

Birth parents affected by a contact veto in NSW

For those birth parents considering making contact with the child who was placed for adoption, knowing that their son or daughter has lodged a contact veto can be devastating.

The initial reaction may be one of shock, disappointment, disbelief and anger. This may give way to a long period characterised by a sense of abiding grief, sometimes acute, sometimes merely a vague feeling of scarcely definable loss. The words of Joan, a 45-year-old birth mother spoken 3 months after being informed that her daughter had lodged a veto, may best describe some of these feelings. She said, 'I am still bursting into tears without any warning and my family is suffering because I am so obsessed with the thought of my daughter's refusal to meet me.'

Your long held hopes, fantasies or dreams which revolved around a meeting may be instantly dissolved to be replaced by fears and self doubt. The veto may bring to the surface many painful memories from the past, relating to your pregnancy and the birth of your child. You may feel the same sense of powerlessness and lack of choice that you experienced all those years ago.

Feeling angry towards your own parents is not uncommon and you may blame them for not offering you more support at the time of the birth. Your parents in turn, will have to cope with their own feelings of sadness and sometimes guilt, if they had longed for a reunion with their birth grandchild or belatedly come to reproach themselves for the decision in which they had so major a part. Alternatively, they may be angry with you for wanting to 'rake up the past' and may accuse you of trying to interfere in your child's life.

You may spend a lot of time agonising over why your child does not wish to see you: 'Why do they hate me if they have never met me?' 'What did my child grow up to believe about me over the years?' It is not unusual in these circumstances to feel some anger towards your child's adoptive parents.

No two people will react to the news in exactly the same way. Jennifer, a 40-year-old birth mother, felt differently: 'I had to get on with my life when I gave up my daughter 20 years ago and I guess I will have to accept that she will never be part of my life now.'

The children of now older birth parents, were placed for adoption in a climate of secrecy when 'illegitimacy' was regarded as shameful and adoption was not openly discussed as it is today. Some adopted people, accepting the family conspiracy of silence, don't feel happy to search for their birth family until after the death of their adoptive parents. This may be a reflection of their loyalty and devotion towards their adoptive family, or the belief that to attempt to search would be seen by their parents as a form of betrayal. Particularly if the parents are elderly and frail, the adopted person may feel strongly protective of them, reluctant to do anything which would disturb them or to act behind their backs.

Do remember that you are the seeker and you have had many years to anticipate and prepare yourself for a reunion.

Your son or daughter, to whom the whole idea is new and, in some ways threatening, may not be ready to meet you now, but they may well feel differently in time. Some younger people have used the placement of a veto as a way of 'buying time' while they sought information about you and began to think through their feelings about their adoption.

In late adolescence and early adulthood adopted people may feel anger or resentment towards their birth parent or alternatively are not interested in their adoption, seeing an approach from a birth parent as an unnecessary or unwished for complication in their life at this stage. Their ideas and feelings may change as marriage or the birth of a child puts them in touch with the emotions associated with parenthood and makes them aware of their own need for knowledge of their origins. This may help them get in touch, for the first time, with what the experience of giving up a child could have been like for you.

Some adopted people, while apparently accepting their adoption, have denied the implication of having two sets of parents. They have grown up believing that a 'loyal' adopted son or daughter never need acknowledge his or her family of origin, let alone search for them, or willingly accept contact. It is possible that they feel that their birth parents never wanted them in the first place. Perhaps they have accepted the then conventional wisdom that a mother can give up a child for adoption, put that behind her and 'get on with her life'. They may have no concept of the ongoing pain and grief that most birth mothers experience.

Adopted people may imagine and be reluctant to find out any negative or distressing information about their conception and/or birth parents. The fairy tale of the 'chosen child' may be held on to as the comfortable alternative to confronting what they fear might be a less acceptable reality. By placing a veto on contact, the adopted person can feel that they remain 'in control' both of the information they are willing to give or receive, and of their emotions. The thought of establishing a relationship with that 'intimate stranger', their birth parent, may be too scary and the work of managing such a relationship on any level requiring too great a commitment.

It may help you to accept your child's decision about not wanting contact if you have been left an explanatory message on the contact veto form. However, leaving a message is very much a matter of individual choice and some adopted people choose, for a variety of reasons, to leave no message. One reason may be that, knowing nothing of the birth parent who will receive the message, they may be anxious that it will be misinterpreted - seen as being either too unsympathetic or as offering unfounded hopes. For people unused to writing letters, the effort of putting their thoughts down on paper, or finding the appropriate words in such a delicate situation, may well seem beyond them.

One client spoke of the shame and embarrassment of encountering a contact veto and of a resulting reluctance to talk about it with anyone. Overcoming this reluctance and using the help of the counsellor to put these feelings into words, to look at the whole experience - the pregnancy, the adoption, the years of silence, the joyful expectation of contact, and then the crushing disappointment of the veto - helped her to put all of this into perspective, to feel that she had regained control of her life. None of which diminishes her present pain but she believes that in time, she will achieve a new focus for her thoughts and life will offer her different satisfactions.

In some circumstances adopted people who have lodged a veto may later approach the adoption service provider for information. It is worthwhile registering your name on the **Reunion & Information Register** at the Adoption Information Unit of Community Services (ph: 1300 799 023) so that you can easily be contacted by the Department. You may also like

to leave a letter and photos on the Register so that your adopted child knows you are available despite the veto.

These thoughts provide a brief sketch of what might be the background and the significance of the contact veto. Having read this, having agreed or disagreed with what has been written, having new questions now about your own situation, you may find the need for further discussion.

Here, at the Post Adoption Resource Centre we would be very happy to hear from you, to have a discussion with you on the phone, to arrange an individual appointment or to perhaps provide a group where you might meet other people also struggling with their complex reactions to a veto.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

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