

Intercountry adoption and search for origins:

A guide for adoptees



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International Social Service

International Social Service (ISS) is a professional, non-governmental organisation, founded in Geneva in 1924, whose network covers more than 100 countries. Working with national members, the network helps children and families facing cross-border issues. ISS plays an active role in advocating and drafting international texts on the rights of children in alternative care, adoption and surrogacy.

ISS Australia

ISS Australia is an independent, national, not-for-profit organisation with more than 50 years' experience in providing services to those who have been separated by international borders, and an emphasis on the rights and best interests of the child. ISS Australia provides intercountry social work and legal services, delivered across international borders. ISS Australia is the only Australian NGO that focuses exclusively on such services, which are delivered as a member of the global ISS network. One of ISS Australia's core services is the Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service, which provides 'free specialised search and reunion services to intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents, including those adopted through expatriate adoptions'.

International Reference Centre for the Rights of Children Deprived of their Family

In 1993, the International Reference Centre for the Rights of Children Deprived of their Family (ISS/IRC) was established within the ISS, General Secretariat. The fundamental mission of the Centre is to share, disseminate and promote ethical experiences regarding intercountry adoption and more broadly, the protection of children deprived of their family or at risk of being so. The Centre also aims to support professionals across the globe.

In collaboration with UNICEF and/or other bodies, ISS/IRC has also carried out many assessment missions on these issues including in Romania (1991-1993), Albania (1992), Armenia (1998), Rwanda (2002), Ukraine (2005), Moldova (2006-2008), Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (2007-2008), Vietnam (2009), Ivory Coast, Guatemala and Syria (2010), Laos (2011), Colombia (2011), Democratic Republic of Congo and Ghana (2013), Tunisia and Denmark (2014), Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova (2015), Cambodia (2016) and Morocco (2017).

For more information www.iss-ssi.org/ and refer to section 'What we do'.



“I should not have done this via Facebook, alone, and so young. It has completely destroyed my relation with my adoptive mother.”

Ben, 16 years old
E. Furlsand and EFA (2017). *Ton histoire, tes origines et les réseaux sociaux*.

“If someone had advised me beforehand of the reality of post-reunion, it would have been useful to know you can't get complete answers because it leads to more questions and more complicated responses.”

Jay, adopted from Sri Lanka

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Introduction

An adoptee's access to his or her origins is a process which, depending on the case, is undertaken at different moments in life and for diverse reasons.

For some adoptees, the question of knowing one's origins will never arise, whereas for others this need to know will take on vital importance. It may also involve a variety of actions, from simply having access to their file, to traveling to the country of origin and/or meeting the birth family.

Searching for origins presents challenges such as securing access to information and records. More particularly within an intercountry adoption context, special complexities may include language barriers, cultural differences and financial imbalances. A search for origins can lead to very positive outcomes for all concerned. However this is not always the case and the journey is not always smooth.

While it is not possible to provide an all-encompassing solution to totally protect your journey to discover your origins, this guide seeks to help you to mitigate and respond to these challenges. This guide also recognises the importance for the adoptee/searcher to be empowered, to be in control of the search. Professionals are there to support that process, not to disempower you.

This guide highlights in red the danger signals that you could potentially encounter at each stage of the search.

In orange, representing the need to act with prudence, there are questions that you should ask yourself, your central authority or your adoption accredited body. These questions should not be left unanswered.

Glossary

Adoption Accredited Body (AAB): intermediary designated by the Central Adoption Authority to implement certain stages of the adoption process in principle for prospective adoptive parents, but may also provide search and reunification services in the country of origin. In the past, these AABs were referred to as agencies.

Central Adoption Authority: Authority responsible for implementing and supervising all adoption processes. It can delegate some of its responsibilities to AABs.

Country of origin: country where the child was adopted from (i.e. had his or her habitual residence).

Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (1993 HC): the main convention that regulates intercountry adoption procedures and explains the core principles related to this subject.

Receiving country: destination country for the adopted child.

Residential care institution (RCI): place where the child is likely to have been living before his or her adoption.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989: the leading convention that governs all matters related to children and provides the basis for the 1993 HC.



You will find this symbol throughout this guide, which indicates that further information is available in the resources section on pages 36 and 37.

All citations found in this publication unless otherwise noted are extracted from ISS Australia. (2017). *The Colour of Time: A Longitudinal Exploration of the Impact of Intercountry Adoption in Australia.*

Search and reunification process

STEP 1 Deciding to search

Clarifying motivations (page 8)
International standards (page 10)

STEP 2 Preparing for the search

Information (page 12)
Possible outcomes (page 14)
Costs (page 16)

STEP 3 Choosing the means for the search

Identifying support (page 18)
Selecting a professional (pages 20 & 22)
Use of new technologies (page 24)

STEP 4 Undertaking the search

Starting the search (page 26)
Continuing the search (page 28)

STEP 5 Following up on the search

Managing search outcomes (page 30)
Envisaging contact (page 32)
Maintaining contact (page 34)



STEP 1

The motivations to undertake a search for origins

Knowing where one came from is a natural desire that many people have – not just those who are adopted.

Motivations are many (medical purposes, building your identity, etc) and might arise and/or change at different times in life (childbirth, adolescence, loss, etc).

Irrespective of your motivation or the timing of your search, it is important that your expectations of outcomes are well managed and your intentions are as clear as possible. It is therefore essential that you are aware of the potential issues that arise at each stage, as well as the benefits of professional and family support.

Moreover, you should avoid undertaking this journey alone. Your adoptive parents and siblings, your biological parents and siblings, as well as other family may likewise need professional support during the entire life long process.

Danger signals!

- I am not clear about my intentions.
- I do not want to be supported or do not think it is needed.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- What am I looking for?
- Am I ready to share my story with a professional?
- [If you are still a child], do I have the maturity and professional support to undertake a search?



STEP 1

International standards

The importance of knowing one's origins is recognised both by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1993 Hague Convention.

These international standards require that States provide a framework, such as co-operation mechanisms, appropriate guidance and professional support.

Therefore only competent professionals should offer services to support you practically and psycho-emotionally throughout the various steps involved. Without such a framework, risky situations may lead to unethical practices which can potentially have harmful effects on your search, as well as on your wellbeing and your future.

However, it is important to note that knowing one's origins is not an absolute prerogative and may compete with the entitlement of birth parents to remain anonymous. In cases where your biological parents legally refuse to disclose information, for example, or where information does not exist, you may also need to be professionally supported.

Danger signals!

- Lack of a searching framework: this can generate unethical practices such as exploitation of persons and improper financial gain.
- Use of third parties without any professional accreditation or affiliation.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Are there laws about accessing information in the countries where I was adopted from and to?
- Do I recognise that my birth family may have a legal right to remain anonymous?



STEP 2

Where and how to obtain information

Searching for origins presents challenges in securing access to information and records.

Adoption records information can be obtained from:

- your adoptive parents who should hold information and records pertaining to your birth and adoption;
- the country to which you were adopted (eg, Central Adoption Authority, Adoption Accredited Body); and/or
- the country from which you were adopted (eg, Central Adoption Authority, RCI).

You will need to make formal applications for the release of your records according to data protection laws. The next step is to apply the information from the time of your birth to the search process now. Some countries have significant records of their citizens and their whereabouts, though other countries rely on local knowledge and anecdotes. You can also benefit from information obtained from other adoptee groups based on their previous search experiences (see page 18). The internet has increasingly become a useful tool for obtaining information, although it has risks (see page 24). You may also obtain information through DNA testing. ⓘ

Danger signals!

- I am ignoring laws that prioritise the right to remain anonymous.
- I am undertaking the search by myself.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- What are the data protection laws and practices in the countries where I was adopted from and to?
- What will I do if laws do not allow a search for origins?



STEP 2

The possible outcomes of the search for origins

As you embark on the search for your origins, it can involve unexpected highs and lows and a variety of outcomes.

While each adoptee's search is unique, it is important to be aware that the process can be onerous and could take many months, but often life-long. It is important to not only consider the possible outcomes for yourself, but also those for your birth and adoptive families. It may even be that you discover an illicit practice.

Discoveries may include:

- travel to the country you were adopted from;
- culture and traditions of country you were adopted from;
- access to basic information about origins and adoption;
- person is not found or is deceased;
- person is found but does not want contact or needs time;
- both parties desire contact, the arranged reunion may have positive results or problems could emerge; and/or
- an illicit practice related to your adoption. ⓘ

Danger signals!

- I have not anticipated the potential impact of my search, on myself or on others.
- I have unrealistic and/or high expectations.
- I have an unrelenting desire for information.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Am I open and prepared as much as is possible?
- What professional support is available to prepare and respond to potential discoveries?
- In case of an adoption breakdown/illicit practice, what resources might I need? ⓘ



STEP 2

Costs of the process

An important question to ask when selecting a professional and prior to starting the search is what costs are likely to be involved.

Given the general imbalance of wealth and the market around adoption, having an overview of possible costs for various outcomes can protect you from being taken advantage of.

In countries where there is a framework for undertaking a search, you should be aware of established fees. In countries where there is no such framework, you should be aware of comparable fees and accepted practices for obtaining information. A number of ethical questions may arise if processes with 'informal costs' are used to obtain information.

There may be a conflict of interest for the searcher (and you), whose remuneration is discovery dependent. A fine balance between finding information and avoiding participating in processes which lack transparency must be found.

Danger signals!

- Payment of money outside official established fees.
- Estimation of fees is not provided prior to the search.
- Lack of transparency in payments.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Are the requested fees justifiable? Can they be paid by a bank transfer and/or with an invoice?
- Do I have access to independent advice that can provide safe boundaries for searching?



STEP 3

Access to support groups and peer based knowledge

The support of your family and friends is crucial and they should be involved as much as you wish during the process.

Such support is complementary to the one of the professionals (see pages 20 and 22) who are there to ensure neutrality and help you overcome potential loyalty issues.

If you are uncomfortable talking to people who are close to you, meeting others through an adoptee association that offers a range of support (phone call, face-to-face meeting, discussion group, mentoring, etc) can help. Some of them have a solid experience in preparing adoptees to travel to their country of origin and managing their return (see pages 14 and 30).

Peer support can be a key factor before, during and after these emotionally charged experiences as well as on a long term basis. It can help you find suitable responses and contribute to your wellbeing and emotional stability.

Danger signals!

- I have the feeling that nobody understands me.
- I am uncomfortable in sharing my emotions with my family, my partner, my friends, etc.
- I do not need to talk to other adoptees as I will be able to manage the process alone.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Is there an adoptee's association where I can get support? ⓘ
- Are they able to support me before, during and after my trip to the country from where I was adopted and meeting my birth family?



STEP 3

Who are the professionals offering search services?

Professionals are there to support the search process, not to disempower you.

Some Central Adoption Authorities and adoption accredited bodies provide search services directly or access to a list of investigators living in the country of origin.

Likewise **individual investigators** seek information about the adoptee's past, beginning with the documentation available and expanding the net through an investigative process. Some **investigators are part of international organisations**, such as International Social Service and International Committee of the Red Cross; others work with trustworthy national organisations. Others may be working independently. All persons, involved in the search for origins should at the very least be aware of relevant international principles and associated ethics, working with quality standards (see pages 10 and 22).

International social workers and other professionals should work alongside the investigator providing psycho-social support for the multiple search outcomes (see pages 14 and 30).

International mediators are other professionals that may be relied upon for reunion case management. 

Danger signals!

- I will rely solely on the Internet to make contact with my family of origin.
- I have not checked the background of the professional I am using.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Is there a list of professionals undertaking search for origins?
Or are there any recommendations by professionals?
- Is a trained social service professional involved?



STEP 3

Criteria to choose a professional in charge of the search

It is important that you choose professionals who will provide the greatest safeguards for your search.

Once you have access to the list of professionals in your country, there are a number of important questions to ask yourself before taking the next step. And because the exercise of the right to know one's origins can give rise to complex legal, ethical, psychological and social questions, support should ideally be multi-disciplinary.

Recourse to professional searchers as well as reputable organisations and AABs is encouraged (see page 20). They will have a sound knowledge and experience of ethical adoptions and ideally they should be referred by a competent body.

Danger signals!

- I am using a professional/entity that does not propose a contract guaranteeing transparency and confidentiality in the process as well as the cost involved (see page 16).
- I am using a professional/entity that is not specifically authorised to undertake search for origins process.
- I am using an individual who is inexperienced, without any solid references.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Is the entity/professional accredited through an official process?
- Does the professional/entity give an impression that it has profitable objectives (eg, luxurious offices, etc)?



STEP 3

Search for origins and new technologies

You may even decide to go on this quest by using the Internet, including social media such as Facebook.

Please be aware that among all the opportunities that these new search methods offer (low costs, speediness, higher success rates due to global network, etc), specific risks exist.

- Instantaneous and unfiltered nature of social media communication.
- Lack of support for psychological and emotional impact.
- Virtualisation of the search process can provide space for unethically working service providers or ill-intentioned individuals.

Danger signals!

- I am 10 years old. My adoptive parents refuse to talk about my adoption. Therefore I will search by myself.
- I think I have found my birth mother on Facebook and left her a message on her public profile page.
- I am resorting to use of social media without consideration of privacy rules.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- [If you are still a child] Did I talk to my adoptive parents about my desire to look for my origins on the Internet?
- Do I have a social worker, other professional whom I can turn to or other targeted resources (see pages 18 and 20)? ⓘ
- What information is accessible on my public profile page?



STEP 4

Starting the search

Once your motivations are clear (see page 8), it's time to get started.

A good place to start the search for your origins is by asking your adoptive parents what information they may already have (see page 12). Your adoptive parents may be very open in sharing information, letting you know they will support you on your journey. Some adoptive parents may be less supportive and feel afraid. In that case, they may not be as open and forthright.

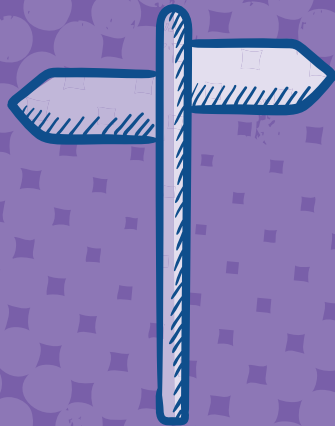
You should likewise approach the Central Adoption Authority or AAB where your adoption was finalised, making a formal request for any adoption records. Some adoptees will receive a substantial amount of information, whereas others will receive minimal amounts. This may depend in good part on your age, political context, relevant laws including consent, information recorded at the time of your birth and/or adoption, and whether your birth family provided this information.

Danger signals!

- I am not able to speak with my adoptive family.
- I am not prepared for failure to obtain any (or adequate) information about my birth family.
- I am starting this search alone, without support.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Have my adoptive parents been open in the past and answered any questions I have had about my origins?
- Am I aware of any local post adoption support services to help me during my search?
In some countries, the Central Adoption Authority may finance such services.



STEP 4

Continuing the search

Once you have made the decision to proceed with your search, you should seek support from an adoption professional.

As searching for information is an onerous task which may take many months or even years, this can create anxiety for you as you wait for outcomes, such as knowing if your biological family is alive or whether or not they want contact with you.

It is important that you are prepared to cope with however the search develops – from a foreseeably long wait time (see page 14) to the unexpectedly rapid receipt of information. Sometimes other life events occur after you initiated the search process (pregnancy, changing jobs, death of a relative, etc) that may influence how ready you are and the search progress.

Therefore, professional support should be maintained throughout the process, and will be especially needed should you encounter difficult information along the way, such as if your birth family are deceased, cannot be located or choose not to have contact with you. Professionals can also provide support and mediation services to make contact.

Danger signals!

- I am not prepared for distressing information.
- I am not prepared to manage the waiting time.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Do I have someone to talk to about my feelings, such as feeling anxious, angry, or incomplete due to the lack of contact?
- In case I find out about a suspected illicit practice, have I considered resources such as the handbook *Responding to illegal adoptions** with professional support?

*www.iss-ssi.org/images/advocacy/Tab1-ISSAdvocacy/Illegal_Adoption_ISS_Professional_Handbook.pdf



STEP 5

Managing search outcomes

The various outcomes of intercountry adoption searching each present complex issues that need consideration before moving forward.

Even when you have been – and you feel yourself to be – thoroughly prepared, and expectations have been explored, the impact can be difficult to predict and to manage.

The emotional journey of adoption is by nature deep-seated, sometimes in ways that adoptees are not always fully aware of. It is these deeper, more primal emotions that can be triggered. Here are some important points to consider:

- We cannot know in detail the birth family's experience.
- We can assume that the original separation from your birth family will have involved loss and pain for them. It is this loss and pain which often acts as a barrier to contact, not you personally as the searcher. It may also lead them to provide modified versions of your past.
- In intercountry adoption searching, often the historic, social and cultural context of the adoption plays a large part in the outcome, including the challenge of locating people in the first place.

Danger signals!

- I have not allowed enough time to process my emotional experience and I have acted impulsively.
- I want contact even if it puts my birth family in danger.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Have I identified trusted support including peer support? (see page 18)
- What is the cultural and socio-economic context of the living conditions of my birth family?



STEP 5

How to envisage a possible contact with family of origin

Contact can be daunting for all parties concerned.

There are many difficulties for intercountry adoption reunions, the most significant being distance, culture and language.

The more information is shared before the actual face to face contact occurs, the better the outcome is likely to be. Prior awareness of differences in economic conditions, lifestyle and cultural values is vital. This helps prepare both parties to feel as comfortable as possible before the meeting.

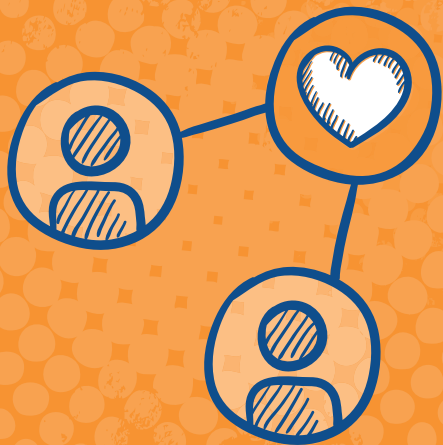
Initial contact may involve writing a letter, new technologies (see page 24) and/or may take place in the country of origin often involving more than one member of the birth family. You may benefit from taking a support person such as a family member as well as a translator. You may even consider using a professional mediator or other professional who can help with preparing the meeting and provide support throughout. It is better to not expect to have important questions answered at this meeting.

Danger signals!

- I am contacting my birth family on my own.
- I am using social media without boundaries (see page 24).
- I am not prepared as to how to manage my feelings about seeing the way my birth family live.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Have I researched the culture of my country of origin?
- Have I considered use of an international mediator? ⓘ
- Have I thought about traditional communication such as writing a letter before a first meeting?




STEP 5

Maintaining long-term contact with the family of origin

Building a relationship with your birth family takes a great deal of commitment and willingness to understand their perspective and experience.

The post-reunion process is often profound but also complex to navigate due to possible distance, emotional, cultural and language barriers between the two parties. It is well worth having the right support in place to deal with issues such as these.

It is important to acknowledge that developing communication with your birth family may be a slow process if they are not yet able to communicate directly with you. You need to gradually move forward in order to build a foundation for the longer term relationship.

You may consider the use of a mediator or other professionals to manage relationships with both families. This could be helpful especially in cases where there may be unwarranted pressure to support birth families, where there is a discovery of an illicit practice or an adoption breakdown. 

Danger signals!

- I have no intention of respecting the culture of my birth country.
- I expect to have a meaningful relationship with my birth family just because I am biologically related.
- My birth family is putting pressure on me to support them.

Questions to ask (yourself) to avoid the above risks:

- Am I open to learn about my birth country?
- Am I willing to see my adoption from my birth family's perspective?
- Who will assist me to maintain long-term contact to overcome possible barriers and pressure?

General resources

Better Care Network information about children deprived of their families in multiple countries. www.bettercarenetwork.org/

Central Authority Your interlocutor for all questions in relation to the adoption, various actors, choice of a country and its situation etc. Contact details and addresses of the Authorities of Hague Convention Contracting States at: www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.authorities&cid=69

Committee on the Rights of the Child You can find the text of the convention and in the section 'sessions', information about the situation of children in countries and possible concerns. This information is usually found in the State's periodic report and the Committee's recommendations. www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/index.htm

Hague Conference of International Private Law You can find the text of the 1993 Hague Convention, documents related to its applications, information about procedures in various countries, etc. www.hcch.net

International Social Service International Reference Center for general information about intercountry adoption and the protection of children deprived of their families, regarding legal, ethical and practical questions, etc. You should also regularly visit www.iss-ssi.org/index.php/en/news1

International Family Mediation www.ifm-mfi.org

Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism information about illegal adoption cases denounced before courts or in the media. www.brandeis.edu/investigate/about/index.html

UNICEF General information about the situation of children in the country. www.unicef.org

Specific resources

- Adams, J. (2012). *In Your Face – Social Media and Adoption Search and Reunion*. Post Adoption Resource Centre.
- Armstrong, S. & Slaytor, P. (Eds) (2001). *The Colour of Difference: Journeys in Transracial Adoption*. Federation Press (no longer available in print but can be purchased as an ebook at Google Play).
- Baglietto, C., Cantwell, N. & Dambach, M. (Eds) (2016). *Responding to illegal adoptions: A professional handbook*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Social Service.
- Fursland, E. (2010). *Social Networking and Contact: How social workers can help adoptive families*. BAAF.
- Fursland, E. (2010). *Facing up to Facebook, A survival guide for adoptive families*. BAAF.
- Fursland, E. and Enfance & Familles d'Adoption (2017). *Ton histoire, tes origines et les réseaux sociaux*. Paris: Enfance & Familles d'Adoption (adaptation of the two resources above written by E. Fursland).
- Haralambie, A. (2013). *Use of social media in post-adoption search and reunion*.
- Howard, J. (2010). *For the Records II: An Examination of the History and Impact of Adult Adoptee Access to Original Birth Certificates*. Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.
- Howe, D. & Feast, J. (2000). *Adoption, Search & Reunion – The long term experience of Adopted Adults*. The Children's Society.
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- Jeannin, C. (Ed.) (2018). *Towards a greater capacity: Learning from intercountry adoption breakdowns*. Geneva, Switzerland. International Social Service.
- Long, L. (2017). *What to consider when beginning to Search in InterCountry Adoption?*
- Oakwater, O. (2012). *Bubble wrapped children – How social networking is transforming the face of 21st century adoption*. London: MX Publishing.
- Ryan, T. & Walker, R. (2016). *Life Story Work*. Coram BAAF – Adoption & Fostering Academy.
- Smith, C. & Logan J. (2004). *After adoption – Direct contact and relationships*. London: Routledge.

Peer support

ISS has had contact with the following associations although we are aware that many other associations exist that are available through the associations below:

Australia

InterCountry Adoptee Voices | www.intercountryadopteevoices.com

France

La Voix des Adoptés | www.lavoixdesadoptes.com

Racines Coréennes | www.racinescoreennes.org

Spain

AFIN

La voz de los adoptados | www.lavozdelosadoptados.es

South Korea

Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea (TRACK)

www.justicespeaking.wordpress.com

Switzerland

Espace A | www.espace-a.org

The Netherlands

United Adoptees International | www.unitedadopteesinternational.nl

Personal notes



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“I have never before felt more attached
to people whom I have never met.”

Carmen, adopted from Chile

Message received by a young adoptee...

“darlin son i am so hapy coz iv found u ere I bin
lokin for ages plse rit bak coz uv bin told lies
bout me i always luvd u n nvr stopd thinkin
bout u b gr8 2 cu.”

Oakwater H. (2012). *Bubble wrapped children*.

International Social Service/
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