



# Forced Adoptions in Australia

## Information for Practitioners

### History and impacts

#### Forced Adoptions in Australia

A large proportion of the Australian population has been exposed to Australia's historical adoption practices. Many still feel the wide ranging impacts - mothers, fathers, adopted persons and other family members directly involved, as well as the subsequent partners, children, extended family and the next generations.

#### How did this happen?

A Senate Committee investigated forced adoption policies and practices in Australia. Their report described the following adoption practices that took place during the 1950s -1970s:

- Young single pregnant women were often sent away from home to preclude prejudice or judgement from the local community.
- Most times the young women were sent to 'homes' owned and operated by religious organisations where the conditions were frequently harsh.

An estimated 150,000 adoptions took place between 1951 and 1971, the peak period in Australia. Young unwed pregnant women were frequently given little or no choice about what would happen to their babies.

Today many of these adoptions are considered to have been 'forced'.

- The 'homes' frequently arranged adoptions, but often social workers, and occasionally doctors and nurses, also took adoption 'consents' and arranged adoptions.
- Adoption was almost always recommended ('the right thing to do'), and other options were limited or non-existent.
- Some mother's had their ante-natal medical records marked 'BFA' (Baby for Adoption) without any discussion.
- When giving birth, many mothers experienced poor medical treatment, and administration of drugs against their will.
- Parents, boyfriends and fiancés were discouraged, sometimes barred from access to the 'homes' and hospitals to see the mother or the baby, and their perspectives on adoption were often ignored.

- Babies were generally removed at birth, and mothers restricted from seeing their babies, despite adoption papers not being signed.
- Many mothers were manipulated into giving consent for the adoption, and told consent could not be revoked. In some instances their signatures were forged or post-dated.
- New birth certificates were issued, and adoption records sealed. Legal mechanisms were in place to prevent contact in later years.
- As people attempted to re-build their lives, mothers in particular were discouraged from speaking about their experiences. They were frequently not believed or blamed for the adoption.
- Adopted people were sometimes lied to, felt abandoned and made to feel like they should be grateful for being adopted. They regard themselves as the "meat in the sandwich".

These practices reflected the 'clean break' theory which suggested mother and child should be separated as early and as completely as possible. This theory assumed both mother and child would forget the past and forge a stigma-free life. However, mothers did not forget their children, many adopted children struggled with attachment and identity issues, and the adoption impacts were felt by many others, including later children.

#### What was the impact?

Adoption has significant personal and psychological impacts. Research conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that for people affected by past adoption practices:

- Mothers had a higher likelihood of severe mental disorder, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- People who were adopted had lower wellbeing, higher psychological distress and problems with attachment, identity, abandonment and parenting their own children.
- Fathers had mental health issues, and symptoms of PTSD.



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### Supporting affected people

#### What do I need to know?

Research conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies highlights the importance of:

- Validating the experiences associated with adoptions
- Understanding that effects of the adoption experience do not diminish over time
- Understanding there may have been complicity by doctors and nurses, and this mistrust and suspicion carries forward into how affected people trust the medical profession today
- Doctors, mental health professionals and nurses providing sensitive and appropriate professional services
- Affected people receiving appropriate therapeutic services, which may include treatment for the trauma they experienced; and
- Referrals to adjunct services providing peer support, and search and connect services.

Some adoptions were coerced and large numbers of them were illegal. Some mothers do not identify their adoption experience as being 'forced', even when they had little choice.

#### What language do I use?

Preferred terms are:

- **Mother / Father** - Avoid using 'birth mother', 'relinquishing parent', 'natural mother' or 'biological father'.
- **Adopted Person** - 'Children' and 'babies' should be limited to describing adoption processes.
- **Adoptive parents** - use with great sensitivity. Mothers often feel adoptive parents were complicit in the forced adoption practices, and adoptive parents can feel like they are blamed for what happened. Even referring to them in the presence of mothers can be highly traumatising.

### Assistance for People Affected by Forced Adoptions

On 21 March 2013 the then Prime Minister of Australia offered a national apology and announced:

- Improved access to specialist support services, peer and professional counselling and supported records tracing
- A website and national exhibition to record the history and experiences of those affected by forced adoptions
- Increased capacity for the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program in the immediate post apology period for General Practitioners (GPs) to refer people affected by forced adoption practices with a mild to moderate mental disorder to mental health professionals who deliver focussed psychological strategies services; and
- Guidelines and training for mental health professionals to assist in the diagnosis, treatment and care of those affected by forced adoptions.

In response to these announcements, the Commonwealth Department of Social Services is working to have enhanced support services in place by mid-2014, The National Archives of Australia will launch a website on the first anniversary of the National Apology and a national exhibition on the second anniversary. People affected by forced adoptions are invited to make contributions to both the website and the exhibition.

People affected by forced adoption who have a diagnosed mental disorder previously had and will continue to be able to access ATAPS services or Medicare subsidised services under the Better Access initiative. They can also access a range of other mainstream mental health services including crisis support lines, telephone and online counselling and the virtual clinic Mindspot.

All state and territory governments, with the exception of the Northern Territory, have also issued apologies.

Services are currently in place and available to assist people affected by forced adoptions. Enhanced services will be in place and available by mid-2014.

*For more information on Forced Adoptions in Australia*  
Email [forcedadoptions@dss.gov.au](mailto:forcedadoptions@dss.gov.au) or visit [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au).