



# Forced Adoptions in Australia

## History and Experiences of Forced Adoption

### History and background

A large proportion of the Australian population has been affected by Australia's historical adoption practices. Many of them - mothers, fathers, adopted persons and other family members who were directly involved, as well as subsequent partners, children, extended family and later generations – still experience the wide-ranging impacts.

In the past, adoption of children of unwed mothers was common. Unwed pregnant women had little or no choice about what would happen to their babies.

Many infants were taken from their mothers at childbirth due to the extreme pressure and coercion that they experienced from family, social workers and/or hospital staff. Many of these adoptions were arranged without willing or informed consent, were unethical, dishonest and in many cases illegal and are therefore considered "forced".

While separation by adoption continues, approximately 150,000 adoptions occurred during the peak period of 1951 – 1975 (although forced adoption is not limited to this period). Because of the conservative social values commonly held at the time, much shame and secrecy surrounded pregnancy out of wedlock. Unwed women were expected to "give up" their children to childless married couples.

In most cases, these adoptions were "closed adoptions", where the original birth certificate was sealed and a revised one was issued, creating the child's "new legal" identity with their adoptive family.

### What did people experience?

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 20th 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 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 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 often 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 were blamed for the adoption.
- Adopted people were often not given information about their origins. Some felt either abandoned 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.

Those affected by forced separation continue to struggle with trauma, guilt, attachment and identity issues and the ongoing adoption impacts may be felt by others in the affected person's lives.

<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](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2010-13/commcontribformerforcedadoption/report/index)

## Impacts<sup>2</sup>

The impacts of forced adoption and family separation are diverse and long-lasting, for not only mothers and fathers separated from a child by adoption, but also for the adult sons and daughters who were adopted as babies, and their extended family members. The most common effects of forced adoption are deeply psychological and emotional, and include:

- depression;
- anxiety-related conditions;
- complex or pathological grief and loss;
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; including complex PTSD);
- abandonment, identity and attachment disorders; and
- personality disorders.

The needs of people affected by forced adoptions are diverse and ongoing, ranging from obtaining records or information-seeking activities by involved parties, to long-term support for highly complex trauma-related issues.

### Social changes affecting adoption

In the 1970s and through the 1980s and 1990s, legal, social and economic changes occurred. For example, in 1973 the Australian Government introduced the Supporting Mother's Benefit, providing income support for sole parents. There was also greater social acceptance of single parenthood and of children raised in de facto relationships. These changes gradually began to alter adoption practices, reducing the pressure to relinquish babies born out of wedlock, and shifting away from the secrecy surrounding adoption.

On 21 March 2013, the Australian Government delivered a formal apology to people affected by past forced adoption or removal policies and practices. The apology acknowledges the experiences of those affected by forced adoptions, which created a lifelong legacy of pain and suffering.

## Examples of Forced Adoption

Note: the experiences of affected people are vast and varied. **Please be aware reading these case studies may be upsetting.**

### Case Study 1

When "Fiona" fell pregnant at 16, she was working and in a long-term relationship with the father, and they intended to keep the baby. Her parents were unsupportive, sending her to a home when she was five months pregnant. She shared a room with several other pregnant, unwed girls, and was required to work (with a small payment provided), with her duties including cooking and cleaning.

After giving birth in a hospital (where, during her labour, she was physically tied to the bed), a sheet was placed in front of her face to block her from seeing her baby, and her boyfriend tried to visit but was prevented from doing so.

Fiona was told to sign adoption papers – without being advised of government payments that may have been available to support her. She refused, and then recalls being injected with unspecified drugs. Fiona was then "made to sign" in such a state where somebody else held the pen for her while she signed. She was not allowed to see her baby and had to leave the hospital without him.

Large numbers of adoptions were coerced and many were illegal. **Even when mothers had little choice or no real decision making power, they may not identify their adoption experience as being "forced"**. Regardless of when and how the adoption occurred, issues of trauma, loss, identity, attachment, grief and self-esteem are common themes in affected people's lives.

### Case Study 2

"Ann" was 20. Her conservative middle-class parents liked her long-term boyfriend and knew of their plans to get engaged on her 21st birthday. Yet on discovering she was pregnant, Ann's parents were embarrassed, angry and upset about what their family, friends and neighbours would think. They decided it was best for Ann and her baby for the baby to be adopted. Ann's mother took her for doctor's appointments at night. Ann and her boyfriend continued to see each other secretly, hoping to change her parents' minds before the birth.

In hospital, Ann wasn't allowed to see her baby after the birth, despite numerous requests to staff. Several days later an unknown woman visited her, bringing adoption papers to be signed. Ann refused to sign but after further visits by the same woman, with no parental support, all alone and under immense pressure, she was convinced that she had no other option. She finally and unwillingly signed the paperwork. She was then allowed to briefly hold her baby. Ann was never informed about the 30-day revocation period that existed (following "consent" being obtained for adoption). She returned to her family home and her parents never spoke of her baby again.

### Case Study 3

"Daniel", was very different to his brother (his adoptive parents' only biological child) in both looks and temperament, which reinforced his sense of not belonging and was a constant reminder of being adopted. He spent many of his adult years trying to trace his mother and father, having initially delayed this process to avoid upsetting his adoptive parents. He also felt guilty for not being more "grateful" for being adopted. Daniel eventually found his mother and father, who were no longer together, and they were both open to having contact. The journey has been up-and-down, and brought many new challenges. Daniel has felt conflicted in his loyalties between families, and is trying to work out where he fits in amongst multiple families. However, he feels it is important that he had been able to find out more about his history and make connections with family.

### Assistance for people affected by forced adoptions

For more information about specialist support services for people affected by forced adoptions, visit the [Department of Social Services website](http://dss.gov.au/social-services-website) (<http://dss.gov.au/forcedadoptionssupportservices>)

To contact the Forced Adoption Support Service in your state or territory, call **1800 21 03 13**

<sup>2</sup> <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/forced-adoption-national-practice-principles>