



## Quinn's story

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I am a late discovery adoptee, having been unaware of my adoptive status until the age of 23. I was born and adopted New Zealand, but have lived permanently in Australia since 1973. My biological mother was abandoned by my biological father. The time being unsupportive of unwed mothers, my mother made the difficult decision to relinquish me to a couple who had moved to New Zealand from the UK in the 1960s. My adoptive parents were in their late forties at the time of my adoption; my father was a RAF veteran who had been invalided out of the air force due to injuries both physical and psychological during the Second World War.

My life with my adoptive parents was difficult, even once we were able to settle permanently in Australia and they had bought a home in the 1980s. My father was suffering the effects of his war experience (post-traumatic stress disorder of sorts, though never formally diagnosed) as well as having a controlling personality. He controlled and manipulated my life to the point of deciding which course I would study at university and which career I would subsequently follow (medicine, despite me feeling entirely unsuited); he tried to control which friends I associated with, where and when I went out, and criticised anyone he disapproved of, which was most; he used silence to wear me down when I disagreed with him or did something of which he disapproved; he frequently used gaslighting to make me feel uncertain about my own perceptions. I attempted suicide at home during the second year of the medical degree and my parents did nothing in response. This state of affairs continued until I decided I needed to leave home, near the end of the medical degree and during a six-week supplementary course required before I could graduate. It was on this day, after I had explained to my parents why I was leaving, that my father decided to tell me that I had been adopted. He also denigrated my biological mother during this announcement and told me I would end up in the 'gutter' if I left home. I left and our relationship never really recovered.

I reunited with my biological mother in 2002 after the death of my adoptive mother in 2001. It has been a revelatory and satisfying time with her, and the rest of the family, and both of us have been overjoyed to have found each other. But the time we lost can never be regained. I was 37 when I met my biological mother (for the second time, shall we say) and she was 58.

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However, the most damaging aspect of being adopted is the effects that it has had on my mental and physical health. I lived with chronic anxiety and stress throughout my life with my adoptive parents, attempted suicide because of my father's behaviour towards me, developed major depressive illness in my twenties which lasted through my forties, and now have chronic physical health problems as well. At least some of these problems are linked to experiencing trauma and chronic stress.

And the effects of separation from my biological mother as a baby were profound, something that I only became aware of later in life. The signs of these effects I used to think were my abnormal personality, a fault of my own, when in fact a constant fear of rejection stemmed from this separation and produced 'people pleasing' behaviours in me which were excessive and damaging to my sense of self-respect and harmed relationships rather than encouraged them. I am extremely sensitive to any representations of mother-baby separation and loss, something I had not imagined would increase as I got older rather than decrease. It does not reduce, the trauma of this early removal, but seems to become a part of who I am.

And I know that I am not the only one, that many adopted persons experience similar problems, even if their adoptive families were loving. I write about my own lived experience in order to encourage re-thinking around adoption, fostering, kinship care, and other forms of child and adolescence care. Adoption must never be assumed to 'save' children from neglect and abuse, or to provide children for infertile people and couples. Or indeed to 'solve' so-called 'youth crime' problems or to further traumatise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have suffered from the effects of our treatment of their families (Stolen Generation and subsequently).

In expressing what I think children and adults and families need, I can only reiterate points that Jigsaw Queensland has made:

1. keep children safely with their families wherever possible
2. provide proper support so separation can be avoided
3. preferring kinship care, foster care, or permanent care orders over adoption
4. replacing plenary adoption with simple adoption as a last resort when there are no other options available
5. truth-telling, open access to records, and transparency (e.g. integrated birth certificates)
6. lifelong, not time-limited, support
7. prioritising lived experience in all future policy decisions.

I would like to emphasise the second point: it is much, much better to provide support for families so that they can stay together rather than take children away from their parents after neglect and/or abuse has occurred. Prevention is always better than cure and I am surprised we forget this so often. It has devastating effects for families and for children who do not 'grow out' of trauma but rather become traumatised adults. We may have improved since the time when I and so many others experienced the effects of forced adoption and shaming of unwed mothers but we

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need to remember that adoption can still harm people all the way through their lives, even with the most loving of adoptive families. Mine was not the most loving, even though my adoptive parents tried their best in many ways, and the effects of this live with me now, at the age of 60, and will probably do so until I die.

