



### Parents separated from children by forced adoption or removal

In the past, adoption of children of unwed mothers was common. While separation by adoption continues, approximately 250,000 adoptions occurred during the peak period of 1951 – 1971. Many pregnant women, most of whom were unmarried, and some married, had little or no choice about what would happen to their babies. Some couples were provided with housing on the condition they relinquish a child or children for adoption. Adoptions were arranged without willing or informed consent, were unethical, dishonest and in many cases illegal and are therefore considered “forced”.

A Senate Committee<sup>1</sup> investigated forced adoption policies and practices in Australia. Their report, tabled on 29 February 2012, described the following practices that predominately took place during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

- Young single pregnant women were often sent away from home to overcome prejudice or judgement from the community.
- Most women were sent to institutions owned and operated by religious and other organisations where the conditions were frequently harsh and abusive.
- The institutions frequently arranged adoptions, but often social workers, and occasionally doctors and nurses, also took ‘consents’ and arranged adoptions.
- Adoption was almost always recommended (‘the right thing to do’). Other options were limited or non-existent.
- Some mothers had their ante-natal medical records marked ‘BFA’ (Baby for Adoption) without any discussion.
- When giving birth, many mothers experienced poor medical treatment, abuse and administration of drugs against their will.
- Parents, boyfriends and fiancés were discouraged, and sometimes barred, from access to the institutions and hospitals to see the mother or the baby and their perspectives and views on adoption were often ignored.
- Babies were generally removed at birth and mothers restricted from seeing their babies despite adoption

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Community Affairs References Committee Report, Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, February 2012. [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Community\\_Affairs/Completed\\_inquiries/2010-13/commcontribformerforcedadoption/report/index](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2010-13/commcontribformerforcedadoption/report/index)

papers not being signed.

- Babies were often in 'limbo' for weeks or even months as adoption processes were finalised.
- Many mothers were manipulated into giving consent to the adoption and incorrectly told that consent could not be revoked. In some instances, their signatures were forged or post-dated.
- New birth certificates were issued and adoption records sealed. Legal mechanisms were put in place to prevent contact in later years.
- The separation experience at birth for a mother and her baby was profoundly traumatic for both of them.
- As people attempted to re-build their lives, mothers in particular were strongly discouraged from speaking about their experiences. They were frequently either not believed or blamed for the adoption.
- Adopted people were often not given information about their origins. Some felt abandoned and/or that they should be grateful for being adopted. They had to adjust to their separation and loss while integrating new identities and families into their lives. Many were not told that they were adopted and found out as adults, sometimes decades later and in traumatic circumstances.

These practices reflected the 'clean break' theory in which a mother and her child were separated as early and as completely as possible. It was understood that the separation caused both of them grief but the level of trauma inflicted was poorly recognised because attachment theory was in its infancy and pre-birth bonding was not well understood. Mothers and their children did not forget their separation experiences. Many adopted people, as children and as adults, struggled with attachment and identity issues and the ongoing adoption impacts were, and continue to be, felt by many others including their children<sup>2</sup>.

### Impacts

Adoption has significant personal and psychological impacts. Research conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies<sup>3</sup> found that for people affected by past adoption practices:

- Mothers have a higher likelihood of severe mental disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- People who are adopted are more likely to experience mental health disorders, poorer wellbeing, higher psychological distress and encounter problems with attachment, identity, abandonment and parenting their own children. In later years, they have sometimes had difficulty acknowledging their role in both their family of origin and their adoptive family.
- Fathers may experience mental health issues and symptoms of PTSD.

### Supporting people

The Australian Institute of Family Studies research highlights the importance of:

- Validating experiences of separation and adoption as most people affected have lived in silence and have not been able to talk openly and freely about their experiences.
- Understanding that the effects of the separation and adoption experience are real for the people involved and are often 'triggered' by subsequent life events eg birthdays, births or deaths within a family.
- Understanding that there may have been complicity by doctors and nurses, and this mistrust and suspicion carries forward into how affected people trust health professionals today.
- Doctors, mental health professionals and nurses providing sensitive and appropriate professional services across a range of situations.

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<sup>2</sup> DSS Forced Adoptions in Australia factsheet Jan 2016 [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01\\_2016/forced\\_adoptions\\_-\\_fact\\_sheet\\_revised\\_january\\_2016\\_0.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2016/forced_adoptions_-_fact_sheet_revised_january_2016_0.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Past Adoption Experiences: National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/resreport21/index.html>

- Affected people receiving appropriate therapeutic services which may include treatment for the trauma they experienced.
- Referrals to adjunct services providing peer support and search and connect services when people are seeking their personal information or wishing to reconnect with their original families.

It is important also to note that although the CHSP policy framework defines this group as parents affected, it is important to note that the National Apology was for all people affected by Forced Adoptions including other family members.

For more information or to access support and referral services contact: VANISH - Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self Help on 1300 826474 (1300 VANISH) or visit <http://vanish.org.au/>

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