

ADOPTEE LEGAL RECORDS & REGISTRIES CHECKLIST

The non-DNA path — original records, registries, and the court process, working alongside your DNA research

Before you begin — quick glossary:

Original Birth Certificate (OBC) — the birth certificate issued at birth, before an adoption, listing the original birth parent(s). In many places this is sealed and replaced by an amended certificate naming the adoptive parents.

Non-identifying information — background details from an adoption file — such as birth parents' ages, physical description, medical history, or reason for placement — released without revealing names or contact details.

Mutual consent registry — a registry where both an adoptee and a birth relative can separately register their willingness to be identified; a match is only released if both sides have registered.

Confidential intermediary — a court-approved, neutral searcher — often used in states with sealed records — authorized to contact a birth relative on an adoptee's behalf and ask if they wish to connect.

DNA testing is one path to answers — official records and registries are the other. Most successful searches end up using both. This checklist covers the legal and documentary side, to run alongside your DNA research rather than instead of it.

Phase 1 — Gather what you already have or can request

- ☐ Request your non-identifying information from the placing adoption agency or state agency — *this is available in most places even when identifying records remain sealed, and often includes far more detail than people expect*
- ☐ Locate your amended birth certificate and any adoption decree you have access to — *these establish your legal record and are usually needed for any further request you make*
- ☐ Write down every name, date, and location fragment mentioned in any document you receive — *even a hospital name, a county, or an approximate date can become a key cross-reference point later*

Phase 2 — Understand the specific laws that apply to you

- ☐ Check your specific state's (or country's) current law on Original Birth Certificate access — *★ this varies enormously — some US states now allow adult adoptees full access to their OBC on request, others restrict it, and some require a court order. Search for your specific state's current law rather than assuming a general rule*
- ☐ If you were adopted internationally, identify the specific country's record-access process — *this differs completely from domestic US processes and often involves a different agency or central authority*
- ☐ Note that laws in this area change periodically — *a state that restricted access some years ago may have since opened it — always check the current law rather than relying on older information*

Phase 3 — Register with mutual consent registries

- ☐ Register with your state's mutual consent registry, if one exists — *check your specific state's vital records office or adoption authority for its official registry*
- ☐ Register with the International Soundex Reunion Registry (ISRR) — *a free, long-established mutual consent registry that works across state and country lines*
- ☐ Understand that these registries only work if the other party also registers — *a mutual consent registry is not a search tool by itself — it simply catches a match if both sides happen to sign up. Don't treat it as your only strategy*

Phase 4 — Pursue the court process, if applicable

- ☐ Determine whether your state requires a court petition to unseal identifying records — *this applies in some, not all, states — check your specific state's process before assuming you need one*
- ☐ Consider working with an attorney experienced in adoption records, if a petition is required
- ☐ Ask whether a confidential intermediary program is available in your state — *a state-appointed neutral searcher can contact a birth relative on your behalf in many states, without either side needing to reveal information until both agree to connect*

Phase 5 — Combine the legal path with DNA research

- ☐ Run this checklist alongside the Unknown Parentage Research Checklist — *DNA and legal/paper approaches complement each other strongly — a lead from one often confirms or narrows the other*
- ☐ Cross-reference any non-identifying information against DNA-derived candidate families — *a birth year, hospital, sibling mention, or stated occupation from your file can help you identify which DNA cluster or candidate family is the right one*
- ☐ Keep your legal-records findings and DNA findings in clearly separate, cross-referenced notes — *this makes it much easier to see where the two forms of evidence independently agree with each other, which is exactly the kind of confirmation you want*

Phase 6 — Pace yourself and use support

- ☐ Reach out to adoptee-specific support communities and search angels — *DNAAdoption.org and the "Search Squad" Facebook group both connect adoptees with experienced volunteer searchers, free of charge*
- ☐ Move through this process at whatever pace feels sustainable to you — *there is no deadline, and records that are sealed today are not necessarily sealed permanently — laws in this area continue to change*
- ☐ Revisit the NPE Research Checklist for the emotional-preparation and contact-planning steps — *Steps 2 and 6 of that checklist apply directly here as well, regardless of whether your search started with DNA or with records*

Pro tip: Non-identifying information — birth weight, parents' approximate ages, medical history, mentions of siblings — often unlocks far more than people expect. Request it even if you assume your full file is sealed, since it's usually available as a separate, less restricted release from the identifying record itself.

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