



## Approaching your relative—How we can help

### Making the decision to contact

Making the decision to establish contact with a relative is very personal. It's a decision which you may have considered at various times for many years. It's normal for this decision to raise a whole range of emotions and questions such as:

- Will my approach be seen as intrusive and disruptive?
- What if they don't want to know me? How will I cope with the rejection and loss a second time?
- I've thought about this person for decades -what if they turn out to be the complete opposite of what I expected?
- What if their expectations around contact are different to mine?

#### **For parents outreaching to an adopted person:**

- What if they don't know they were adopted?
- How will I deal with any anger they may feel towards me about the adoption?
- How will I tell my partner and other children and how will they react?

#### **For an adopted person outreaching to a parent:**

- It's possible they haven't told anyone about the adoption. What happens if someone else opens my letter?
- How can I cope with any feelings of being disloyal to my adoptive parents?.
- How will I deal with the reactions of my adoptive parents?
- How do I approach my father when I've been told he didn't know about my birth or the pregnancy?
- What if my mother willingly gave me up and didn't experience coercion or force?



The experience of adoption is often associated with feelings around loss and loss of control. These feelings may come to the surface during your decision to make contact with your relative and may play an important role in deciding which approach you take. Regardless of how you choose to approach your relative, it is important that you have support available to you to openly discuss how you are feeling and to share your anxieties around the approach.

### Making contact directly

If you choose to contact your relative directly, a Jigsaw Qld caseworker can assist in a number of ways:

- Providing advice and emotional support during the outreach process
- Assisting you to prepare for contact including exploring your expectations and possible outcomes
- Giving suggestions and feedback on the drafting of your first letter
- (Optional) Including the Jigsaw Qld phone number in the initial letter which provides your relative

with the option of calling and receiving support from adoption professionals prior to direct contact with you.

- Providing information on Support Group meetings where you can share and hear about other people's outreach experiences
- Providing recommendations for books and articles about search and reunion.
- Providing any support you need after you have outreached to your relative

## Asking Jigsaw to outreach on your behalf

If you choose to use Jigsaw Qld to approach your relative, we appreciate that this is your journey so you are in control of decisions surrounding contact. The process is very transparent and your caseworker will regularly consult with you and keep you updated throughout each step of the journey. They will also provide emotional support throughout the process.

### The outreach process

- When your caseworker outreaches to a relative on your behalf, they will write a standard letter which doesn't include any identifying information about you or make mention of the adoption. The reason for doing this is to protect both your privacy and the privacy of the person we are approaching. This first stage is focused on establishing that we have the right person. If the person we are outreaching to is elderly we may choose to telephone them instead of sending them our letter. This is to minimise any possible alarm they may experience by receiving a "strange letter" out of the blue.
- Before we send the above letter to your relative we usually like to have your first letter and any photographs ready so that we can ask their permission to send your letter/photos to them. This is a really important part of the process because it can help counter anxiety or reluctance your relative might be experiencing. They will also be aware of the time and care you have put into the process.
- We will ask you what information you would like us to share about you with your relative when they respond. Information will only be shared with your permission.
- Prior to outreaching to your relative we will confirm if you have any important questions that you would like us to ask if your relative is not wanting any contact. It might be important to reflect on these questions deeply and discuss them with your caseworker.
- People express a range of emotions when they call in response to receiving our letter. Jigsaw Qld caseworkers are experienced in providing support to relatives who have been approached, particularly in reassuring them around any anxieties they may be experiencing. We also reassure them that their decisions about the pace and nature of contact will be respected and they will not be pressured. Jigsaw caseworkers respond sensitively to the range of responses that arise such as:
  - Some people can be very excited and want immediate contact. This may be confronting for you even though you have been wanting contact.
  - Some people are reluctant and suspicious about what you are seeking and there may even be worries about claims on their estate or requests for financial assistance.
  - Some people are overwhelmed by emotions related to the adoption and possible past trauma.
  - Some people will be very fearful because their family do not know about the adoption and they do not want them to find out after so many years of secrecy and their associated shame.
  - There may also be the possibility of unexpected and sometimes distressing family information that they are worried about sharing.
  - Occasionally some people we contact do not know they were adopted and this is shocking for them.
  - Some people may deny that they are the person we are seeking.
  - A father may not have known there was a pregnancy or adoption and may struggle with this information.

- If your relative is happy to have contact, we ask permission to forward your first letter to them. Exchanging letters at the beginning is a good way to slowly build a relationship and gives both parties the space to deal with the complex and sometimes confusing reactions that can arise. After a period of exchanging letters or emails you will be better informed to make the decision about future contact, for example, telephone or face-to-face contact.

### **After contact is made**

- During the first stages of contact your caseworker will follow up with you and your relative to provide support as you build the relationship. Some issues that may arise include:
  - Different expectations (for example, one party wanting more frequent and/or closer contact than the other party)
  - Processing the differences between fantasy and reality and the loss associated with this
  - Overwhelming and confusing emotions including anxiety, grief, guilt, anger
  - Heightened sensitivity and vulnerability can result in misunderstandings.
  - Different communications styles and personality differences can impact on the relationship building.
  - Dealing with ongoing secrecy.
  - Reactions of other family members to this new relationship.
  - Preoccupation with the new relationship to the exclusion of other relationships and life roles.
  - Very rarely there can occur a physical attraction towards your relative. (If this occurs it is recommended that you talk this through with your Jigsaw caseworker)
  - Deciding how many members of the family are included during this early stage of contact
  - Negotiating roles and what names to call each other.
- When arranging your first face to face meeting you should consider:
  - A location that is neutral ground, quiet and somewhat private so that both parties feel comfortable if they get emotional. If you wish, Jigsaw QLD can offer you a meeting room.
  - Who should attend this meeting? We generally recommend that you keep attendance at this first meeting to a minimum which may include a support person for each of you.
- Building a relationship takes time, effort, openness, patience and acceptance. This relationship can be more complex because of the heightened, deep emotions involved related to the adoption experience. We encourage you to seek support at any stage to help you deal with challenges as they arise.