

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE ADOPTION OPTION?

By Roslyn Phillips

Some years ago, I read a newspaper report on adoption in South Australia. I was shocked.

In this state of more than 1.5 million people, only two South Australian babies had been adopted by couples who were not related to them.

There were quite a few adoptions of overseas children, and several "known" adoptions by step-parents – so why only two local babies?

But the next year was even worse. There was not a single "local adoption" in South Australia. Numbers in other states were a little higher, but still very low compared with a few decades ago.

At the same time, reports of domestic child abuse were soaring. Huge numbers of young children were being removed from their parents and living in out-of-home care because of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported nearly 50,000 Australian children were living in out-of-home care in 2017.

Many of them were living in

temporary placements with no stable home. Yet there were long waiting lists of loving, would-be parents for the very few local babies available for adoption – a growing, tragic discrepancy.

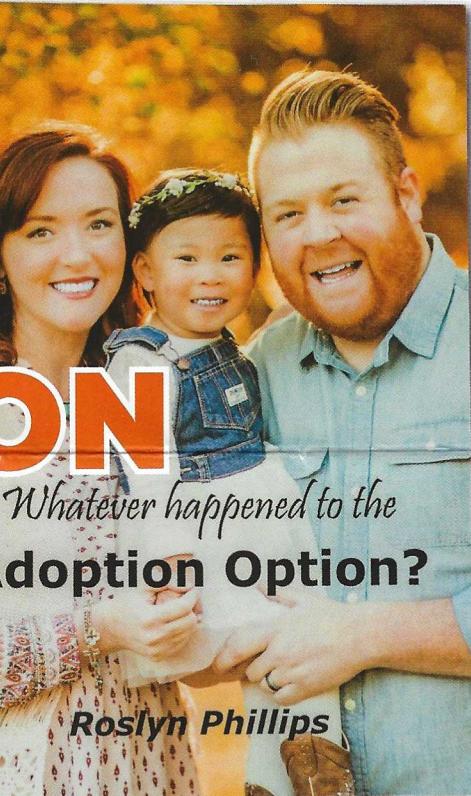
During my childhood I knew several children who had been adopted. All of them talked to me about their adoption and seemed happy, loved and well cared-for.

I thought, "Why can't at least some of the thousands of children in out-of-home care be placed with permanent loving families?" But it soon became clear that adoption is now a dirty word in Australian social welfare circles.

A friend told me about a social worker she overheard at a conference telling another: "I'm proud to say I've never lost a baby to adoption yet!"

I decided to investigate further. I emailed a list of contacts, seeking people who had experienced adoption – as an adoptee, adoptive parent or in some other way – to tell me their stories, whether happy or sad.

Many who responded, but not all,



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were Christian believers. I promised to share their stories without identifying them.

I also checked available research. I wanted answers to two key questions: "Is adoption – closed or open – as harmful as many social workers believe? How can we best help the thousands of children who are being removed from their homes every year?"

This paper, extracted from my book *Whatever Happened to the Adoption Option?* published in June 2025, tells these and other adoption stories – and suggests a way forward.

The book, available from FamilyVoice Australia, includes full references.

Steve Jobs, Apple Inc founder – the genius who nearly never was

Steve had a complex start to life.

His Muslim dad Abdulfattah and Catholic mum Joanne were both gifted students at the University of Wisconsin, and in mid-1954 Joanne discovered she was pregnant.

But her devout Catholic parents strongly disapproved of her relationship. She did not want to marry Abdulfattah while her father was alive. At the time, adoption was the only legal option for mothers unable to keep their child for any reason.

As her pregnancy became more obvious, Joanne crossed the country to stay with a kindly doctor in San Francisco. He cared for unwed mothers, delivered their babies and arranged adoptions. Her baby boy was born on 24 February 1955.

Joanne wanted the adoptive parents to be college-educated, but the couple she had chosen before her baby's birth – a lawyer and his wife – decided they wanted a girl. Eventually she agreed to allow Paul Jobs, a high school drop-out and his bookkeeper wife Clara, to adopt her baby. She insisted that they set up a savings account to pay for his college education.

Joanne's son grew up with his loving, but far from brilliant, adoptive parents, who named him Steve. He in turn loved them deeply.

They supported Steve through thick and thin, despite his many flaws. From Paul in particular, he learned many of the practical things that, along with his very high intelligence, later led to his amazing career as founder and CEO of the multinational computer technology company Apple Inc.

Paul and Clara told Steve early on that he was adopted. When he was six or seven he told a young neighbour, who suggested his real parents didn't want him.

He ran crying to his mum and dad, who assured him that they had specially chosen him. And while people who knew his mercurial character believe he felt abandoned by his birth parents, Steve himself strongly denied it.

"I've always felt special," he said. "My parents made me feel special." He would always insist that Paul and Clara Jobs were his "parents 1,000%". By contrast, he referred to Joanne and Abdulfattah as his "sperm and egg bank".

After Joanne's father died, she married Abdulfattah and they had a daughter. But after a few years, Abdulfattah

deserted his wife and child, who then led a very unsettled life. If Joanne had raised Steve, he would never have known the loving support and stability that Paul and Clara provided.

Much later, when Clara died, Steve reunited with his biological mum and sister. But he did not want to meet his biological father. He said he wanted to reassure Joanne that she had done a good thing in giving him up for adoption.

"I wanted to ... see if she was okay and to thank her, because I'm glad I didn't end up as an abortion," he said.

Which just about says it all.

Gold standard adoption research

Australian government social workers often oppose the adoption option, claiming it is harmful for both the child and the birth mother. However, quality research does not support this view.

Longitudinal studies, while expensive, are "gold standard" research. Dr David Fergusson was a world leader in this field.

He and his colleagues followed up 1265 babies born in Christchurch NZ in mid-1977 from infancy into childhood, adolescence and adulthood. This large, random, unbiased sample has provided ideal controls for any investigation.

Fergusson's Christchurch Health and Development Study has produced over 230 scientific papers, books and chapters on issues including breast vs bottle feeding, youth cannabis use and psychosis, and factors affecting youth suicide. The study has also investigated adoption and abortion.

The 2006 Christchurch Study on abortion and mental health found that women who had had at least one abortion were twice as likely as others to drink alcohol at dangerous levels and three times as likely to use illicit drugs. Nearly half had experienced major depression in the previous four years – twice as many as those who had never been pregnant and 35% more than those who had continued their pregnancies.

Separate analysis showed that the mental health problems followed the abortions – not the other way around. Dr Fergusson – who described himself as "pro-choice" – said he was surprised

by the results, but they were statistically strong. He said the link between abortion and mental ill-health had persisted despite adjustment for confounding factors.

The Christchurch Study's 1998 investigation of adoption found it had positive outcomes for the child. Dr Fergusson concluded that adoption is "a generally socially advantageous process in which children from relatively disadvantaged biological backgrounds entered relatively socially advantaged homes and families. In comparison to their peers who remained in single parent families, adoptees were an advantaged group in many areas of childhood and family functioning.

"Children placed for adoption are likely to enter generally good and caring family environments and ... such placements may mitigate, although perhaps not eliminate, the elevated risks of social and psychological problems in adolescence associated with children from high-risk biological family backgrounds."

Other research indicates that adoptees score better than their non-adopted peers in areas such as self-esteem. A 1994 study by Dr Peter L Benson et al of the US Search Institute investigated 715 families who adopted babies between 1974 and 1980 and who reached the ages of 12-18 by 1993.

The study involved 881 adopted adolescents, 1262 parents and 78 non-adopted siblings randomly selected from the records of 42 public and private adoption agencies in four US states. Participants completed extensive confidential survey instruments containing a wide variety of psychological and family measures.

The Benson study found that adopted teens were as deeply attached to their adoptive parents as their non-adopted siblings. Only 16% were not strongly attached to either parent. Only 11% of adopted children reported divorce or separation of their adoptive parents – compared with 28% of a national sample of adolescents.

Adoptive families typically achieved high levels of warmth, communication, discipline and cohesion – reflecting

greatly improved pre-adoption screening processes typically employed by adoption agencies post 1970.

Keli Lane

Keli is still in jail at the time of writing – serving 18 years for the presumed murder of her baby daughter Tegan in Sydney in 1996. Tegan's body was never found, and Keli has always denied killing her.

Most Australian adoptions were closed from the 1940s to the 1980s. A birth mother may not even have been allowed to see her baby, who was handed to the adoptive parents and given a new name and birth certificate. Some relinquishing mothers experienced ongoing grief over the loss of their child. Some others felt relieved that the shame of unmarried motherhood had gone, with all adoption details remaining confidential.

Keli Lane was in the latter group. She wanted to give her baby to a couple who would love and care for the child, but she did not want any contact – then or later. She wanted a completely closed adoption so she could get on with her life.

But by 1996, closed adoptions were no longer on offer. Media reports of deeply grieving relinquishing mothers meant that by the 1990s, adoptions were required to be open, with continuing contact between birth mother and child. Women with unwanted pregnancies had only three options:

- abortion – by then, effectively legal;
- keeping their babies, supported by the government allowance that had become available from the mid-1970s; or
- open adoption.

Most of those who rejected abortion chose to keep their babies. Very few were released for adoption, and most relinquishing mothers welcomed the open adoption system that allowed them to follow their child's progress.

But Keli Lane did not want any of the three options.

Keli had had four pregnancies before Tegan was born. She aborted two of them – and was so traumatised that she did not make that choice again.

She then had two more babies,

whom she relinquished to adoption – a daughter and later, a son. She experienced ongoing hassles from her social workers, who tried to force her to keep in contact with her children.

So when baby Tegan was born in 1996, she decided not to go down the adoption path.

But did that mean she chose instead to abandon or kill her baby (who was never found), as a jury would later decide?

Clearly, if Keli had been allowed to choose a closed adoption for her baby, she would never have been convicted of Tegan's murder.

Adoption today

Adoption is a service that provides a family for a child who is unable, for a range of reasons, to live with his or her birth parents. It is the legal process by which a person legally becomes a child of the adoptive parent and legally ceases to be a child of his or her existing parent(s).

Full parental rights and responsibilities are given to the adoptive family. This means the birth parents no longer have rights over the child, and cannot claim the child back.

The child becomes a full member of the adoptive family – taking their surname and assuming the same rights and privileges as if born to them, including the right of inheritance.

An Australian Institute of Family Studies fact sheet on adoption law history notes:

- Concerns about high levels of infant mortality and occasional reports of infanticide cases led to the first legislation on adoption in Australia being enacted in Western Australia in 1896, followed by other states from the 1920s.
- In the decades prior to the mid-1970s, it was common in Australia for babies of unwed mothers to be adopted. At its peak in 1971–72, there were almost 10,000 adoptions in Australia. Since then, rates of adoption have dropped massively.
- From the 1920s, Australian adoptions began to be “closed” – where an adopted child's original birth certificate is sealed forever and an amended birth certificate issued,

establishing the child's new identity and family relationship.

- Legislative changes in the 1960s tightened these secrecy provisions, ensuring that neither party saw each other's names. Birth mothers were sometimes wrongly pressured to relinquish their child, resulting in what was often called “forced adoption”.
- From the 1940s, adoption advocates saw it as desirable to relinquish the child as soon as possible, preferably straight after birth.
- From the 1970s, advocacy led to legislative reforms that overturned the blanket of secrecy surrounding adoption, though until further changes were made in the 1980s (or 1990s in some Australian jurisdictions), information on birth parents was not made available to adopted children or adults.
- Beginning with NSW in 1976, registers were established for both birth parents and adopted children who wished to make contact. In 1984, Victoria implemented legislation granting adopted persons over the age of 18 the right to access their birth certificate (subject to mandatory counselling). Similar changes followed in other states (e.g., NSW introduced the Adoption Information Act in 1990).
- These changes have largely eliminated complaints by birth mothers and their adopted children. But not everyone is happy.

Is there a right to know?

In the late 1990s, I met a young man who had been adopted as a baby in the 1970s. Under the new state adoption law, he now had access to his original birth certificate and non-identifying information about his biological mother, including her medical history. But he told me he remained very upset because his mother had placed a veto on actual contact.

“I have an absolute right to know my biological mother!” he told me.

“But what about your mother's rights?” I asked. “She may have a good reason for vetoing contact. What's more, when she gave you up for adoption, the

government promised her that details of your birth would remain completely confidential."

"That promise should never have been made," he insisted. "Every child has the right to know his parents!"

"Your mother did a wonderful thing for you," I said. "She could have had a legal abortion in the 1970s, but instead she chose to give you life. Surely that is a gift to be grateful for?"

But he considered his rights to be paramount once he was born.

"Would you really prefer to not be alive than not know your birth mother?" I asked. He had no answer to that.

Was he a child of rape that his mother wanted to forget? Was he the result of incest? Did she veto contact because she did not want to distress her new family, who did not know about his existence? There may have been significant reasons for lodging a veto.

I urged him to be patient. In time, some mothers change their minds.

Adoption miracle – Neil and Andrea

Neil and Andrea live in South Australia. They told their incredible adoption story outside the Adelaide Oval on 6 February 2021 – to an audience of more than 5000 who were about to set out on the annual Walk for Life to Parliament House and back.

In their state, there are about 2500 abortions for every baby released for adoption. It's one of the worst ratios in the developed world.

Andrea suffered from a rare condition that meant she would never be able to bear a child. But her doctors had held out one ray of hope – she could always adopt, because dozens of babies were released for adoption every year.

Little did they or she know that the legalisation of abortion in South Australia would soon drastically alter the adoption landscape. In 1969, when the law was passed, over 450 babies were released for adoption.

Just one year later, that number dropped to 39.

Andrea married Neil in 1987 and immediately placed their names on the adoption register. Seven years passed

– then, after their work called them interstate, they were told they would be struck off the SA adoption waiting list.

But they continued to pray – and were allowed to stay on the list.

Then came the biggest miracle.

On May 15 in 1998, they became parents to an adorable 10-month-old baby girl. She was one of only two babies released for adoption in South Australia that year.

Another 4576 unwanted babies were conceived in the same year, but didn't survive because of abortion.

In 2000, Andrea and Neil were incredibly blessed once again when a second daughter came into their lives. That year, she was the only baby released for adoption: 5326 didn't make it.

"Adoption of unwanted babies is sometimes the best option available to pregnant women," Andrea said. "We are eternally grateful to God that two special birth mums opted to give the gift of life to their babies and made the decision not to abort them. If they hadn't, our girls wouldn't be here with us today."

Alternatives to adoption

State governments have had to reconsider their adoption policies following huge increases in abused children in out-of-home care. Moving from foster home to foster home with no settled base has led to even more psychologically damaged youth.

Adoption in this situation requires the consent of birth parents, one or both of whom may decline to give it. Legal guardianship is being offered to would-be adoptive parents as an alternative for many children because it gives them greater stability.

Guardianship orders are made after a Children's Court decides that a child cannot live with their parents. Guardianship makes sure a child or young person has a stable, nurturing and safe home without cutting legal ties to their family.

A guardian has full care and responsibility for a child or young person until they turn 18. Guardians provide a safe, caring home and make decisions about health and education, and manage contact between a child or

young person and their parents, family and other important people in their lives.

If a child or young person is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or from a different cultural background from their guardian, they maintain connections with their culture and community through a cultural support plan.

Guardians receive an allowance to help provide for the child's needs, based on the individual situation.

Some states offer permanent foster care, where departmental approval is needed for important decisions like choice of schools and major medical treatment, rather than the guardianship model where the guardian is given more freedom.

Guardianship and permanent foster care do not offer the lifelong security of adoption, but they are far preferable to the instability of changing foster placements.



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This paper contains extracts from Roslyn Phillips' 2025 book, *Whatever Happened to the Adoption Option?* – published by Quoll Books.

The book covers many adoption issues and details, such as biblical teaching, how to go about applying to adopt, overseas adoptions, costs, and adoption stories. Copies are available by contacting FamilyVoice Australia, phone: 1300 365 965; email: office@familyvoice.org.au; website: familyvoice.org.au