



# Outreach and Building Relationships with Family

A mini-guide for people searching for family separated by adoption

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**VANISH**

## Introduction

Once contact information for the family member has been located, it's common to have many questions. This mini-guide is designed to support thoughtful consideration about whether and how to make contact, and offers practical tips for doing so.

**A note on language:** *In these guides, we use the terms 'adopted person' and 'natural mother' and 'natural father' as these are the terms used in the relevant adoption legislation. We appreciate these terms don't resonate for everyone. Our glossary contains some further information about terms that people might use to describe themselves.*

## Deciding to make an outreach

Before deciding to make contact, it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- What are the underlying reasons for seeking contact?
- Who is available to provide support throughout this process?
- What are the potential implications for existing family relationships?
- How much information will be shared with family members, and how might they respond to the formation of new relationships?
- How might significant occasions—such as weddings and Christmas—be managed?
- Has the other person's experience of the adoption process been considered?
- Can the outreach be approached with openness and sensitivity to the other person's feelings, preferences, and desired pace of contact?
- What are the expectations regarding contact, including the type and frequency?
- Are there any factors that might limit or restrict contact, such as age, disability, or capacity?
- What are the thoughts or feelings about ongoing contact and the development of a positive relationship?
- How might one cope with the possibility that the person being searched for does not wish to have contact?
- Is there interest in meeting extended family members, such as grandparents?

## Making contact

It is important to respect the other person's privacy when making first contact. Efforts should be discreet, as confidential as possible, and directed personally to the intended recipient.

In some cases, one party may have spent considerable time contemplating contact, while the other may not have had the opportunity to prepare emotionally. Many individuals affected by adoption have spent years managing the emotional impact of their experiences. While contact may be welcomed, it can also be unexpected and emotionally complex. The process can be confronting and overwhelming for both parties. Allowing time and space for the person being contacted to respond at their own pace is essential.

VANISH recommends that initial contact be made in writing. Although it may be tempting to approach someone in person, call by phone, or reach out through social media (such as

Facebook), these approaches can feel intrusive and may not allow adequate time for preparation. Such methods may result in a sudden end to contact and could reduce the likelihood of developing a future relationship.

It is therefore suggested that the first contact be made via a brief letter that does not disclose the nature of the relationship—particularly in case the letter is opened by someone else—and is written in a warm, respectful tone. The purpose of the letter is to confirm that the correct person has been found.

Some individuals choose to include a self-addressed return envelope, while others may prefer to send the letter by registered or person-to-person mail. VANISH can provide sample letters to assist with this process, if needed.

## Rejection or no response to contact

If no response is received, VANISH recommends waiting at least six weeks before sending a second letter. VANISH can provide sample letters for follow-up correspondence if needed.

It can be difficult to understand why a response may not be forthcoming. Often, there is no clear insight into what is happening in the other person's life at that moment. They may be experiencing a range of emotions, including shock, and might have multiple issues to consider. Time may be needed to process thoughts and feelings related to the contact, or there may be other circumstances such as holidays, illness, or a recent death that are unknown and beyond anyone's control. Additionally, it can never be guaranteed that the letter has reached or been opened by the intended recipient.

In some cases, the person being sought may choose to decline contact. For those initiating the search, this outcome is often deeply feared and can naturally feel like a rejection. The fear of rejection prevents many from attempting contact altogether. Unfortunately, some adopted individuals experience the pain of a "second rejection," which can be devastating. It is important to remember that this is not a personal rejection of the individual making contact. Peer and professional support is available through VANISH for those affected.

For natural parents, feelings of shame and trauma related to the adoption experience may lead to shutting down and rejecting contact. Some have never shared the existence of the child with anyone else. Conversely, some parents experience relief and joy and respond positively and promptly when contacted.

For the adopted person, this contact may represent the first time they learn about their adoption. In such cases, additional time may be required to process the information and seek appropriate support.

## Meeting your relative

What feels right varies for each individual. However, VANISH offers the following suggestions:

- Meeting in a neutral, mutually agreed location, such as a park, a quiet café or place of personal significance.

- Consider having a trusted support person present (e.g. partner, sibling, friend). It is helpful to communicate with the support person about what kind of assistance is needed. Inform the person being met that someone will be accompanying them to the meeting and invite them to do the same.
- Aim to spend some private time together to get to know one another, before involving extended family members.
- Proceed slowly and remain considerate of the feelings of all involved. Although there may be a biological connection, expectations, interests, lifestyles and values can differ significantly. Some individuals will feel an immediate bond, while others might experience the meeting as if encountering a stranger.
- Reflect on what information or questions are intended to be shared. Is there a desire to exchange stories or photographs?

## Building relationships

- Like any relationship, this one may experience ‘ups and downs’ and may evolve over time. While there may be a right to access information related to an adoption, a healthy and positive relationship requires the mutual consent of both parties. Every reunion is unique, however, following the general advice that has been shared by individuals who have undertaken a search and contact, might be informative: Be clear and realistic about expectations for future contact and the relationship. How will that fit in with current life and the expectations of the other person?
- Respect the privacy of the person sought and allow them time and space to recall their experience of the adoption.
- Allow time to get to know the person and accept who they are, this helps to develop a relationship built on respect, honesty and trust.
- Keep communicating. If y feeling hurt, angry or overwhelmed, let people know, but gently.
- Try to be patient and move forward at a pace that is comfortable for both parties.
- Take time to reflect on the process and acknowledge feelings.
- Try to let others know about the search and reunion. Family and friends can offer support, as well as share excitements and disappointments.
- Stop and consider the effects on other family members. Sometimes they feel excluded, unsure how to support their loved one or unclear of their role in the emerging relationships.
- Mutual respect, mutual agreement and mutual acceptance help to develop and maintain an ongoing relationship.
- Allow some time to pass before asking sensitive questions, such as the identity of a natural father, or health-related questions.
- Professional support could also be helpful – particularly in navigating different relationships and changes.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that taking steps to search for and locate a natural relative separated through adoption creates an opportunity for connection—not only to get to know the person who has been found, but also to offer them the chance to get to know the person who initiated the search.

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This resource has been developed by VANISH with the support of the Victorian Government Department of Justice and Community Safety as a guide for people undertaking their own search for family separated by adoption.

By registering with VANISH as you commence your search, VANISH search and support staff can assist you with practical suggestions and reading material. They can also connect you to professional and peer support options during and after the search process.

To contact VANISH visit [www.vanish.org.au](http://www.vanish.org.au) or phone 1300 VANISH (826 474).

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