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**Supporting
those affected by**

Past Adoption Practices

VANISH celebrates 25 years of service

VANISH

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Preface

Supporting those affected by Past Adoption Practices is designed to inform and assist members of the community affected by past adoption practices, to increase community understanding about the effects of separation from a child by adoption and the effects of separation from family of origin and being adopted. It is also an essential resource for medical and mental health professionals to provide the background information needed to recognise, relate to and assist those individuals experiencing long term grief and trauma associated with past adoption practices.

Coleen Clare
Manager, VANISH

Language

VANISH Inc. wishes to acknowledge that the experience of separation from a child or family and of being adopted is unique for each person. We recognise the very sensitive nature of these experiences, and of the language used to describe them. At no time, is the language used in this booklet intended to cause offence.

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Past practices of adoption

Adoption¹ was officially legalised in Victoria in 1928; from 1928 to 1984 there were approximately 64,000² legal adoptions in Victoria. Adoptions during this period were ‘closed’, with the child’s original birth certificate being sealed, the birth re-registered and a new birth certificate issued showing the new name of the child and the names of the adoptive parents. This effectively hid the identities of the mother and the child and established the child’s adopted identity ‘as if’ born to the adoptive family.

The years covered in this booklet specifically relate to the period of the 1950s through to the late 1970s, although not strictly confined to this timeframe. Past adoption practices included forced adoptions where a child’s mother or parents were compelled to relinquish a child for adoption. During this period The Senate Community Affairs References Committee believed it to be “incontrovertible that forced adoption was common”.³ Mothers often experienced extreme emotional, psychological and physical pressure to have their child adopted which has “left many feeling they were the victims of a systematic approach to recruiting “undeserving mothers” for the service of deserving married couples”; separation was traumatic and “emotions such as grief, loss, shame and secrecy” surrounded their experiences.⁴

¹ Adoption is officially, the process of taking another person’s child into one’s family through legal means, changing the identity of the child and raising the child as one’s own with all the entailing responsibilities and duties.

² Family Information Networks and Discovery, Department of Human Services

³ Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2012). Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices, p 4.

⁴ Kenny P, Higgins D, Soloff C, & Sweid R, (2012). Past adoption experiences: National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices, Research Report No 21, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, p xiii.

Who is affected

There are sensitivities and complexities related to the language used when discussing past and forced adoptions. In this booklet:-

Mother refers to a mother who was separated from her child through past adoption practices. Mothers are frequently referred to using qualifying terms such as biological, birth, natural or relinquishing. These terms do not recognise that in the majority of cases mothers maintained a psychological relationship with and longing for their children. The same principle applies to **fathers** separated from a child through past adoption practices.



"The Last Goodbye, Perth, October 1945"

Individual who was adopted, adopted person or adoptee refers to a person who was adopted as a child and is now an adult.

Late discovery adoptee refers to an individual who does not find out they are adopted until adolescence or adulthood.

Adoptive parent refers to the mother and father who adopted and raised a child. In past adoption practices there was no acknowledgement that adoptive parenting is significantly more complex than biological parenting.

Extended family members

Australia wide, there were between 210,000 and 250,000 past legal adoptions⁵ which affected not only those directly involved but 'rippled' through to others in the adoption circle, including siblings, partners, members of extended families and subsequent generations.

⁵ Kenny P, Higgins D, Soloff C, & Sweid R (2012), op. cit. pp. 8-9.

Experiences and impacts of adoption

Two reports released recently, the *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices (2012)*⁶ and *Past adoption experiences: National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices (2012)*⁷, provide both an in-depth insight into people's experiences and representative data on the manipulation, mistreatment and malpractice involved in the removal of babies from (usually unmarried) mothers or couples. This included some of the following practices.

Mothers and fathers

- Pregnant, unmarried women were stigmatised as being irresponsible and unworthy of parenting, made to feel ashamed and told that if they loved their baby they would give them to a 'real' family, forget about their baby and get on with the rest of their life. Many were sent away or hidden away from their community. Some were sent to 'homes' owned and operated by religious organisations where the conditions were frequently harsh.
- Compared to married mothers, unmarried mothers were discriminated against; some were abused during the birth process, such as being shackled, drugged, or left without pain relief.
- Files of single mothers were marked 'baby for adoption' without the parents' knowledge and regardless of their intentions.
- Many mothers were denied information that could have altered their financial circumstances and their final decision about the adoption of their child.

⁶ Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee (2012), op. cit.

⁷ Kenny P, Higgins D, Soloff C & Sweid R, (2012), op. cit.

- Mothers were often not advised of their right to revoke consent within 30 days, or if they came back to get their baby they were told that he or she had already been adopted. As a result of these practices some mothers (and fathers) consider their child to have been abducted.
- Fathers were frequently stigmatised as irresponsible, and removed from the adoption process altogether to avoid the possible delay involved in gaining their consent. The father's name was often left off the original birth certificate in preference for 'unknown'.

Individuals who were adopted

- Babies were separated from their mothers immediately after birth, many were not allowed to see or hold their baby. Some were told their baby had died.
- Babies were adopted without a signed consent form, or consent was taken under duress or under influence of medication.
- Babies were removed from their mothers and placed in nurseries until adoptions were arranged. In some establishments they were not allowed to be cuddled or held even when feeding as it was believed this could compromise their attachment to the adoptive parents.
- Babies who were seen to have health or other problems were deemed not fit for adoption and remained in the child welfare system⁸.

⁸Approximately 21% were deemed unfit in Cole, C (2013), 'Stolen Babies - Broken Hearts: forced adoption in Australia 1881-1987', Volume 1, PhD thesis, University of Western Sydney, p 274, retrieved from <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/aja/article/viewFile/3181/3676>

Adoptive families

- Most babies who were adopted were raised in families with no genetic relative. Their connection to their family of origin, their ancestry and their culture was severed and deemed unimportant.
- Adoptive parents were not always carefully screened and some adopted children were subjected to physical or emotional abuse, or both.
- Adoptive parents were rarely provided education and support regarding the impact of separation and adoption.

In cases where adoptions were not considered to be forced, where the mother (and sometimes father) felt it was their choice to have their child adopted, their experiences often still involved shame and secrecy, hindering their ability to grieve this loss.

Long-term impacts of adoption

The practices described above caused significant and life-long pain, trauma, sorrow and grief associated with loss for mothers, fathers and individuals who were adopted.

“.....mothers do not forget their child. Most go on thinking about their child for the rest of their lives..... mothers yearn in particular to know about their child’s welfare – is their child alive and happy?”⁹



Many mothers reported that their child’s adoption was the most traumatic experience of their lives; some did not go on to have subsequent children. The silence surrounding closed adoption meant that mourning and grief was conducted in secret, or deeply buried and denied. Mothers affected are more likely to suffer from long-term health impacts compared to the rest of the population.

“The secrecy needed by society to cope with adoption imposes guilt, shame, worthlessness and loss of self-esteem on natural mothers, ultimately affecting their emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual health”.¹⁰

⁹ Adoption: Myth and Reality, Family Information Networks and Discovery Services (2009 updated 2013) Victoria p.10.

¹⁰ ARMS (Vic). Retrieved May 1, 2014 from <http://armsvic.org.au/about-relinquishment/>

The traumatic effects, for the baby due to the separation from his or her mother, were not understood. So while the infant's arrival into the new family was celebrated, his or her loss and grief remained invisible and unresolved.

Even individuals who were adopted into safe and loving families often experienced a void and felt that they 'didn't fit'. They struggled to see resemblances - someone who looked, walked or talked like them or shared their natural talents and traits, resulting, for many, in confusion about their identity and sense of self. Adoptees also report feelings of having been abandoned and rejected, resulting for many in fear of rejection, relationship difficulties, low self-worth, over-achievement and over-compliance. Some adopted people report that the secrecy and sense of shame continues into adulthood.

Those who discovered later in life are left with the sense that everything they thought to be true is now to be questioned.

“Late discovery adoptees may experience significant emotional damage as they find themselves contemplating a life that has been based on lies and deception, no matter how well intentioned their adoptive parents may have been in keeping the adoption a secret”.¹¹

Long-term impacts were also felt by other family members.

¹¹ Kenny P, Higgins D, Soloff C, & Sweid R, (2012), op. cit. xv.

What helps

Each individual affected by past adoption practices has different experiences and different needs.

Acknowledgement and validation

Past adoption practices and their impacts are not commonly known about or understood so for those affected, just being heard and believed is important. Having their personal accounts accepted and the lifelong impact of what happened acknowledged, can bring validation and with it the hope of greater understanding.

Self-education

Learning about other peoples' experiences through first-hand accounts¹² and research can be helpful. There are many books, articles, films, television shows, videos, websites and blogs that focus on a range of adoption-related topics.

Information and records

Finding out about family members separated by adoption and/or about the circumstances of the separation is very important to many of those affected. The first step is to apply for the adoption records¹³ that might reveal identifying information about a mother, a father (if named) and an adopted person. Adoption Information Services hold adoption records - see inside back cover.

¹² 'Separated' by ABC Open open.abc.net.au/projects/separated and the Forced Adoptions History Project by the National Archives of Australia forcedadoptions.naa.gov.au/

¹³ Adopted people have access to their adoption files (Victorian Adoption Act 1984) and thus to identifying information about mothers (and fathers if named). On 1 July 2013 an amendment to this Act allowed mothers (and fathers if named) access to identifying information about their son's/daughter's adoption.

Support for search and contact

Searching for, making contact with or being contacted by a relative, where this is possible, can be a complex and sensitive process. Reconnecting can bring joy and relief; however, it may bring further rejection and loss. It is an intensely emotional experience and can trigger trauma-related issues. The nature of contact and quality of relationships can have a significant bearing on the well-being of those involved. Sensitively delivered support and relevant information regarding specific issues that may arise can make a difference to how these issues impact upon individuals and their families.



Specialist counselling

A skilled counsellor can offer individuals an opportunity to connect with and explore their difficult feelings and find their own capacity for healing. Finding a counsellor who has the adoption sensitive skills, training and understanding and who can be trusted to validate grief and address the trauma experienced is of high importance to those affected.

A skilled and experienced counsellor can support them to work on underlying causes of physical, emotional and spiritual problems and to address separation, rejection, loss, trust, identity and self-esteem issues.

Support Groups

Many individuals affected by past and forced adoption practices find peer support groups helpful as these provide a space for honest discussion about their experiences, thoughts and feelings where they can be listened to with empathy and understanding. Hearing from others who have been through similar events can help an individual more fully understand their own experiences and feelings, and help them realise they are not alone. This is particularly valuable for those who have felt socially isolated. Some find support groups the most useful form of assistance.

Community Education - 'never again'

Many of those affected say public acknowledgement of the truth is important in helping them deal with their past experience and that public education would put an end to the secrecy and stigma and create greater awareness among their families and communities. Community education can also help increased understanding between family members who have been separated particularly in relation to the circumstances surrounding separation and adoption, and the lifelong impact. Another important factor for many is that their experiences be heard and learnt from so that history is not repeated. The term 'never again' was used in State and National Apologies¹⁴ to reflect these sentiments.

¹⁴ Victorian Parliamentary Apology for Past Adoption Practices 25 October 2012
National Parliamentary Apology for Forced Adoptions 21 March 2013

Adoption-related questions for allied health practitioners

In order to ask sensitive questions about past adoption experiences, it is important to have an understanding of adoption separation, loss and trauma and the extremely diverse range of individual experiences and circumstances and their life-long impact. It should be noted that individuals will not always self-disclose about adoption separation and loss.

The following questions are a guide only.

1. *Do you have an experience related to adoption? or Do you have an adoption experience that may have affected*
 - *your health?*
 - *your knowledge about your medical history?*
 - *your relationships with others?*
 - *how well and happy you feel, or don't feel?*
2. *If the answer is yes to any of the above, perhaps ask-*
 - *Was that experience as a mother/father who was separated from a child by adoption, as an adopted person, adoptive parent or as a family member?*
3. *Can you share with me more about what you have experienced? If needed, the following prompts may be useful*
 - *Do you feel a sense of loss or experience grief related to separation from your baby/your mother/your father/your sibling etc.?*
 - *Do you feel your experience might have had some impact on your relationships or your self-esteem?*
4. *Would you like the contact details for an organisation that works in the area of adoption that has support workers and counsellors who may advise you?*

Myths about past adoptions

Mothers and fathers were young and irresponsible

It was believed unmarried mothers and fathers could not care for their child; and that their youth, inexperience, lack of financial stability and lack of family support were used to promote and justify adoption. However, research indicates the opposite in the majority of cases.¹⁵

You can't mourn for someone you have never known

It was believed a baby was not affected by separation from the mother as it was thought there would be no memory. However, research¹⁶ has revealed that separation of mother and child was quite traumatic, and both mother and child grieve their loss. The loss may feel worse on birthdays and other family occasions.

Reunions resolve loss and grief once and for all

Often in the media, as in fiction, reunions end 'happily ever after'. However it is a myth that all reunions result in happy endings or resolve the trauma, loss and grief of separation.

Search and contact is the more accurate description of the experience often termed reunion. It refers to the process of obtaining information and records through to searching, exchanging details, communicating and even meeting. The term 'search and reunion' is often used in the literature but this does not reflect the reality that not all searches may be successful for a range of reasons, nor may contact end in a meeting or, in the longer term, a reunion.

¹⁵ Kenny P, Higgins D, Solof, C & Sweid R (2012), op cit. p169.

¹⁶ Verrier N (1993), *The Primal Wound: understanding the adopted child*, Gateway Press, Baltimore.

Other Australians separated from family

Aboriginal Australians

Indigenous people, also known as the Stolen Generations, were victims of past government child removal policies and practices. A National Apology for these practices was delivered to them in 2008.¹⁷ Link-up Victoria provides a range of support services.

Forgotten Australians

Some adopted people find they have siblings and/or parents who were placed into 'out of home care' as children; some were adopted after being 'in out of home care'. National and Victorian Parliamentary Apologies¹⁸ have been offered to Forgotten Australians and former Child Migrants¹⁹. Open Place provides a range of support services to Forgotten Australians.

Inter country adoptions

Children have been adopted internationally in Australia since the 1960s when 292 children arrived from Vietnam. Since then, it is estimated that approximately 3,500 inter-country adoptions have occurred in this country.

Assisted reproductive treatment

The number of Victorians conceived by donor-conception practices is unknown; some know of the circumstances of their conception however the majority are unaware of their status as the truth has been withheld from them. VARTA provides a support service to these people.

¹⁷ National Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, 13 February 2008.

Victorian Apology to Aboriginal people for the Past Policies.17 September 1997.

¹⁸ National Apology to Forgotten Australians & former Child Migrants 16 Nov. 2009.

Victorian Government Apology to Forgotten Australians 9 August 2006.

¹⁹The term 'Forgotten Australians', used to describe thousands who experienced institutional or 'out of home care' in the 20th century, came into use around the time of the first report of the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care in 2004.

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parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/documents/assembly/Apology.pdf

ADOPTION INFORMATION SERVICES

For Adoption Information Services (AIS) and records please contact the following:

Family Information Networks and Discovery (FIND)

Department of Human Services
Level 20, 570 Bourke Street,
Melbourne 3000

Tel: 1800 130 225 or 1300 769
926 or (03) 8606 5700

Email: findduty@dhs.vic.gov.au

Web: dhs.vic.gov.au

Anglicare Western Victoria

41 Somerville Rd, Yarraville 3013

Tel: (03) 9396 7400 or

1800 809 722

Web: anglicarevic.org.au

CatholicCare Victoria

3 Wingfield St, Footscray 3011

Tel: (03) 9689 3888

Email: adoptions@ccam.org.au

Web: ccam.org.au

Connections Victoria

274 High St, Windsor 3181

Tel: (03) 9521 5666

Email:

foreverfamily@connections.org.au

Web: connections.org.au

SUPPORT SERVICES

ARMS Inc

P O Box 645, Deepdene

VIC 3103

Tel: (03) 9769 0232

Email:

arms@armsvic.gov.au

Web: armsvic.org.au

Koorie Heritage Trust

295 King Street Melbourne
3000

Tel: (03) 8622 2600

Email:

info@kooriheritagetrust.com

Web:

kooriheritagetrust.com/

LINK-UP Victoria

34 Wurruk Ave, Preston
3072

Free call: 1800 687 662 or

Tel: (03) 9470 3666

Email: linkup@vacca.org

Web: linkupvictoria.org.au/

Intercountry Adoption Resources Network (ICARN)

P O Box 12238 A'Beckett
Street, Melbourne 3000

Tel: 0419 344 265

Email: icarn01@gmail.com

Web: icarn.com.au

Open Place,

Suite 1, 8 Bromham Place,
Richmond. 3121

Freecall: 1800 779 379 or

Tel: (03) 9421 6162

Email:

info@openplace.org.au

Web: openplace.org.au

Mackillop Family

**Heritage Services and
Information Service**

237 Cecil Street,
South Melbourne 3205

Tel: (03) 9699 9177

Web:

www.mackillop.org.au

Permanent Care and Adoptive Families

Level 5, 50 Market Street,
Melbourne. 3000

Tel: (03) 9020 1833

Email:

info@pcafamilies.org.au

Web: pcafamilies.org.au

Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority (VARTA)

Level 30, 570 Bourke
Street, Melbourne 3000

Tel: (03) 8601 5250

Email: varta@varta.org.au

Web: varta.org.au

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1300 826 474

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VANISH Inc. SUPPORT SERVICES

VANISH Inc provides a professional and confidential free search and support service to

- individuals born and/or adopted in Victoria
- individuals separated from a child by adoption in Victoria and a free support service for
- partners and family members of the above two categories

Support can be provided face to face (preferably by appointment), by email, or by telephone.

VANISH provides a range of services.

- Regular **support groups** for mothers, fathers, adopted persons and adoptive parents in Melbourne and various Victorian regional centres. A free Support Group Facilitators' Handbook is available www.vanish.org.au
- Limited **counselling** service for mothers, fathers and adopted persons engaged in search or in need of short-term counselling.
- **Professional training course**, *Looking through the 'lens of adoption' in working with loss and trauma* for GPs and mental health professionals.
- A free **Post Adoption Guide: how to search for adoption records and birth relatives** is available www.vanish.org.au to assist in conducting responsible searching, making an outreach and maintaining contact.
- An extensive collection of adoption-related books, articles and resources are available in the **VANISH library**.
- A search service via Agency Agreements to **Forgotten Australians** and **donor-conceived** persons.
- **Educational** material, presentations and advocacy on behalf of its membership and service users.

For further information about all services including professional training and support groups please contact VANISH on 03 9328 8611 or go to www.vanish.org.au

VANISH welcomes voluntary donations at any time to enable us to extend our services.

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