the survey at the close of the webinar so that we may better meet your needs! Tell us what topics you would like us to include in future webinars.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Please call 301-476-8525 if you would like suggestions for specific topics or issues not covered here. While many of these books were published a long time ago, their themes and messages are timeless.


Duxbury, Micky. Making Room in Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties through Open Adoption, 2007.


Riley, Debbie with Dr. John Meeks. *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*, 2005. (Can be purchased at www.adoptionsupport.org)


Solle, Joe. *Adoption Healing*, 2003


RESOURCES

www.americanadoptioncongress.org

www.childwelfare.org (Child Welfare Information Gateway – Directory of Foster Care and Adoption

www.cubbirthparents.org

www.isrr.net (International Soundex Registry)

www.iscsearch.com Independent search consultants

www.adoPTIONsearchreunion.org.uk/contact/socialnetworking/

Books and videos can be accessed through Tapestry, Amazon, AAC, CUB, Kinship Center, and Perspectives Press.

You Tube has some wonderful documentaries made by kinship members about their reunion experiences.