

Mental Health Professional's Role in Supporting Youth Search and Reunion

1. Introduction and Objectives

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Mental Health Professional's Role in Supporting Youth Search and Reunion Journey.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe the clinical implications of current search and reunion practices
- Integrate into your clinical practice adoption competent strategies appropriate to assist parents to understand the identity formation process in connection with search and reunion, and the importance of parental support

2. The Role of Search and Reunion

2.1 The Role of Search and Reunion

Adopted children and youth experience a sense of yearning for their birth connections at different ages and stages of development. Virtually all adopted persons, at some level, search for answers to these basic questions about who they are.

2.2 The Role of Search and Reunion in Identity Formation and Mental Health

In the book, *Being Adopted*, the authors state: "We are often asked, 'What percent of adoptees search for their birth parents?' and our answer surprises people: 'One hundred percent.'

In our experience, all adoptees engage in a search process. It may not be a literal search, but it is a meaningful search nonetheless.

It begins when the child first asks, 'Why did it happen?' 'Who are they?' 'Where are they now?' These questions may be asked out loud, or in the solitude of self-reflection."
Brodzinsky, et al., 1992, p. 79

2.3 Need for Answers

Adoptees may vary considerably in their levels of interest and need for answers, with some displaying minimal curiosity and others experiencing persistent yearning.

Variability in an individual's curiosity about, and yearning for, their origins depends on many factors, including:

- The person's temperament, personality, and developmental level
- The meaning they have attributed to their adoption (that is, whether they were being placed by birth parents to support their future well-being or removed from birth parents)
- The degree of support for searching within their adoptive family, community, and culture
- The nature and circumstances of the adoption, and
- Their previous experiences with, and memory of, birth family

2.4 Need for Information

As we have discussed, adoptees who feel a strong need for information, but are unable to find satisfactory answers can feel profound powerlessness and can experience emotional struggles that are detrimental to their mental health and life satisfaction.

2.5 Temera

Listen to Temera tell a little about her story and talk about why adoptees have a need to search.

[Video Transcript]

TEMERA: So some of the misconceptions and biases around search and reunion, I feel are, the perception that adoptees are searching for their family but that they want to go live with their family, that they want to, be a part of that family versus being apart of the adopted family. Which I know brings a lot of fear for adoptive parents. But for the adoptee I think its more of kind of this innate need to complete their picture. And sometimes its not about going to live with them, or even having relationships with them. That its about knowing, who they are, and kind of where they come from, and what their full story is.

So I'd like to tell you a little bit about my story. I was relinquished at birth. And my adoptive parents, I am their only adopted child, I have an older brother who is their birth child. And we really struggled with adoptive issues. They were really isolated and weren't really connected with an adoption community. And adoption wasn't something that we talked about in my family. So I think I really became, really anxious and intense about wanting to know more about my family because I just didn't have any information around nine or ten. And so search and reunion was kind of always something that I knew I was going to do as soon as I could. And I kinda always been told that at 18 you can go find your family, do whatever you want. So that was kinda in my head, at 18. So I did start searching at 18. I'm now 43 and I found my birth family at 25. And at that time I had three small children, and having children really ignited kind of find-ing my roots as well. And my

birth mother was not able to have a relationship with me. She had not told her family or her husband and her children, so she felt like that was not something that she could do. And my birth father had been dead for quite some time. So I wasn't able to have relationships with them. But I did find my birth fathers family, who were really open and really embraced me. They told me stories about my grandmother who really wanted me, and wasn't allowed to have me. But she had written me in her bible. Things that were just really important that clearly I was on people's minds, amid my birth father's family. Which was really wonderful.

[End of Video]

2.6 Yearning and Searching

Yearning and searching is a normal process for adoptees. The impact of not knowing who they are may lead to the phenomenon of being in a crowd or public event and wondering "Is one of these people my birth parent or sibling?"

For children in interracial placements these feelings can be very complex when they see people who look like them and who may acknowledge them as one of their own. If they have not been able to form or keep a connection with any knowledge of their heritage, their sense of self is compromised.

For children adopted internationally, the distance from their country of origin makes the possibility of seeing or finding birth family in their native environment remote, yet for many, the yearning and searching remains.

2.7 Janna Case Study

The following is an example of an adoptee's ever-changing quest for information and birth family connection.

Janna was removed from her birth mother, Cassandra, and placed for adoption as a one-year-old. When Janna was a teenager, she wanted to know about her birth parents, if she had siblings, and if they were willing to meet her.

Her adoptive parents supported her in her search efforts. They reached out to the placement agency and learned that, at birth, her birth parents were homeless, using drugs, and were unable to care for her. Since that time, both birth parents achieved sobriety and, although no longer in a relationship, both were stable. She found out that her birth father had never married and was a musician.

She found out that her birth mother had married and had 2 younger children who didn't know about her.

When Janna was 18 years old, she requested contact with and met her birth father, but not her birth mother because she was angry, resentful, and felt betrayed that her mother had other children.

At age 32, Janna was married and pregnant with her first child. Being pregnant accentuated the need to have a connection with her birth mom and further explore a connection with her siblings. Janna pursued a search through social media, finding her mother and seeking connection.

After several virtual exchanges, Janna and her birth mother met, where Janna received information about her adoption story and her half-siblings. The door was now open to build connection with her mother and siblings.

2.8 Siblings Reflection

Why do you think it was important to Janna that her siblings knew about her?

2.9 Rejection Reflection

How might her feelings of rejection impact her mental health?

2.10 Siblings and Rejection Response

Janna might be confused as to why her birth mother parented her siblings and not her, and she may feel that she is not important enough for her siblings to know about her. We know that of all the relationships one has, sibling relationships are one of the most important. This is called biological relatedness. For Janna, this may provide her some comfort knowing that someone else has a genetic relationship and connection to her.

For some adopted individuals, finding out that siblings did not know about them could be devastating and invalidating. This awareness might cause deep sorrow, uncertainty, self-doubt, and could have a profound negative impact on their sense of self.

This case further illustrates the depth of adoptees' desire to know where they came from and their need to solidify a sense of self.

2.11 Search and Reunion

As Janna's case illustrates, search and reunion can evolve over time and can open the door to many emotions and great shifts in relationships.

It's important for you, as the clinician, to understand that for some, the experience of search and reunion can be a positive experience. For others, it can be wrought with conflict and disappointment. It is in the adopted person's best interest to have clinical support and the support of others to ensure emotional support and guidance in the search and reunion process.

3. Family Support

3.1 Family Support

It is important for you to remember that, for some caregivers, search and reunion can be challenging, creating divided loyalties, fearing that adoptee will be hurt by what they find and how to integrate the birth family connections into the family constellation. Your ability to create space for the adoptee, adoptive parents, and birth family to express these dynamics will create a more positive experience for all.

3.2 Feeling Threatened

Adoptive parents may feel threatened by the relationship or may fear the potential negative consequences of contact. This may be especially true when the child is of a different heritage or community of origin.

The more the world of the birth parent is unknown or different from that of the adoptive family, the greater the potential for a fearful response.

This is equally true in kinship families where the birth family is well-known but estranged from the adoptive or guardianship family.

Often there are family dynamics that play into estrangement and conflict that need to be resolved.

3.3 Manuel

Helping adoptive parents assess the risk in contact with birth family members, in addition to exploring their own ambivalence in forging these connections, will be an important part of your work.

Listen to Manuel talking about his parents' reluctance to support him in his search.

[Video Transcript]

MANUEL: My parents always pictured my biological parents as bad people. So that made it really hard for me. Sorry. [CRYING] And when I went to do my search I did it on Facebook, and all I really had was their names and a few pictures that I had during visits. And I looked super close at that little small profile picture and tried to like match it up. So that's honestly how I did it.

And it took them a year before they replied to my messages. So that was--in that year that was really hard for me too, because it was like maybe they forgot about me too. So yeah, I'd say the search is a really hard process. And I tried to open up to my parents about it but they told me I wasn't ready, but I felt like I was.

DEBBIE RILEY, LCMFT: How old were you?

MANUEL: Huh?

DEBBIE RILEY, LCMFT: How old were you?

MANUEL: I was sophomore in high school. I'm not sure exactly how old that is, but I was a sophomore in high school. It led to--yeah, 15 maybe--it led to a lot of bad grades, I'll tell you that.

But, yeah, I was a sophomore and my parents told me I wasn't ready, but I felt like I was, and so I took it upon myself with the help of the Internet, to do my search, find my own answers, and it was a hard thing. I, honestly, I didn't involve my parents a lot. And when I actually found them and made contact, I spoke to a counselor at my school.

It was a school counselor and I told them about it. They helped me tell my parents. They took it the wrong way at first, I'll say that. They were saying that I'm not ready for it. That bringing them back into my life will cause a lot of more issues than it will solve. And honestly, that's not how you go about doing that.

I felt like I was ready to find those answers. And right now I've built a connection with my biological family, with my foster family, as I mentioned before. And I don't keep up with the connection because like what I wanted was those answers of who I am and where I come from. And I met up with my family. I meet up with them occasionally, but it's not an ongoing--I don't go see them every day, every week, every month. It's when I feel like it I'll reach out to them and maybe they'll be available to meet up with me. It's when I feel like it. It's on my terms, basically.

And my parents were afraid that when I found my parents I was going to go run away, move with them, choose them over them, choose my biological parents over my adopted parents. And that's not what happened. I just wanted to find answers. And when I found my answers, I was okay, and I just went on to be a stronger version of myself because I found the answers I was looking for.

[End of Video]

3.4 Follow-Up Message

Note how emotional it is for Manuel to talk about this, and now listen to therapist Debbie Riley's follow-up message to parents in the audience. This is an important message that you, as a clinician, can help to bring home to parents you are working with.

[Video Transcript]

DEBBIE RILEY, LCMFT: Messaging that you gave parents today is invaluable, because it really is not about you not being ready, it's about you not being ready, and that's the issue. And I think you hit on all the fears that parents have when search and reunion surfaces about, "You're going to love them more. You're going to want to go live with them. You're going to leave us."

I mean, those are the fears that's driving them pushing back on it. And I really hope that you will take the words that Manuel has shared today to heart, because he's given you some really invaluable information and guidance about what to do, and I want to thank you for that.

[End of Video]

4. 10 Things: Adoption Search and Reunion

4.1 10 Things: Adoption Search and Reunion

As Manuel illustrated, search and reunion is key to the identity formation of many adoptees. In this next section, we will focus on important aspects of the search and reunion process, so you can support the youth and families with whom you work.

4.2 Search Goals

It is important to first understand the distinction between search and reunion. Search is about gathering information, whereas, reunion is about having a relationship.

These distinctions are important because some youth may wish to search without ever seeking or having a reunion.

The first step is for youth to know what they hope to gain and how it might feel if they don't get what they want or expect from their search.

4.3 Search and Reunion Questions

As a clinician, there are questions you can explore with the youth in order to define what the purpose of the search is, at least at the outset. These questions are based on Sharon Roszia's work in the video *10 Things: Adoption Search and Reunion*. Click on each button to hear each question.

1. What does the youth know about their birth family?
2. Does the youth only want to gather information about their biological heritage?
3. Does the youth just want photos and information?
4. Does the youth want to initiate contact with a birth family member?
5. Does the youth want a relationship with a birth family member?
6. Can the youth imagine how they might want to initiate that contact? By letter, phone call, through an intermediary?
7. Are there particular questions they want to have answered?

4.4 Ultimate Goal

Try to help the youth anticipate what the ultimate goal might be, and what might happen if they are unable to achieve that goal.

Sometimes it is wise to help the youth set goals one at a time, searching for information, evaluating that information, and then deciding what steps to take next.

The information gathered in the search process can be disruptive. Information can sometimes be revealed too quickly, and the youth might need to sit with pieces of the story before adding new information.

You can help parents to be supportive and help the youth think through if they need to take time to digest information before moving ahead.

4.5 Search Tools

Before we go any further, we should acknowledge that social media, the internet, and access to DNA testing have changed how searches can happen. Click on each photo to learn more.

1. Searching can yield results quickly and can be overwhelming to a youth who is just looking online for information, but might not be ready for the photographs and extensive information that may be available on social media. Youth might also be found by a birth parent through social media, something they may not be ready or prepared for
2. Parents might not know that their children are searching online for birth relatives, or that they have been contacted by a birth family member. To mitigate the emotional challenges inherent in search and reunion, it is imperative that parents initiate early and ongoing conversations about search and reunion, the internet, and social media and indicate their willingness to support their child to avoid this happening in isolation and with secrecy.
3. The accessibility of DNA testing has opened up opportunities for adopted youth to gain critical genetic health information and discover biological connections.

4.6 Sarah

Let's look at a case example. Click on each photo to hear Sarah's story.

1. Sarah grew up in a White family, always being told that she was of Native American heritage. Despite help from her parents, her search for birth parents was unsuccessful.
2. In college, she became involved in Indian studies and active in the Indian student organization. She was accepted by the Indian community on campus despite not being able to prove her identity.

3. Finally, with the help of a DNA search, she found her birth mother. She learned that her birth mother was also adopted and that she had been part of the ARENA project, the first national adoption resource exchange which placed Native American children with white adoptive parents until the 1970s.
4. With Sarah's help and advocacy, her mother was able to find her tribe, and both became tribal citizens. Sarah and her birth mother entered therapy together to work on the intergenerational grief associated with a painful and wrongful removal, and the resulting loss of identity.

5. International Adoption Search

5.1 International Adoption Search

Although those placed from abroad typically have less, if any, identifying information about the birth family, many international adoptees have traveled to their country of origin, visited where they lived, and some have reunited with birth family members.

5.2 International Adoption Barriers

There are many barriers to search and reunion in international adoption, including language, financial costs, difficulty traveling to a foreign country, and complexities of politics and society, in addition to lack of information, especially for those who were abandoned.

Heritage tours are available in several countries for adoptees and their families to visit their country of origin and connect with their culture, for example, China, Korea, and Guatemala. These may include visits to the orphanage where they lived.

5.3 Societal Circumstances

As a clinician, it is helpful to talk with the youth about the societal, political, religious, or legal circumstances in their country of origin that might have led to a mother relinquishing a child. The one child policy China had in place for many years, as well as the preference for male children, are examples of such circumstances.

Putting the birth mother's decision in context can be very helpful for the youth and their parents to explore.

5.4 Astrid Case Study

Click the arrow to hear about Astrid, who was adopted from an orphanage in Colombia.

1. Astrid grew up knowing that she had been internationally adopted from an orphanage in Colombia. She could remember her mother and grandmother vaguely and did remember being in the orphanage.

2. She had searched for her birth parents during adolescence and in her young adulthood but was told by the adoption agency and the orphanage that there was no record of her birth family and that she had been left there when she was 5 years old.
3. In her adulthood, she became a leader working in support of adult adoptees. After having her own daughter her longing grew. In her thirties, she visited Colombia. There, Astrid was interviewed by the local newspaper that also published a childhood picture of her. Her birth family contacted the newspaper.
4. She learned that her mother had left her and her sister with a landlady while working out of town, but when the birth mother returned a month later the children were gone.
5. Astrid did not know it at the time, but she had apparently been sold or otherwise delivered into a system that supplied children for international adoptions. Astrid had to go through a process of confirming that the story was true, finally confirming the relationship with a DNA test.

5.5 Astrid Follow-Up

Astrid's experience highlights that what children understand about their adoption story is not always reality, and what they may find through the search and reunion process may have repercussions, mentally and emotionally.

An important role of therapists is to help prepare and support youth and their families through whatever they might find, and the emotional implications of that process.

5.6 Tribal Citizenship

Children and youth who are of American Indian or Alaska Native heritage have unique concerns and challenges that the clinician will need to consider.

For instance, citizenship in a tribe or confirmed lineage can be central to healthy identity formation and help the search process.

If citizenship is possible, it will bring important life-long connections as well as rights and resources that can help the youth cope with mental health, identity, and other challenges.

Clinicians who are helping youth or adults who think that they are of Native heritage can seek help from resources provided in this curriculum.

6. Possible Outcomes

6.1 Possible Outcomes

Before considering a reunion, youth must be supported to think through the possible outcomes.

This is especially important if an intermediary is not used, in which case you, as the clinician, can be the person helping to do this exploratory work.

6.2 Making First Contact

Before searching and making a first contact, the youth should be helped to prepare for unexpected outcomes in finding their birth family member, which might be a birth parent or other birth relative such as a grandparent.

As a clinician you can help the youth think through the following potential outcomes:

What if the person they are searching for...

- is not ready to be found?
- denies the relationship?
- hasn't told, or isn't willing to tell, anyone in their current life about the child they relinquished or lost?
- is nothing like the person they find?
- wants more from them than they can give?
- is not in a healthy place emotionally?
- is holding onto anger about losing them?
- expects to reclaim their role, for example, as a parent?
- is in a much better place than they imagined?

How will these answers impact how the youth feels about the adoption or guardianship?

6.3 Things to Consider in Search and Reunion

Click on each photo to hear things to consider in search and reunion.

Intermediary: It may be helpful to consider using an intermediary - which can provide a buffer, giving both parties time to digest the search process so that contact is not made at a time when they aren't ready. The intermediary may be someone at the agency that handled the adoption, or it may be an agency designated by the state.

Setting Boundaries: An important goal for the clinician is to help the youth and the parents to set boundaries on the emerging relationship. When safety is an issue, the adults must help the youth determine the nature of the relationship and create safeguards. If the birth parent is not in a good place, the adoptee may wish to help rescue or feel the need to care for them or experience survivor guilt, feeling guilty that they are in a better place than their parent.

Parental Support: It is also important for parents to remain supportive as the youth navigates the search and the potential for connection. Parents who come across as critical or rejecting of the youth's need or desire to search are likely to put strain on their relationship with their child and impacting the youth's quest for identity.

Excitement: At the onset, one might see a rush of excitement as the reunion is unfolding. In time, this level of intensity may dissipate and the nature of the relationship may change.

Rejection: Initial rejection by the birth family member can bring up past feelings of loss. The found person may be willing to have a relationship in the future, but may need time to adjust and tell others in their life about the youth. The found person may never be ready for contact, and that can be devastating to the youth. As a clinician, your work will be to help the youth process this rejection, and the loss and grief that will surely follow. For more information, see Handout: *Fact Sheet on Searching for Birth Relatives* in the Resources tab.

6.4 Repercussions

When discussing or thinking about the repercussions of search and reunion, keep in mind that it is like a pebble in a pond: The rings extend out from the initial search and touches many more people and relationships than that of the youth and the found person.

Help the youth to understand that there are repercussions for them, for the person being sought, and for everyone else connected to both parties.

Adoptive parents, siblings, and extended family may all have feelings about the reunion and the relationships that may result.

It can be confusing and confounding to be drawn into a found family with people pulling at the youth from different directions.

It can also be a time of self-exploration and relief at finding information they never had.

6.5 Parents Fears

Parents may have fears about the youth being rejected, and also fears about themselves being replaced by the people who are found.

Help the youth to consider how the found person will fit into their life. What will they call them? How will they introduce them to others? How will they relate to their adoptive family or guardians?

If the adoptive parents or guardians can be accepting and can participate with the youth in the search and reunion with support, and without judgment, the youth will know that they have a secure base and will not be rejected.

6.6 Impact of Unexpected Information on Identity

Sometimes search and reunion will reveal information that is different from what the youth has believed and what has helped form their identity. Sometimes there are sad endings, like a death of the person sought, criminality, or mental illness.

The following is a case history of a young woman whose identity was based on information that she was told all her life, and challenged when she found her birth family. Click on each number to hear more.

1. Trina was adopted at age 2 years from foster care, where she had been since she was removed from her mother's care at age 6 months because of neglect. Trina's heritage was recorded as Black, Roma, and Italian.
2. Trina was adopted by a White couple who had three children by birth, and who had adopted 6 children, all of mixed racial heritage. Trina identified as Black.
3. She got married to a Black man and had two children. After her first child, she decided to do a search for her birth family to gather more information for her children about her heritage and health history.
4. When she finally found her birth family, she was shocked to find that there was no Black heritage in her background. Instead, her birth family on her mother's side was Mexican. She had sisters who looked like her and with whom she found many commonalities. Her aunt told her that she remembered her birth father who was White. It is possible he was Italian, but she could not confirm that.
5. Trina was completely thrown by this information, and struggled to reassess her identity. Her search had revealed unexpected information that turned her life upside down.
6. Over time, however, and with help from a therapist, Trina was able to integrate the heritages of her birth, adoptive, and her own family.

6.7 Issues for Trina Reflection

As a clinician, what are some of the issues you will need to help Trina address to help her reconcile her established identity with the information she gathered about her heritage?

6.8 Issues for Trina Response

Did you consider:

- Anger at not having correct information
- Feeling that she had been living a lie
- Confusion about identifying and living as a Black woman when that was not her heritage
- Incorporating her Mexican/Italian heritage
- Helping her children shift their identity
- Coming to terms with the intergenerational concerns of not having the correct information about her heritage

6.9 Contradictions

As in this story, another outcome of searching could be that the youth will find out information that contradicts what they have been told about their story. Click on each button to hear more.

Different Views: Birth parents and relatives might have different views about how or why the child was separated from the biological family. This creates more conflict for the child or youth that must be teased out in your clinical work. It also creates ambiguity about what the truth is.

Breach of Trust: Youth can feel betrayed if they learn that their parents withheld information, if underpinnings of their separation appeared questionable, if birth families did not receive support for reunification, or there was a lack of exploration of important kinship connections or placement.

What the Youth Will Gain: Having answers to the reasons why they were placed reduces the ambiguity, provides grounding for their identity, and often removes the burden that they were somehow responsible. This also opens up the opportunity for connections with birth family. Your role as the clinician is to help the youth and hopefully the parents, to define the goals of the search and support the outcome.

6.10 Emotional Considerations

Search and reunion can be like an emotional roller coaster, and any youth embarking on this journey needs to be aware of the ups and downs of the process, and the complications of new relationships.

Meeting new people of such importance in one's life can be overwhelming. The outcomes of search and reunion can be complicated, emotionally draining, confusing and intense, and the youth will need support to navigate strong feelings and set healthy boundaries.

Your role as a clinician is to support the youth in preparing for, and coping with, the results of the search and reunion journey.

Roller coaster video obtained from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xfhspqJzZQ>.

6.11 Normalize Search and Reunion

Additionally, it is important to normalize for parents the role of search and reunion in the youth's life so that they will feel supported and know their parents won't be threatened by their yearning.

Contrary to the fears of adoptive parents, the process of joining with the youth in search and reunion can make their relationship much stronger.

Respect for the child's heritage and history and participation in helping them find the answers they are seeking will keep the door open to honest communication and lead to an important shared experience in which the parent can be supportive.

6.12 The Power of Knowing

There is power in a successful search and reunion, even if the relationship doesn't result in close ties or even ongoing relationships.

Knowing is the key. Knowing the truth and the story, getting answers and finding where the youth fits in.

Listen again to Temera talking about the power of knowing.

[Video Transcript]

TEMERA: So, for me, the reason why it was so important for me to find my birth family, I didn't have any information about them. But it was also you want to know where you came from. You want to know what happened. You have--I had children, so I knew their birth stories, but I didn't know my own birth story. And I really wanted to give my kids a complete picture, and I wanted to give myself a complete picture.

I really had struggles around my identity throughout my teen years and my 20s and finding them and just seeing people who look like you or similarities, similarities with my children, it really makes you feel like, "I do belong somewhere. There is a family that I have that connection with," when you see other people that are able to say, "I look like my dad or my mom." So that was really powerful for me.

It's not that we're super close. It's not that I have this intense relationship with them, but I'm able to draw from the fact that they're able to give me information about my grandmother and how much she wanted me and how much pain she was in that she couldn't keep me. How much pain my father was in, that he really, at that time in the '70s, didn't have a say of what happened to his child. So those things were really important to hear to kind of just complete the picture and relieve some of that anxiety and some of that intense feeling around just not knowing.

[End of Video]

7. Conclusion

7.1 Wrapping Up

In this lesson, we have talked about the impact of search and reunion. Mental health professionals can be an important partner in this journey, as they work with children and youth and their families to explore and make sense of their identities.

Please check out the Resources tab for more information.

7.2 Learning Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

7.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how will you apply these in your practice?

7.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

7.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed Mental Health Professional's Role in Supporting Youth Search and Reunion Journey.

In the next lesson, we will begin discussing special considerations in supporting transracial families.