

Submission for the Standing Senate Committee on Former Adoption Practices

A description of the impact and damage of these practices on the young women on whom they were perpetrated.

In the 1940's through to the early 80's, young, unmarried women who were pregnant were targeted by government agencies to feed the need for adoptive children.

- Many young pregnant girls were thrown out of home by their parents as having breached the moral codes of the time
- Many planned to keep their babies
- Some had plans for marriage to the fathers of their children
- However once they entered an unmarried mothers' home they had virtually no hope of keeping their children.

They were brainwashed—

- You are immoral
- You cannot provide for your child the way a married couple could
- There are married couples out there longing to give your child a good home and a good upbringing
- You would be selfish to keep your child when he/she could have a much better life without you
- Many were told they would have no hope of marriage and a normal life with an illegitimate baby
- They were told that adoption was the best option. That they should forget what had happened and go on to lead a normal life

Pregnant, they are stigmatized as immoral, and feel outcast and inferior and very very guilty

Then the birth occurred. There was the belief was that if the mother didn't see the baby she didn't bond with it, so she was often drugged, there

were pillows and sheets held up so she couldn't witness the birth. The baby was removed. She was drugged some more and medications given to dry up her breast milk. The report of many women was that they were placed in a ward with other women who are happily enjoying their new motherhood. They were not allowed access to their babies. This happened whether or not she had signed adoption papers already.

The mother was now both traumatized and powerless.

She was then sent home to parents who had thrown her out, or else she was left to her own devices. No-one would talk about the lost baby.

Now she was silenced.

Guilty, inferior, powerless, traumatized and silenced. These are the recipe for many mental illnesses and disorders. Substance use and abuse to avoid feelings, Mood Disorders such as Major Depressive Disorder, Anxiety Disorders such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Somatoform Disorders such as Somatization or Conversion Disorders where the body converts emotional distress into body dysfunction, Dissociative Disorders such as Depersonalization or a feeling of not being quite real—also a mechanism for avoiding feelings, Primary Insomnia, and disorders related to impulse control. These are all possible outcomes of trauma.

There has been no scientific study to state exactly how this impacts these women's lives. The Parliamentary Enquiry of 1998 notes that there is a high rate of suicide among women whose children had been forcibly removed. Many did not marry, many had no other children. There was seldom a normal life. From anecdotal evidence I would say these women continue to feel stigmatized, betrayed by their society and their families, misunderstood, and unheard.

In therapy, the loss of the child is seldom talked about early in therapy and as a therapist I found myself wondering what exactly was behind the emotional volatility or the severe depression I was witnessing. But why would the woman make the connection between her symptoms and the loss of her child? She was told to get over it. Corollary: if she couldn't just get over it and put it behind her there was something wrong with her. Not with the system that set her up, but with her. She was shamed.

Guilty, inferior, powerless, traumatized, silenced, and shamed because she couldn't just "put it all behind her." Any victim of trauma will testify that it is not something you "just get over". Trauma revisits a life over and over.

In this case, the woman, the mother, sees a child and wonder if it is her child; she felt the guilt of not knowing what her child looked like, what his name is, whether he is happy. The mother often fears that her child hates her for what she have done, or that the child feels hurt and rejected by having been “given up for adoption”. And worst of all is the terrible guilt of not being an adequate mother and the terrible grief of giving up the child. Without proper professional help there is no recovery.

What shows such “Find My Family” do is to reunite families such as these. But what they don’t do or work on is the long-term consequences of doing so.

A child meets his/her mother. One adoptee explained to me, “There was an instant connection, a biological link, but there was nothing else. We shared nothing else, no history, no social history. I needed to back right off at first.”

The mother is at last reunited with her child. She is full of hope, joy and excitement. At last she can be a mother to this child. But she is unprepared for what the child’s feeling might be: first there is joy and happiness, then anger, bitterness, recrimination, blame from the child. These children didn’t grow up in the era of repressive morality, so cannot see how their mother could have surrendered them.

It is a fortunate, but probably infrequent outcome if there is a happy ending to these reunions.

I hope this submission is helpful. It is based on empirical evidence, not scientific research; so from reading, from discussions with some mothers, discussion with Dr G Rickaby who worked for many years in Australia and Canada trying to help this group of women.

Thank you for reading this submission. Please contact me further if I can be of help.

Dr Denise A N Wallis MAPS, MCCP, Registered Senior Clinical Psychologist.