

# Genetic Genealogy for Adoptees, Foundlings, & Unknown Parentage Cases

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DNA testing has become hugely popular for people who have what is referred to as “unknown parentage” for one or both biological parents or in their ancestral line. Adoptees make up a large group of these individuals who turn to DNA testing to help uncover the identity of one or both biological parents.

Others in the group with unknown parentage include foundlings (individuals discovered abandoned as infants or young children), those raised by a single parent, those whose present biological parent will not reveal the identity of the other (most typically, the mother will not name the father), donor conceived persons, and NPEs (people who make a “not the parent expected” discovery). NPE is a term that evolved from its original term of non-paternal event and is also referred to as a misattributed parentage event.

Sometimes men and women affected by unknown parentage have some information about their potential parent(s), and some others know nothing at all about them. It all depends on their situation, access to documents, recounted stories from others, and previous work they have done to sift through available sources of information.

DNA testing can open wide the doors to these people’s pasts. They may find matches to people quickly, or it might take months. Their challenge is to determine how they are related to DNA matches who may be close family or distant cousins. This section will help you understand how it is done.

Genetic genealogy is quickly becoming a reliable way to identify and connect with biological family. The three tests useful for genetic genealogy purposes are autosomal DNA (which includes testing of the X chromosome), Y chromosome DNA, and mitochondrial DNA.

For most, autosomal DNA testing is the most important and helpful test of the three. Autosomal DNA (you may see this abbreviated in some places as atDNA) is the number one test on the market. This is the type of testing companies like 23andMe and AncestryDNA provide. With one DNA test, you can learn about your paternal and maternal families as well as your ethnic origins.

When searching for answers related to a genealogical brick wall you will be required to dig into documents or your DNA. If it is for an adoption or unknown parentage reason, it’s important to identify the motivating factors for your search. Knowing the underlying reasons will help determine the path ahead.

These might be the types of questions to ask yourself:

- Do I seek a better understanding of the circumstances around my adoption?
- Is it possible to locate (and build relationships with) relatives from my birth family?
- Is my primary goal to gather medical information, to better understand my health or that of my children?
- Do I have one burning question or many?
- How will I know if I’ve found my answer or finished my search?

This last question is perhaps the most important. It is worth putting some thought toward a specific goal or set of desired outcomes, with the understanding that the search might be long and arduous. For some people, no matter the outcome, the search for the truth is worth it, even if all the questions cannot be fully answered.



Even if someone in your life has explicitly asked you not to search, you may still opt to move forward. Think through how you might best explain to them your reasons for deciding to search, and how you will handle sharing information about what you discover. Sometimes searching leads people to new relationships that can disrupt family dynamics and friendships, either temporarily or for a long time. This is normal. Change can be painful for different people for different reasons. People and relationships can be resilient. Some who weather storms end up stronger afterward.

### **Genealogical logic puzzles**

Genealogists are like detectives. Working out puzzles and solving mysteries is their passion. Many joke about their addiction to family history research because it can consume a person's life. Late-night research sessions can leave you with a headache the next morning, or a few weeks later, when you come back to review what you discovered. This can be doubly frustrating if you did not take notes and have lost track of important information you came across along the way.

A paper notebook or a text document on your computer will work well to keep track of your discoveries. People who have experience using computer software often turn to spreadsheet programs like Excel or Google Sheets. Other people prefer spiral notebooks or binders. Whatever tool you use to keep track of your findings, it should be something that you are comfortable using, and lets you keep all your research notes, ideas, clues, thoughts, and other bits of information for later reference.

When taking notes, try to include the following types of information:

- Date(s) research was performed
- Books or print publication consulted
- Useful websites (Bookmark websites you frequently visit, then create a resource list showing what they contain and why it is helpful for your research.)
- What you found (Sometimes it's helpful to record what you did not find from each source, so you do not waste time returning to it again later.)
- DNA kit numbers and matches (Learn and use screenshots in case information later disappears if someone deletes their account.)
- Surname list/location list (Compile a list of potential family surnames and the locations associated with each one.)
- Correspondence log (Recording who you contacted, the information you sought, and what you obtained.)
- List of libraries, archives, courthouses, or other facilities containing important records (Record the addresses, hours of operation, and other pertinent information.)
- Abbreviations and other terms (Record government abbreviations, religious terms, and foreign words you come across during your research.)

### **DNA testing**

Starting in the early 2000s, online DNA testing services were first used by genealogists researching family origins, but quickly spread to people trying to connect with biological family separated by adoption. DNA testing provides a compelling alternative to the middlemen, bureaucrats, and other adoption gatekeepers who once controlled information about adoptees and birth families. DNA has also changed how, when, and with whom adoptees first connect to biological family. As you might expect from the title of this book, we cover this topic in detail in later sections.

DNA may not automatically connect you with a birth parents or siblings. A more typical scenario is to discover you match a long list of distant cousins, which you will then need to

research and communicate with to figure out how you might fit into their family. On the other hand, you may discover someone who is a close match, and your search wraps up quickly.

This involvement of more family has marked a major shift, removing a level of privacy once assumed for those most closely involved in adoptions and shifting the balance of power over the discovery of adoption-related information into the hands of individuals who have decided to order a DNA test. How relatives react to being contacted out of the blue varies from family to family and even within families. There is no guidebook for how to navigate the waters of DNA, but we are beginning to learn from the stories of others who have done it.

### **Other people who can help with a search**

There are other types of professionals who work with adoptees and birth family to help them make progress in their search for answers. Some professionals are paid for their time and expertise, while others volunteer their services. Many have highly-developed research skills for locating genealogy and adoption records. These specialized skills allow them to quickly navigate publicly available information, historical databases, and in some cases, DNA results.

A search angel is an experienced researcher who volunteers their time to individual cases. They enjoy working with adoptees, typically because they have been through a search for biological family themselves or on behalf of someone they know, and they want to share their skills to help others. Many search angels know the ins and outs of searching for information in specific states or countries. They also have personalities that help form bonds of trust and empathy as they guide others through the search process.



Genetic genealogists have become adept at using DNA information to piece together how individuals and their families are connected. Many are self-taught and do not have a formal scientific education. They may use information from DNA testing combined with genealogical research to construct a person's possible family tree. Often these trees work from an ancestor down to current-day, living family members. Those who do this work full-time often refer to themselves as professionals.

Since genetic genealogists working professionally and volunteers acting as search angels do not have a process for becoming degreed and certified, there is potential for more variability in the type of support, information, and services each can provide. You may reach a point in your search where you reach a dead end; locating one of these helpers may allow you to continue moving forward in your search.

There is growing support for adoptees who decide to search for more information about their origins. In addition to friends and family members, adoptees can connect with professional counselors, experienced searchers, and other adoptees who understand the emotional and practical challenges adoptees face when seeking to connect with biological family.

### **Creating a Spreadsheet**

This is only one of many different methods to track information, and you can use any system that you find works for you to track DNA matches, the amount of shared DNA, and other types of relevant information. Some people create a separate document to track results from each testing company while others put the information all into one place. Either is okay. Keeping information separate grows more important if you have many DNA accounts to keep track of. You can always adjust your system of organization to make it fit your needs as you gain more experience.

Information to consider recording (each in separate columns):

- Surname (last name) of person tested
- First name of person tested (or account user name)

- An abbreviation or personal ID you use for them (for example, initials)
- Their relationship to you (if known or suspected)
- Email address
- Testing company
- Date tested
- Shared DNA amount (percentage or cM)
- Maternal or paternal side match (if known)
- Additional notes

### **Tracking DNA Segments**

Another important piece of information to track on your DNA matches is the segments of DNA you have in common. These are called shared segments and are described by their location on a chromosome.

When you track a DNA segment in a spreadsheet, you typically will list the start and end points of a DNA segment. These numbers can be long (1 – 250,000,000) and many experienced users suggest that you round them to the millions. Segments are reported in units called Mbp, or megabase pairs. For example, 189,234,110 could be abbreviated as 189.2 Mbp.

As you begin to study the details about the DNA you share with a person in your match list, you will want to track that information. Below are the columns that you might add to your existing spreadsheet, to keep track of DNA sharing details:

- Maternal or paternal side (if known)
- Chromosome where you have a matching segment(s)
- Start point of shared region
- End point of shared region
- cM for segment
- DNA letters contained in the segment

These columns will make the numbers clearer as you work with the data. This is especially important if you identify segments which several of your matches share. These segments were most likely given to you by the same common ancestor, you just need to figure out who it was.

When you find regions where you and two other matches have segments in common, it can be a trail to lead you back in time to an ancestor you all have in common. The shared ancestor is referred to as your most recent common ancestor, shortened to MRCA. MRCA can refer to a single person (one grandparent) or a couple (grandparent set) that you and a person share. For example, 1st cousins share grandparents. Those grandparents are the cousins' MRCAs. Once you make a discovery of a MRCA, this can be added as a new piece of information in a new column as well.