Journeys to Permanency
Through Open Adoption Practice
Online Version

The online version of this practice guide can be accessed at www.facs.nsw.gov.au With the exception of the NSW Government and Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) crest and logo and where otherwise noted, all material presented in this document is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Australia licence.

Acknowledgements

The Department of Family and Community Services gratefully acknowledges the practitioners who so frankly and vividly shared their practice experiences with us. While this practice guide features only a small number of cases, we wish to acknowledge that there are thousands of frontline workers and managers across the child protection sector in NSW absolutely committed to the achievement of quality permanency-focused outcomes for children in out-of-home care (OOHC).

This guide has been careful to respect the privacy of all the children, young people and families involved in these cases. For this reason, all names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the people involved – including the caseworkers.
Minister’s Foreword

Open adoption is vastly different to the secrecy of past adoption practices. In an open adoption arrangement, children grow and develop through building meaningful relationships with adoptive families and birth families simultaneously. Open adoption offers children and young people the opportunity to understand their history and know their identity.

Under the Safe Home for Life reforms, open adoption is to be considered as an option if children or young people cannot be restored to their birth parents or live safely with kin. Research tells us that open adoption can improve outcomes for children in care. Open adoption represents one way in which felt security, safety and permanency can be achieved for these children.

NSW continues to lead the way in the field of adoption practice in Australia, and in strengthening the evidence base available to practitioners on the front line. Currently NSW has the highest rate of open adoptions from OOHC of any child protection jurisdiction in Australia. A recent Family and Community Services sector-wide survey of frontline practitioners delivered insights about the key drivers of open adoption practice. The voices of over 600 frontline practitioners like you were captured in this survey. You told us that you need more information and ‘real-life’ insights about the practice work in open adoption. We called for submissions from frontline NGO and FACS staff of practice stories where adoption was considered for a child in care.

The Journeys to permanency through open adoption practice publication features the stories submitted by dedicated practitioners like you. It highlights great casework which, while essential to progress in open adoption orders, also represents the high quality casework underpinning the achievement of safe and secure placements for children and young people.

I extend sincere thanks to all the practitioners who have shared their experiences in Journeys to permanency, where their practice experiences are shared to inspire those working on the child protection and out-of-home care front line in NSW.

Brad Hazzard
Minister for Family and Community Services
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing for the big day in court</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family tree</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding Dad</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucky break</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable calling</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La famiglia</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abby's Aunty</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing pieces</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This guide is a resource for frontline practitioners wanting to know more about the practical and intuitive skills needed to undertake the detailed casework which supports open adoption of children and young people from out-of-home care. The cases are also a great resource for managers and supervisors to use in discussing open adoption practice work with their teams.

Every child deserves a permanent, loving and stable home for life. Family and Community Services (FACS) is collaborating with its government and non-government partners to drive the NSW Government’s Safe Home for Life program to deliver this goal. The Safe Home for Life legislative reforms strengthened our focus on ensuring that all children grow up in safe and stable homes. The reforms included the introduction of permanency planning principles which encourage consideration of open adoption for children in care. Open adoption is being encouraged for all children who are unable to remain with their families or be placed with kin, because research indicates the outcomes for children in OOHC are improved significantly when they have a secure and stable home; and the earlier we can get this right for them, the better.
Pioneering casework

The stories within this resource demonstrate that the casework which underpins open adoption represents best practice in OOHC. When exploring adoption as a potential permanency option, finding family is a priority, contact between children and their families is promoted, and focus is placed on the importance of children developing and maintaining a sense of identity and connectedness. Open adoption casework ensures a connection between an adoptive and birth family is maintained for the best interests of the child or young person involved. In order to undertake inclusive and timely permanency planning, a range of tools is available to practitioners, including family finding resources and Family Group Conferencing. These tools are valuable resources to ensure thorough permanency planning which best meets children’s needs and timeframes.

The casework which underpins open adoption continues to develop and we are proud to highlight the wonderful work being done by the frontline workers who are pioneers in this space. This practice guide presents examples of great open adoption casework, presented and described by caseworkers themselves. Eight important facets of the adoption journey are highlighted. In each story, a frontline practitioner describes the role they have played in facilitating and guiding the unique and very personal journeys of adoption showcased here.

Identifying and locating birth parents.

The work showcased in ‘Finding Dad’ demonstrates the importance of identifying, locating and understanding the perspectives of birth fathers, not just because this is an underpinning for the legal progress of adoption, but most importantly because it benefits the children involved.

Carer assessments.

Good quality outcomes for children cannot be achieved without high quality assessment of carer families. ‘La famiglia’ documents how thorough assessment of carers is possible, even when the challenges of working closely with international agencies form part of this process.

Understanding the needs of, and meaningfully engaging with, birth family.

Appropriate language, along with the need to facilitate and help children understand and bring meaning to experiences of trauma, are the underpinnings of great casework in open adoption. In ‘Comfortable Calling’, one caseworker describes how slowly building trust with a reluctant birth dad led to some great outcomes for the children involved. ‘Abby’s Aunty’ recounts the story of one caseworker’s experience in rebuilding lost relationships between siblings, guided by the support and insights provided by a very caring and protective Aunty.
Life story work.

‘Lucky Break’ documents the unusual and sometimes fortuitous route that open adoption casework can take when there is little to no information about the birth parents. In this case, clever searching, with a few lucky breaks in-between, yielded detailed information about birth family history.

The importance of felt security and permanency for children.

The search for security and permanency does not end at eighteen. Perry’s journey in ‘Family Tree’ highlights how an open adoption arrangement helped a young adult transition to his independence and also helped him understand who he is.

Communicative openness.

The act of adoption creates new families. Openness in adoption is about so much more than the mutually agreed contact between adoptive families and birth families. Openness is the way we start and conduct conversations with our families. Openness is the way that birth parents and adoptive parents communicate with each other and about each other when they hold conversations with the children involved. Openness is an attitude.

In ‘Comfortable calling’, ‘Family tree’ and ‘Finding Dad’, three different caseworkers deliver insights into the way in which they engaged with birth and adoptive families to work collaboratively in the best interests of the children involved.

The requirements of Family Court and the Supreme Court.

Underpin every step of the open adoption journey. ‘Preparing for the big day in court’ highlights that, while court processes can be intimidating for everyone, there are ways that caseworkers can help support families through this challenging and emotional process.

Adoption and a sense of personal identity.

Missing pieces’ reveals the story of a Forgotten Australian and the unique and wonderfully supportive casework which helped one adult adoptee embark on his journey of adoption discovery.

Early planning and early fact finding.

Under the Child and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act (1998) and the Adoption Act (2000), practitioners have the scope to identify and explore adoption as a permanency option from the point where a child first enters care. ‘Comfortable Calling’ highlights that early consideration of adoption helps to achieve the permanency outcomes which represent the best interests of the children and young people involved, no matter what the permanency option might look like. Very detailed family finding and intensive support for the potential of restoration occurs early on in the casework process, working through all of the options from the very beginning of the placement will achieve the best result for the child or young person.
Preparing for the big day in court

Open adoption is a legal outcome. It is also a very personal event which can have significant emotional and psychological impacts on all of the people involved. This case demonstrates the importance of recognising the intimacy of an open adoption experience. As this caseworker explains, while adoption can represent a traumatic experience for birth parents, with great quality relationship-based casework, open adoption can become a more positive experience. In the following case, open adoption even unlocked opportunities for a birth mum to build a more positive relationship with her daughter moving forward.
How did you become involved in this case?

I started working with Jennifer in 2013. She had just turned fifteen. A contracted adoption assessor (CAA) had worked closely with both Jennifer’s carers and birth parents and had just completed the assessment report and submitted a set of recommendations regarding Jennifer’s possible adoption. As the regional adoption caseworker managing Jennifer’s case, it was my responsibility to help both families negotiate the next steps in this important and emotional process. As part of the finalisation stage, the Court Report and Adoption Plans required completion. All of the parties needed to be prepared for Jennifer’s ‘audience’ in the Supreme Court for finalisation for the granting of her adoption.

Jennifer lives with Linda and Kevin, who have been her carers since she was six years old. Linda and Kevin were keen for the adoption to move forward and waited eagerly to hear the CAA’s findings. Jennifer’s birth mother, Barbara, and her birth father, John, had also been very involved in the adoption assessment process.

The CAA’s assessment was thorough, taking approximately eighteen months to complete. The CAA’s findings would have important implications for Jennifer. The assessment process identified that some changes in the contact arrangements between Jennifer and her birth mother, Barbara, would be necessary moving forward. In separate interviews, Jennifer and Barbara had each identified they would like to more fully collaborate in the decision-making surrounding how visits should occur.

In addition, the assessment helped Jennifer explore how she and her birth father, John, might establish new ways of maintaining contact with each other. John did not permanently live in the town in which Jennifer lived, and he also undertook a lot of transient work. This posed a challenge for ongoing contact. John also reported to the CAA that, in the past, when he had contacted his local FACS Community Services Centre (CSC) and requested contact, this information had not always been passed onto Jennifer. John expressed his disappointment about this. Both John and Jennifer wanted more consistency in contact, and more flexibility and informality in the way contact occurred. The assessment process really helped Jennifer to learn more about her father and his circumstances, and helped her to identify ways of maintaining contact moving forward.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

In managing an adoption case, no single caseworker ever has full information. In this case, Jennifer had not had an allocated caseworker, so there were gaps in both the quantity and quality of evidence surrounding Jennifer’s adoption case. In addition, I am based in a regional area, so there were real geographical barriers to actually meeting
the people involved and managing the more sensitive and relationship-based parts of the finalisation and subsequently the ‘audience’ court preparation process.

I was not physically able to meet everyone before the case conference. But phone calls can play an incredibly powerful role in relationship building, and their importance in this process cannot be underestimated. I made sure to introduce myself to Linda, Kevin and Barbara by phone. John had relocated to another town and every effort to contact him was unsuccessful. Prior interviews with John were used to offer insights about the process of adoption and his feelings about the arrangements surrounding ongoing contact, moving forward. Jennifer and the CAA were also able to share John’s views at the meeting which at this point, represented the next best thing to having John physically in the room at the time.

In preparing for the Supreme court proceedings in Sydney, Jennifer said it was really important to her for Barbara, her birth mother, to attend her ‘audience’ in court alongside her adoptive parents, Linda and Kevin. As a practitioner supporting Jennifer’s adoption, this raised questions for me. During my time as a regional adoptions caseworker, I had heard many practitioners state that attendance of a birth mother at a child’s audience in the Supreme Court is not standard practice, and for many birth parents this experience can be re-traumatising. For adoptive parents, the day feels like a celebration, however for birth parents, the experience is typically associated with grief and loss.

What did you do?

While it was difficult to physically meet all the people associated with this case, I needed to get a better understanding of Jennifer’s relationship with all the people involved. I researched her case history. Paper files, when well maintained and well written, represent the best starting point when a practitioner is picking up a case which is already well progressed. Meetings with colleagues who have been closely involved in the case also yield so much information, intelligence and insight. Working closely with the CAA, in particular, helped to identify gaps in preparation for the finalisation stage of preparing court application documents and processes. Identifying these gaps was so important in completing final adoption plans with Jennifer, Barbara and John (her birth parents), and Linda and Kevin (her adoptive parents).

I met with the CAA before Jennifer’s case conference. In addition to finding out important aspects of Jennifer’s case history, more importantly I began to understand who Jennifer really is as a person. She is a young woman who is confident, friendly and has played an important role in shaping and influencing the relationships with her birth family and her carer family, and has also had an active role in managing and planning her own life.
When I first met all the important people in Jennifer’s life, I was nervous. This feeling however quickly turned to awe. The courage, love and support in the room at that first meeting was amazing. Linda, Jennifer’s prospective adoptive mother, began to share a story. That very same week had been eight years since Jennifer had joined her family and Linda shared some stories from an anniversary celebration that had been held for Jennifer. I waited, with some hesitation, to see how Barbara, Jennifer’s birth mother, might react. Would she feel emotional, upset, or even threatened by this news? Barbara and Linda did share tears, but they also comforted each other.

Barbara then shared that she would soon be married to her new partner, James. Barbara talked easily and happily about Jennifer being a bridesmaid at the event. Jennifer, in her distinctive and light hearted way, began talking about planning her mother’s outfit for the wedding. For me, this brought home the true meaning of communicative openness. I sat in wonder at this extraordinary group of people, and at this very extraordinary young woman.

As practitioners, we have a responsibility, wherever possible, to bring people together in the interests of the children involved. In that moment, I realised that the formal assessment process underpinning Jennifer’s adoption had actually strengthened everyone in her family. Her carer family and her birth family had essentially become one extended family.

Outside of the case meetings leading up to the impending Supreme Court date, I also needed to explore the issue of Barbara’s attendance at the Court further. I understood how important this step was for Jennifer, yet I also understood that this was not standard practice in adoption cases. As a first step, I spoke to key contacts in head office and my Senior Project Officer (SPO) to gather more detailed information. I advocated strongly, remembering how important this request was for Jennifer. I liaised with the CAA and also received advice about how everyone could attend court while still feeling emotionally safe and respected. There were lots of very open discussions with all of the professionals involved, and with Jennifer, Barbara, Linda and Kevin. An agreement was reached. We all went to court together!

What made you most proud of this case?

Jennifer has felt involved and informed about her adoption from the initial assessment processes right through to approval and finalisation of the adoption order.

Jennifer’s experience highlights how an adoption process can help young people make sense of previous trauma experiences and can help them reshape their relationships with birth parents in surprising and empowering ways.
After the adoption process was completed, Jennifer shared one of the many reasons she wanted to be adopted. She said she needed her birth mother, Barbara, to know and understand that she would never be coming home and this had been a difficult thing for her to fully communicate with Barbara in the past. Jennifer also wanted Barbara to know that her future would be better supported by having Linda and Kevin as her parents.

For me, as a practitioner, Jennifer’s case represents living proof that positive relationship building can occur between birth and adoptive families and that when this is achieved it truly represents the best interests of the child or young person involved.

Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case

- Positive relationship building
- Understanding of the legislation and what responsibilities and entitlements this provides to adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents
- Consultations with family members conducted sensitively and respectful of their wishes regarding contact
- Collaboration and team work

Designation of caseworker: Regional Adoption Caseworker, FACS
Family tree

Perry was almost eighteen when he was adopted. Teenagers face some unique challenges in the context of adoption. Adolescence is a time when we begin to understand who we really are. While adoption can offer a sense of felt security, it can also raise questions for teenagers.

In this story, Perry and his adoptive family have discovered ways of maintaining meaningful relationships with Perry’s birth family, and have positively memorialised members of Perry’s birth family who have passed away. All of this has happened in a manner that has helped Perry constructively deal with grief and loss.
How did you become involved in this case?

I assumed responsibility for case management of Perry’s case in 2010. Over the next four years I had the honour of watching Perry grow and mature into a more confident young man.

Perry’s birth parents, Rebecca and Wayne, each had long histories of drug abuse and addiction. Rebecca, addicted to opiates at the time of Perry’s birth, had already had two children removed in the early-to-mid 1990s. Perry, at birth, tested positive for opiates and was immediately assumed into care by the NSW Department of Family and Community Services in 1996.

Perry’s two half siblings were in the care of their maternal grandparents (Rebecca’s parents). After two short-term foster care placements, Perry joined his half siblings and went to live with his grandparents as well, under a twelve month Wardship Order. Rebecca also lived intermittently at her parents’ home and FACS worked closely with the family in the hope that Rebecca would be able to co-parent her children with the long-term support of her parents.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

Perry faced so many challenges at such an early point in his life. Unfortunately, Rebecca (Perry’s birth mother) and her parents did not get along, and a growing number of conflicts appeared to be occurring between the adults in the home. Rebecca was assessed by FACS staff at the time, and it was found that due to her continual drug use and unstable mental health, she would be unable to care for the children.

Perry continued living with his grandparents and his siblings until 2001. At this time, Perry’s grandparents indicated that they were unable to continue caring for Perry. Perry’s grandparents were getting older, and they believed they could no longer cope with the demands of caring for such a young child. Perry’s half siblings, who were older and more independent, remained in their grandparents’ care.

Perry was placed with carers, Robert and Marie, in August 2003. Final Orders placing Perry under the Parental Responsibility of the Minister until 18 years were made in the same year. About six months later, Robert and Marie approached Barnardos because they wanted to adopt Perry. At the time, Perry was seven years old and now looked at this placement as his ‘forever home’.

While Perry was very happy with his carers, he faced continuing challenges in understanding how to make sense of his relationship with his birth parents. Perry experienced significant anxiety, a legacy of his experiences of trauma.

Sadly, Perry’s birth mother Rebecca passed away from complications arising from drug abuse in 2006, when Perry was just ten years old.
What did you do?

I did all I could to support these families in engaging positively with each other. Robert and Marie (Perry’s carers) demonstrated a strong and positive approach to Perry’s birth family and really understood how important it was for him to feel a sense of belonging. Perry had a particularly strong relationship with his maternal grandmother, and Robert and Marie invited Perry’s grandmother over for family gatherings, and Perry continued to have evening dinners with his older half siblings and Grandma on a regular basis.

At the same time, the relationship with Perry’s birth father, Wayne, also began to grow and change.

In this case, the issue of adoption was complex for Perry. At review meetings, adoption was discussed openly and Wayne was not opposed to the idea. Perry was concerned that adoption would make his birth father feel that he had abandoned him.

Wayne really wanted a closer relationship with Perry. He also wanted Perry to know his extended family, particularly his Auntie (Wayne’s older sister). There were challenges however, as Wayne had been estranged from his sister for more than a decade. As caseworker, I played a role in helping to reconnect them all, in the hope this would help Perry achieve a fuller sense of his identity as he grew older. Robert and Marie were also extremely supportive of Perry during this time and helped him manage his anxiety about meeting new people. We took it slowly.

Over the next year, Wayne slowly rekindled his relationship with his sister, Perry’s Auntie, and over time, Perry began to develop a better understanding of his extended family. At this time, formal adoption became less important to Perry as he began to build a new and positive relationship with Wayne. Perry needed time to understand what this meant for him. It led to many family discussions. Robert and Marie spoke openly about the future and everyone seemed open to the idea that when Perry turned 18 he would live for a period of time with Wayne, but then also continue to live with Robert and Marie.

Just when it seemed Perry’s life had begun to stabilise, another tragedy occurred. Without warning, Wayne passed away from heart complications at around this time. Perry was just seventeen. After Wayne’s passing, Perry again began to feel very anxious about his future, as he moved towards his 18th birthday.

Perry needed to be heard. I listened. Lengthy conversations began between his carers, his grandmother and extended family. All parties wanted Perry to be happy with the decision of adoption and for it not to be a ‘knee-jerk’ response to the loss of his father. Perry needed time to come to his own decision about adoption, and whether it was what he really wanted. I did this by allowing him to talk openly about adoption and what it would mean in the future. I provided really clear information to Perry about the steps in the process, as both his birth
parents were deceased – he would be signing the documents for the court. We discussed how ‘His Honour’ would want to hear Perry state, in his own words, why he wished to be adopted.

Adoption was ultimately recommended to be in Perry’s best interests as it would provide him with a stronger sense of permanency, stability, and legal security beyond his 18th birthday and throughout adulthood. Both Robert and Marie spoke often to me about how Perry had enriched their lives, and the lives of their own biological children. They always envisaged that Perry would remain with them after he turned 18 whether he decided to be adopted or not. Robert and Marie’s biological children, who were all adults at the time, referred to Perry as their little brother. I spoke to each of them independently about what an adoption order meant and how Perry would share the same status legally within the family as they do. They were all pleased and wanted Perry to feel a real sense of belonging to their family.

What makes you proud of this case?

Parenting does not stop when a child turns 18 years of age, and Perry’s story demonstrates how important an open adoption process can be to a child in providing a sense of ongoing security, reassurance and permanence as they undertake the challenging road to adulthood.

As a case worker I continually looked at how Perry could remain tied to both his birth family and his adoptive family so that these connections could continue when an agency is no longer involved.

Perry has lost both of his birth parents. Robert and Marie have helped Perry, and been very supportive of him as he seeks to maintain a family connection to both sides of his birth family.

Perry was consulted in relation to his name change for the Adoption Order. He wanted to be known by two names - his mother’s surname and his adoptive parents’ surname. Perry has even taken the further step of removing his middle name, because he would like his name to not be too long!

Perry has also found a way to honour and remember the happy times he had with his Dad, Wayne. In early March 2014, Perry felt he was ready. Wayne did not want a funeral. Instead, Perry held a memorial service for his father at his home with Robert and Marie and the family. Wayne’s family were invited and members of Rebecca’s family also attended to help celebrate Wayne’s life. To honour his Dad, Perry wanted to plant a ‘family tree’. He chose the variety of tree that should shelter his father’s ashes – a small macadamia that will grow into a giant tree. He has positioned the tree in pride of place in the paved courtyard, just near the house, because this is where all the family gathers.
Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case

✔ Identifying the best interests of the child or young person
✔ Evidence of adoption being the best outcome for a child or young person
✔ Positive relationship building
✔ Exploring and helping to ensure ongoing sibling connections

| Senior Case Manager | Barnardos Find-a-Family |
Finding Dad

This case demonstrates the importance of identifying and locating birth fathers, wherever possible. This is important for all children involved and represents an important legal foundation necessary to permanency planning. When considering adoption, if both birth parents can be identified early on in an investigation this can help to progress an adoption more quickly because all parties involved have greater transparency about open adoption and the likely impacts for the child or young person involved.
How did you become involved in this case?

Lisa and Mandy are identical twins. They were 14 fourteen years old when I started working with them and their carers, Karen and Bob. Lisa and Mandy were placed with their carers soon after their births.

Adoption was identified as a case plan goal early on, but progress towards this goal had been slow because paternity could not be determined for the girls. Their birth mother, Emma, had faced long term mental health issues, and this had contributed to challenges in identifying Lisa and Mandy’s birth father.

The family were part way through the adoption assessment when I started working with them. When I first met Lisa and Mandy, I thought ‘Wow! These girls are doing so well – they’re good at everything! They’re good at every sport they play and they are blitzing it academically as well!’

The Contracted Adoptions Assessor (CAA) began working very closely with Emma, the twins’ mother, and slowly began building a trusting relationship with her. Emma told the CAA that she knew who the birth father was, but had never told anyone. She said that she would one day write down his name and give it to the CAA. After many meetings, Emma eventually did this, and also told the CAA that she had met the twins’ father, Don, in a mental health facility. Don was unaware of Emma’s pregnancy and of the birth of their twins.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

My work with Don represented such a central part of my work in this case. Lisa and Mandy needed to know more about their birth history. It was also important for me to identify and locate the twins’ birth father because the Supreme Court requires thorough evidence of birth parent searching.

In this case not only did I need to locate Don, I also needed to definitively establish paternity once I had located him. I then needed to sensitively establish contact between Lisa and Mandy and Don. At the same time, I needed to ensure that the adoption continued to progress for the girls because they so badly wanted this to occur.

When I located Don, I worked closely with his psychiatrist, who agreed to have a conversation with Don about potential paternity. The psychiatrist assisted me in arranging for DNA testing. Once paternity was confirmed, I met Don and his parents, at their home.

This first meeting was so important. I sought lots of information from them about their family for Lisa and Mandy’s life story books. They were keen to talk. It was a lovely, positive meeting, and the family coped so well despite the fact they were still shocked and overwhelmed with the knowledge that Don had twin daughters who were now 14 years old! I also made another huge discovery, which would have significant implications
for the girls. Lisa and Mandy also have a brother, Brad, who still lives with his father (Don).

At my first meeting with Don, he agreed to write a letter to the girls. Don’s parents (Lisa and Mandy’s grandparents) agreed to compile two family photo albums – one each for the girls.

Don and his parents were very respectful of Lisa and Mandy’s wishes with regard to contact. The twins were very unsure about meeting face to face with Don, stating initially that they did not want to meet their birth father at all.

**What did you do?**

The CAA and I decided that if the girls did not yet want to meet with Don, their carers should take the lead and meet with Don and his parents, as it is an adoptive parent responsibility to initiate and facilitate birth family contact. We were hoping that if the carers could have a positive meeting with the paternal birth family and connect with them, the girls would eventually want to meet them as well. Therefore, I initially arranged a meeting between the carers (Karen and Bob) and Don and his parents. I decided that this meeting should be held in a park near where Karen and Bob lived. I thought a neutral, outdoor meeting place would be the best venue for this type of meeting. A place where everyone could feel more relaxed. I thought it would be good to share a picnic morning tea while chatting. Don’s mother, Judy, made a cake for us all to share. She even provided tea and coffee as well! Everyone just talked, a little nervously at first, but it didn’t take long for everyone to warm up.

Karen and Bob brought a beautiful professional photo of Lisa and Mandy to give to Don. Karen explained that the photo was taken on a recent family holiday. Lisa and Mandy had given Karen permission to give this photo to Don, and at the same time, they agreed for the photo to be given to Emma, the twins’ birth mum. Karen and Bob and Don all looked at the photo and talked pretty openly about it. Karen asked Don if he could tell the twins apart. Don immediately said he could because their foreheads were slightly different. Karen expressed her surprise by very positively saying ‘That’s exactly the same facial feature I use to tell the girls apart. I’ve never met anyone else who is able to do this’. Somehow, the openness of this exchange between Don and Karen changed the entire direction of the conversation. From that point forward, everyone seemed to relax. The ice had been broken, and everyone seemed to be talking more openly.

The initial meeting was extremely positive and everyone was really pleased. Karen and Bob continued to stay in regular contact with Don and his parents, with the support of both the CAA and myself. I talked with Lisa and Mandy about meeting with Don, and I gave them as much information as
possible about Don and his parents so they could make an informed decision about contact. At this stage, I really wanted them to meet Don and his family, but I could not let my biases show when discussing this issue with the girls. Lisa and Mandy needed support. I needed to allow them time to come to their own decisions about if, how and when they wanted to meet Don face to face.

In April 2014 Lisa and Mandy first met Don and his parents. At this meeting, Lisa and Mandy presented Don with an album of photographs and information about them, which they had prepared. Shortly after this meeting, in the same month, Lisa and Mandy also got to meet their half brother, Brad. Brad is less than a year younger than them, and has lived with Don his whole life.

Lisa, Mandy and their carers have met with Don and his family many times since and they have enjoyed lots of beautiful and natural contact visits. Phone calls have continued and, at times, Lisa and Mandy can spend an hour on the phone chatting to Don. The relationship between them all continues to blossom. Don agrees with the case plan goal of adoption as he has the insight to know that it is in the girls’ best interests.

What makes you proud of this case?

It was important to undertake my very best practice when establishing the relationships between the parties, as the news of paternity was a shock and was overwhelming for everyone involved, including the carers.

The practice principle of taking time to develop relationships slowly was important. Listening to the views of the young people involved, and pacing the establishment of paternal family contact according to their needs and wishes was so important. It was difficult to balance the needs and wishes of the girls - who were more hesitant - with those of a very enthusiastic paternal grandmother! In all of this, it was also important to support the carers in continuing to build their relationships with Don and his family. I feel that if the girls had been rushed or forced to meet their birth father Don, and his family, their relationships would not be as positive as they are today.

If it were not for the adoption process, I doubt that paternity would have ever been confirmed for Lisa and Mandy, and Don. The Adoption application is currently filed in the Supreme Court. Lisa and Mandy signed their own adoption consent in 2012.
### Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case

- ✔ Identifying the best interests of the child or young person
- ✔ Evidence of adoption being the best outcome for a child or young person
- ✔ Positive relationship building
- ✔ Consultations with family members conducted sensitively and respectful of their wishes regarding contact
- ✔ Focus on reconnecting and maintaining sibling connections

| Designation of caseworker | Regional Adoption Caseworker, FACS |
Lucky break

Life story work is an overarching term used by frontline practitioners to describe a range of activities associated with the gathering and meaningful recording of information about a child’s life. Life story work is an important part of an adoption process, because it provides children with a more complete picture of their lives before, during and after their adoption. The best life story work is achieved by maintaining a strong connection with birth families because first-hand stories can be shared across the lifespan of the child. In the following story, some great collaborative casework, and a lucky break in-between, helped build a complete picture of one little boy’s birth family history.
How did you become involved in this case?

I am a regional adoptions caseworker and I became directly involved in Nelson’s story in 2014. Nelson was surrendered to FACS in 2003. At the time he entered OOHC he was estimated by caseworkers to be approximately two years of age, however his exact age, his name, birth date and ethnicity were not known. From the limited information provided to the caseworker at the time, the little boy was identified to be from a Chinese family. The little boy was placed with carers, Iris and Edgar, who were providing long term OOHC for another child, Johnnie. Iris is Anglo-Australian and Edgar is Singaporean Chinese. Johnnie’s birth family is Korean.

The little boy was named ‘Nelson’ by his first caseworker. Nelson’s middle name, Timothy, was given to him by the Magistrate who made the final order assigning parental responsibility to Iris and Edgar (his carers). Only one person – Andy Chong - had ever been identified as a possible birth relative. While Andy had always denied paternity, he was the only person who had ever cared for Nelson prior to him entering OOHC.

Nelson Timothy Chong was adored by his carers, but he struggled with attachment and abandonment issues as he grew. Johnnie, who was also being cared for by Iris and Edgar, did not get along with Nelson. The boys fought often, and this appeared to be escalating as they got older.

Although it had been far from easy, Iris and Edgar continued to work very hard to build a safe and loving home for the boys they considered their sons. Over the next five years the boys settled in very well, and in 2009, when Johnnie was aged ten, and Nelson was aged eight, Iris and Edgar commenced the adoption process for both boys.

The Contracted Adoption Assessor (CAA) undertook a thorough analysis of Nelson’s history and considered the trauma associated with his early abandonment. The CAA identified that Nelson needed better life story work in order for him to understand his history as he grew older. This finding was corroborated by a counsellor who had been providing ongoing care and support for Nelson. The counsellor too recommended that Nelson needed life story work and more genuine information about his birth family.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

Locating and verifying bona fide information about Nelson represented a big challenge. As Regional Adoptions Caseworker I reviewed all of the information (over a decade of casework files) available on Nelson and developed a timeline of his life. I identified all of the gaps and conflicting information that existed across this timeline. I worked closely with both the Manager of the CSC, and the caseworker assigned primary responsibility for this case.
Over the years, search action had been exhausted at several points because of the challenges associated with locating any information on Nelson. As a team, we revisited and reassessed every one of these decisions to ensure that no vital information had been overlooked. Given how little we had to go on, we knew that our efforts represented the best hope that Nelson had of discovering more about his birth history.

FACS staff searched for and once more located the only known person who had any prior connection to Nelson – Andy Chong. Re-interviewing Andy after almost 10 years was not easy, but the caseworkers calmly persisted. Andy was initially angry, stating that he could not understand why he had been contacted when he was not Nelson’s father. Andy offered conflicting information, and provided some information which was truthful and some which was less than truthful.

Andy stated that he had cared for Nelson for a short period when his mother had abandoned him (at approximately eight months old). Although Andy was confirmed (by a paternity test) not to be Nelson’s birth father, the interviews with Andy yielded lots of important information. Although he was reluctant to speak to FACS staff at first, and was angry that he had been contacted, FACS caseworkers patiently communicated how important it was to find out more about Nelson’s history.

Andy revealed that had shared an apartment with Nelson’s mother for a short period of time, and he believed he knew Nelson’s birth father. He suspected that Nelson’s mother had gone to great lengths to keep the pregnancy secret because Nelson’s father was married and had another family. Andy was also able to provide more information about Nelson’s birth – including his real birth date and the name his mother had given him at birth. Andy believed that Nelson’s birth name was Charlie.

What did you do?

We now had a possible date of birth for Nelson, but we needed to verify this carefully. We decided to use a different approach. Rather than sending off a 16A request for information to the Department of Health, we knew that without more concrete details, the chances of finding any record of a ‘Charlie’ born on the date we were working were slim indeed! We also had no way of knowing if Andy had been completely truthful in his account, or if his memory was reliable.

We used an alternative search approach. We reached out directly and more personally to a medico-legal officer in the Department of Health. We explained Nelson’s story. The officer agreed to help search all of the hospital

---

1. A Chapter 16A allows information to be exchanged between prescribed bodies despite other laws that prohibit or restrict the disclosure of personal information, such as the Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998, the Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002 and the Commonwealth Privacy Act 1988.
records for the major hospitals in the area where Nelson’s mother had been living while sharing a house with Andy Chong. We used relevant search criteria to narrow the search including ethnicity of child and birth date. We found a match!

A Chinese-Malaysian child had been born on the date identified, and had been named ‘Charlie Po’. Official records also indicated that Charlie had received immunisations up to six months of age. This proved to be an important detail. No health or education (school enrolment) details could be located for a Charlie Po anywhere in NSW after these dates. This checking process also allowed us to confirm that Charlie was not deceased and that he had never applied for a passport and had never left the country. This information was consistent with what we knew about Nelson. He had been briefly cared for by Andy, but had then been surrendered into OOHC after this time.

We obtained Charlie Po’s birth records in full. But again, we faced a hurdle. Hospital records were inconsistent and identified two different people to be Charlie’s birth mother. At this point, we had no way of knowing if this was because of an administrative error at the hospital or because Charlie’s mother had used aliases. We also now had a possible name for Nelson (Charlie’s) birth father.

We began the careful work of discreetly but determinedly searching for Ms A, the woman identified in official documentation held by the hospital to be Nelson’s birth mother. We wrote a de-identified outreach letter, we made phone calls, we attended her last known address. We found her and after a lot of conversations, Ms A eventually agreed to undergo a maternity test. The test confirmed that Ms A was not Nelson’s birth mother. While this may have seemed a dead end in our investigation, Ms A also had connections to the Chinese Malaysian community. Ms A volunteered information about a woman who she believed might be Nelson’s (Charlie Po’s) birth mother. Just when we thought the investigation had ground to a halt, we found another viable lead!

In yet another strange twist in this case, Iris (Nelson’s carer) broke her arm after falling off a ladder at home. An ambulance was called and Iris was rushed to hospital. As part of the paramedic’s assessment, Iris was required to give a small blood sample. The paramedic explained to Iris that the test is routine, and just like the ‘Guthrie test’ or ‘heel prick test’ that is administered to every new baby born in a NSW hospital. Little did we know at the time, but Iris’s conversation with the paramedic would lead to a huge discovery for Nelson.

Iris contacted us immediately and suggested it might be possible that the original blood sample, taken from Nelson when he was born, may still be held somewhere in hospital records. We
contacted the Department of Health and they confirmed there was indeed a blood sample stored under the name ‘Charlie Po’. Although we would still need to locate a highly specialised laboratory capable of running a DNA test, and we would need to ensure the appropriate consent forms were signed to release the sample, DNA material could be extracted. If Nelson could provide a current blood sample, we could have the DNA compared.

The DNA matched! It has been a 14 year journey, but Nelson finally knows for sure when and where he was born. Although so many details about his life still remain unknown, he knows that his mother named him Charlie Po, and that he is Chinese-Malaysian.

At this stage, the search for Nelson’s birth mother and birth father continues.

**What makes you proud of this case?**

Formally progressing Nelson’s adoption has remained the important end goal in this case throughout. However, time was also devoted to investigating and undertaking life story work so that we could build a more comprehensive picture of Nelson’s life. At certain points, when needing to verify critically important information such as paternity and maternity, this can mean putting a hold on the administrative work which progresses adoption. Thorough life story work means that caseworkers need to devote time to gathering information, and following through on leads as they come to hand. Making sure that carers understand this vital work is also part of the casework which underpins open adoption. Throughout this entire process, we discussed these issues with Iris and this helped her to recognise the value of thorough and meaningful life story work and to understand more fully why it is in Nelson’s best interests.

Great interagency collaboration was also important in this case. We picked up the phone and we had real conversations with agency partners (for example, the Department of Health). This helped to build networks. Our agency partners could see we were advocating on behalf of Nelson and they were keen to help.

We formed an important collaborative partnership of which we are all so proud - the caseworker, the Regional Adoption Caseworker and the carer. One person could not have done this alone. Iris’s involvement in this case has been so important. We even joke now that Iris was meant to break her arm, because it was the luckiest break we had in this case!
Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case

- ✔ Identifying the best interests of the child or young person
- ✔ Collaborative team work, including the expertise of health care staff
- ✔ Searching and investigating birth family
- ✔ Building a comprehensive and bona fide life story narrative

| Designation of caseworker | Regional Adoption Caseworker, FACS |
Comfortable calling

In undertaking casework to progress open adoption, caseworkers need to be able to communicate openly with all of the family members involved. This means building a sense of trust with birth parents who may themselves be survivors of profound trauma. This story highlights how one caseworker engaged with a volatile birth dad, in order to explore whether any kind of relationship with his three children might be possible. This story also highlights how adoption can be considered as one of the permanency options to be considered for children in care at a very early point in the casework process.
How did you become involved in this case?

When I first met Fred, William and Carol in 2009, they were adorable, delightful little toddlers. Fred was four years of age, William was two, and Carol was just a year old. Their birth mother, Sally, had struggled to care for the children. Peter, their birth father, misused alcohol. He also had an intimidating criminal history, and an extensive history of family violence. Fred and William had been removed very early in their lives, and Carol was removed from Sally’s care at birth. There were no other relatives in a position to care for the children.

Jenny and Geoff cared for all three children and they impressed as highly skilled and committed carers throughout the entire process of placement. From the outset, Jenny and Geoff participated in concurrent planning processes, working towards, and supportive of, a possible restoration between Sally and the children, while also indicating their willingness to be considered as adoptive carers should the need arise. Though we worked hard to support Sally in meeting the minimum outcomes of the care plan, ultimately Sally could not meet these needs, and the process for restoration was halted. Adoption was identified as a possible case plan goal for Fred, William and Carol if they could not be restored to Sally. There was collaborative case planning between the Child Protection and OOHC teams which ensured good decisions were being made for all the children.

Jenny and Geoff realised the importance of ongoing contact with Sally, and the value of maintaining and celebrating the children’s connection to Sally’s Maori heritage. I remember Jenny and Geoff cooking traditional Maori foods and having a ‘hangi’ in their back yard. When the children were ready, they planned on taking them on a family holiday to New Zealand.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

My biggest challenge was to meet with Peter, the children’s birth father. I knew I had to gain his trust so that he would work with me. In the long term, if I could facilitate a relationship, he would be able to have some kind of ongoing contact, and I knew this would be important for Fred, William and Carol, particularly as they got older.

There was no realistic possibility of restoration to Peter. He had a long history of violence toward others, including his own elderly parents. When I first began working with Peter, his bail and AVO conditions meant he could not be within five kilometres of the town in which his mother resided.

On looking more closely into Peter’s own family history, more details emerged about his life which helped me to gain a deeper understanding of his situation and the challenges that might lie ahead. Peter had his own adoption story. He had experienced closed adoption, and this had a huge impact on him. He was told of his adoptive experience when he
was already well into adulthood. Peter never had the opportunity to meet his birth mother because by the time he discovered her identity and searched for her, she was already deceased. To this day, Peter has very little information about his own birth family.

**What did you do?**

I knew that I needed to build a relationship with Peter. But Peter was angry with community services, and held a deep mistrust of any FACS staff. His violence toward others also continued.

In the beginning, Peter was really difficult to work with. The best way to describe it, I would say he was ‘stuck’ in the child protection phase. He challenged everything that was written about him by community services in the Care Plan. For a long time, he could not move past this point. But I just listened. I knew on some level, he wanted to and was trying to engage. We continued to talk on the phone, and to try and arrange meetings when we could.

It took lots of discussions for Peter to work through his anger towards FACS, but he got there. He even began to see some things from a FACS point of view. He began to accept and acknowledge some of the reasons why his children were in care. He also came to the realisation that, given his circumstances, adoption represented the best outcome for his children.

I remember one day I met with Peter in a community service centre. It felt like an important day to me because I knew, realistically, this might represent the only opportunity to gain as much social and medical information about him and his family as possible. Peter was itinerant, and he continued to serve periods in and out of gaol.

Peter provided me with so much information about his life and he was so open. I was able to prepare and complete lovely life story letters for the children to have and to read as they grow older. A short time prior to our meeting, Peter prepared a CD full of photos of his three children. These photos were so important for the children’s life story work. He included photos on the disk of the children’s births, his family and extended family. I still remember what a beautiful and valuable collection of photos they turned out to be.

Although Peter has only had one face to face contact visit with his children (in 2010) since their adoption, he continues to contact me regarding the progress of Fred, William and Carol. I know that he has a strong love for his children, but contact for him is just too painful. Peter even occasionally sends me gifts for me to forward to them.

Permanency placement practice principles informed the way I worked and concurrent planning worked very well. The practice principle of engagement with birth parents was essential. The birth mother, Sally, engaged easily and was supportive of adoption action. In working with Peter, I needed to draw on different skills. While Peter eventually
reached a point where he could see that adoption action was in the best interests of Fred, William and Carol, it was difficult for him to support this goal because of his own painful history of closed adoption.

*What makes you proud of this case?*

Fred, William and Carol were adopted by their very caring adoptive parents, Jenny and Geoff. Open adoption offers these children a stronger sense of belonging and a sense of security. If anything should ever happen to one of their adoptive parents, they know they will stay with their adoptive family and extended adoptive family forever. I am proud of the fact that Fred, William and Carol will be able to have a thorough understanding of why they are in care and about who is in their birth family. I know I have done all I can to ensure these children have been provided with the best life story work possible.

I think it is very important to establish good relationships with birth parents, carers and each of the children or young people involved. I prepared all of the parties well, from the time of their very first meetings. In my experience this helps the relationships develop in a positive manner. If this is not done very well in the beginning it can be difficult to get the parties involved to share information, exchange phone numbers, and negotiate even simple things like arranging meeting times and places down the track. Without a good start, relationships between the parties easily become strained.

I ask myself this question each time I undertake a case: have I done all I can to make sure that the birth parents, adoptive parents or children will feel comfortable calling me at any time? At any time during the adoption or post adoption process, do they feel free to ask me any questions? If I can answer yes, I know I’ve done a good job.
**Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case**

- ✔ Identifying the best interests of the child or young person
- ✔ Evidence of adoption being the best outcome for a child or young person
- ✔ Positive relationship building
- ✔ Providing support to birth parents

| Designation of caseworker | Regional Adoption Caseworker, FACS |
La famiglia

Undertaking high-quality casework to support and progress open adoption can help to provide better permanency outcomes for the children involved. This case demonstrates that even if a final adoption order is not the ultimate outcome, open adoption casework can help to find new family members and rebuild family connections which were previously lost.
How did you become involved in this case?

When I took this case over, Gina and Antonia had already had six different foster care placements since losing both birth parents. These two young sisters were only two and three years of age. I knew we needed to achieve permanency and stability for these beautiful children, but their family situation was complex.

When I initially assumed responsibility for this case, Gina and Antonia were residing with their paternal uncle, Joe, who had arrived from Italy and wanted to take his nieces back to Italy to live with him and their extended family. Gina and Antonia had already faced so much in their lives, as prior to the death of their parents they had been removed from their care due to domestic violence, neglect, drug abuse and profound mental health challenges.

I found this case deeply touching. I recall one day, standing on the balcony with Gina, who was only two years old at the time. I had only known her for a month, and already it felt like a lifetime. Uncle Joe’s house had views of the ocean. I remember this day so clearly. I stood staring at the ocean with Gina in my arms. Her back resting against my stomach, so we both faced the water. There was a strong ocean breeze that day, and it was blowing our hair back off our faces. We stood staring at that ocean. Neither of us moved an inch, or made a sound. All I could think of at the time was ‘I wonder, if you go back to Italy, will you ever see this ocean again - and if you do, will you be okay?’.

Uncle Joe had no children of his own and little experience with children. This meant that in assuming parental responsibility for Gina and Antonia, Uncle Joe faced many challenges. He had become an overnight parent to children he had never met, while also grieving the death of his brother. Uncle Joe also had very limited English, but he was doing his very best to adjust to life in Australia as quickly as possible for the sake of his young nieces.

A team of workers, comprising FACS staff and external agency workers, collaborated to support Uncle Joe as much as possible. We secured accommodation suitable for raising a family, conducted weekly home visits, used interpreters extensively, and arranged child care for Gina and Antonia. We also sourced additional support. For Joe, this took the form of drop-in support from an external agency worker, who could help Joe continue to meet the challenge of parenting his young nieces. For Gina and Antonia, we provided additional age-appropriate support in the form of play counselling.

We made arrangements for thorough assessments of the extended family in Italy, through use of an Australian-based international assessment agency. We relied on the Italian equivalent of community services. We awaited the outcome of these assessments, and if they identified Uncle Joe to be the most suitable carer, we knew we would then
have to take the matter to court, and Parental Responsibility (PR) would need to be given to the uncle. We would also then have to have the Orders registered in Italy. While these international assessment and court processes may at times have seemed painfully slow, we also perceived this as an opportunity to monitor the sisters and the relationship they were forming with Uncle Joe.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

After less than a month of their placement, the environment for the girls seemed to change, and things seemed to unravel for Uncle Joe. When I made my usual visits Gina would hold her arms out to be picked up, the minute I walked in the door. She screamed and cried. She hugged me tighter when I tried to put her down. Antonia tried to escape to leave with me. She banged on the door and screamed when I closed the door behind me to leave. The girls looked tired, sad. They had dark rings under their eyes. I asked my manager to do a joint visit with me, who, after only one visit, also expressed concerns. It was at this time that we received the report from our external service provider, who was undertaking external assessments and providing home parenting support. Our concerns were corroborated by this report. We consulted extensively with our international assessors, management and legal advisors within FACS as well. All agreed that Gina and Antonia could no longer continue to be cared for by Uncle Joe.

What did you do?

While the girls were initially placed in the care of Uncle Joe (their closest relative), our investigation of the wider family network on both the paternal and maternal sides occurred simultaneously. I personally met the girls’ maternal grandmother and their aunt, who both reside in Sydney. They had so many questions, and had so much heartache as well. I found the girls’ maternal grandfather and visited him at home. He had no idea where his granddaughters were. He showed me photos of his daughter, Gina and Antonia’s mother, when she was young. I located half siblings of the girls as well, and I have worked hard to try and reunite them all. I skyped with Gina and Antonia’s paternal grandfather in Italy. We sent letters and emails to their maternal grandmother in Italy as well. After feeling like these little sisters had no one, I realised they had more than I could ever have imagined. I had so much to build on.

At the early stages of our investigation, one maternal family member, Kathy, who was a distant cousin of the girls’ late mother, was identified as a possible alternative carer. Kathy and her partner Ron were keen to care for the girls long-term. From a very early point in the case management process, we had commenced formal assessments of Kathy and Ron as possible carers, while the girls
were still residing with Uncle Joe. The day we decided it was necessary to remove Gina and Antonia from Uncle Joe, by a strange coincidence, also happened to be the day that the kinship assessments were completed on Kathy and Ron. The assessments were very favourable. Kathy and Ron would make great carers for Gina and Antonia.

We called Kathy at 10am on the day we removed Gina and Antonia from Uncle Joe’s residence. With that one phone call, Kathy and Ron dropped everything. They were moving house that day, but they took the next flight from Sydney to the regional area in which the girls were living.

Uncle Joe appealed our decision to remove Gina and Antonia from his care. An internal review was done, and supported our decision and stated that we had gone above and beyond to support Uncle Joe. The girls had been through so much in their short lives – multiple placements, trauma and confusion. We knew they needed stability and an appropriate family placement, but most of all they needed security and love. Uncle Joe, because he was struggling with his own grief, and had little experience as a parent, simply could not act as primary carer for the girls.

Since being placed with Kathy and Ron, the changes for Gina and Antonia have been astonishing. When I visit the girls now they still scream, not in anguish, but with complete delight. They rush to excitedly show me their toys and affectionately choose to hug their carers, instead of me. When I leave, they happily wave me off, instead of trying to escape to leave with me. Gina and Antonia call Kathy and Ron – Mum and Dad. Adoption assessments and the casework to support adoption for Gina and Antonia by Kathy and Ron began in 2012. As of 2014, adoption has been ‘put on hold’ because Gina and Antonia’s paternal grandfather, who lives in Italy, would like to make provision for a significant inheritance to his granddaughters in his will which would ensure their financial security as they grow older. For the time being, formal adoption will not be pursued. However, Ron and Kathy will continue to care for and raise Gina and Antonia as their daughters.

What makes you proud of this case?

It all felt like it was meant to be. Gina and Antonia have found a loving and caring family home with Kathy and Ron. Kathy, who is a distant relative of the girls’ Anglo-Australian mother, is by a strange coincidence a fluent speaker of Italian, and Ron, Kathy’s partner, is of Italian descent. Kathy and Ron communicate regularly with the paternal family in Italy by Skype and Facebook. This connection was a natural and easy one after the paternal grandfather paid for Ron, Kathy and the girls to fly out and meet him in Italy.

Connections with the maternal family are also stronger than ever, with the maternal grandmother and maternal aunt of the girls now visiting regularly (every 2 weeks). The maternal grandfather recently passed.
away, however he got the opportunity to meet Ron, Kathy and his granddaughters before his death. When I spoke to him about this, shortly before he died, he told me just how special this day was for him. The girls also holiday annually with one of their half siblings, and see another half sibling regularly, while we continue to work hard to try and re-establish the contact with another half sibling.

During all my working years with children I have never had that thought of ‘I could take you home’. This all changed the day I met these two beautiful sisters. Perhaps it was the tragedy of their story, or their sad eyes. I knew I wouldn’t be taking them home, so I had to make a difference.

This case has changed me in every way. It made me a better caseworker. It helped me to understand the importance of maintaining and rebuilding family connections. It made me cry and feel human in the work we do. But most of all it filled me up with hope and gratitude.

I will be forever grateful to the two sisters, their carers and the extended family. Their journey gave me a purpose and reminded me that the work we do can, and does, make a difference.

---

**Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case**

| ✔  | Identifying the best interests of the child or young person |
| ✔  | Thorough assessments and careful consideration of whether legal adoption represents the best outcome for a child or young person |
| ✔  | Concurrent planning |
| ✔  | Recognition of the need to maintain cultural family connections |

**Designation of caseworker**

CASeworker, FACS
Abby’s Aunty

Helping to establish and maintain relationships with birth family is not always about working closely with birth parents. In this story, four siblings were reunited and reconnected with birth family, by cultivating a relationship with an Aunty. Though Aunty was reluctant at first, respectful and reassuring work done by the caseworker has helped to build strong and enduring relationships between all four siblings and all of the carers involved.
How did you become involved in this case?

Paula and Phillip are long term carers for Chad, Patrick and Tamsin, having cared for the children since their initial placement in OOHC. As one of two frontline caseworkers assigned to their case, I admired the quality of care that Paula and Phillip provided for these three growing children.

Chad, Patrick and Tamsin, all under ten years of age and maternal siblings, were each removed from their mother, Joanne, soon after birth. Joanne has faced so many challenges in her life including domestic violence and homelessness, and a lifelong struggle with drug addiction. Brett (Patrick and Tamsin’s biological father) has also had a difficult and long-term struggle with alcoholism.

Chad and Patrick have significant additional needs. Chad has mental and physical health challenges including anxiety and an attachment disorder. Patrick has developmental delays, behavioural issues and some additional physical health concerns as well. These challenges only made Paula and Phillip even more determined to commit to each of these children in the long term and provide a ‘forever family’. Paula and Phillip were committed to an open adoption process and believed the inclusion and involvement of Joanne and Brett in these processes offered the best way of offering stability, permanency and reassurance to these children.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

While Joanne and Brett had attended a few contact visits immediately after the removal of Chad and Patrick, they found it emotionally very difficult and the visits quickly fell away. Joanne and Brett continued to struggle with drug and alcohol addiction as well. After Tamsin’s removal from their care, Joanne and Brett reached an even greater point of despair and their respective addictions worsened. They became more detached. They were angry and emotional when contacted by any FACS representatives. For over two years, they could not be located or contacted by FACS staff. Deep down, I feared the worst, that perhaps these children had lost contact with their biological parents for good.

These children faced so many unknowns. With the help of another allocated caseworker and the Regional Adoptions Caseworker, every effort was made to locate Joanne and Brett. We left messages through family members, we followed addresses which led to vacant homes, we posted letters, we cross-matched searches with other government agencies. For the longest time, every viable lead we followed seemed to yield absolutely no useful information in locating Joanne or Brett. It was at this point that I felt an even greater level of respect for Phillip and Paula – they knew the birth parents were struggling with their own issues. As caseworkers, we knew we needed to make contact so Joanne and Brett could
be legally provided with information about the adoption. Phillip and Paula knew that losing a connection to their birth family would hurt their children, and this is what they expressed greatest concern about.

I knew we needed to make contact with Joanne and Brett, but I feared that their anger with FACS would lead to an outcome that they did not intend, nor want – the loss of contact with their children. As caseworkers we needed to regroup and take a new approach.

**What did you do?**

We tried a new strategy. We wondered if Joanne and Brett might feel more at ease, and might be more willing to participate in the process of open adoption if they were approached by an independent social worker. We approached the contracted adoptions assessor (CAA), and managed to locate contact details for the children’s maternal grandmother. The CAA travelled to the residence of the grandmother, who lived in a regional area, with written information about the adoption and most importantly, photos of Chad, Patrick and Tamsin.

The visit with Joanne’s mother yielded such important information. The children had an older sibling - Abby - who had been born many years before Chad. We also discovered that a particularly important person for Abby was her Aunty (Brett’s sister). Although Abby did not live with her Aunty, they were extremely close and she remained a primary support person for Abby. As frontline caseworkers we were excited by these discoveries. Not only had we found a grandmother, and an aunty, we had also located Chad, Patrick and Tamsin’s big sister - Abby!

We knew we needed to contact Abby’s Aunty in a sensitive and respectful way. It started with a phone call. The primary caseworker responsible for this case talked to Aunty about Chad, Patrick and Tamsin. She told Aunty about their history and explored the possibilities for contact with Abby. The caseworker listened carefully to Aunty’s concerns. Initially, Aunty expressed reluctance. She was protective of Abby. She voiced her reservations openly with the caseworker. Aunty was concerned that the experience might re-traumatise Abby, who also had experiences of early childhood trauma – similar to those experienced by her younger brothers and sister. The caseworker was patient. It took much more than one phone call. She knew that Aunty would need time to consider. The caseworker also talked at length with Paula and Phillip, who were also excited by the possibilities of establishing contact with birth family members, particularly siblings for Chad, Patrick and Tamsin.

We arranged an informal visit to a park. Aunty would attend and bring Abby; Paula would bring Chad, Patrick and Tamsin. Paula brought lots of photos of Chad, Patrick and Tamsin as they were growing up. She also brought a gift for
Abby – a charm bracelet. Chad, Patrick and Tamsin had each selected a charm for their big sister.

What makes you proud of this case?

We looked at the unique terrain of the birth family. Although Abby was living with another family member, it was actually her Aunty (with whom she did not actually reside) who was so important to the process of rebuilding family relationships in this case.

One of the happiest moments I experienced in this case was seeing the children talking together – it was so natural. Paula and Aunty were close by, but they could see the importance of allowing the children to talk freely and openly with each other. The conversation between Abby and Chad was very moving. For the first time in his life, Chad saw someone who physically resembled him in appearance, and this meant a lot to him. For Patrick and Tamsin, who had no memories of their parents (Joanne and Brett) at all, meeting Abby helped them know more about their birth family and their shared history.

As a caseworker, it also makes me feel so satisfied with the quality of the open adoption casework that we can do, and the positive role we can play in establishing and building positive relationships.

To this day, the siblings continue to have lots of contact. Abby has stayed at Chad, Patrick and Tamsin’s family home and she has even expressed how important her relationship with Paula and Phillip has become to her. While Chad, Patrick and Tamsin have been the children to have a direct adoption experience, this case demonstrates that adoption affects everyone within a family.
Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case

- Positive relationship building
- Consultations with family members conducted sensitively and respectful of their wishes regarding contact
- Taking the time to understand the relationships and unique dynamics of birth family
- Involvement of the children (siblings) in identifying how best to move forward with contact

| Designation of caseworker | Frontline OOHC caseworker |
Missing pieces

The journey of adoption can span a lifetime. This story details the experience of Frank, a Forgotten Australian, and highlights how profoundly an adoption experience can impact a person’s sense of identity. Frank’s difficult experience of the closed adoption system also affirms the benefits that an open adoption can deliver to children and young people and their families by offering greater transparency, and a better chance of maintaining good relationships with birth parents when restoration is no longer possible.
How did you become involved in this case?

Frank was born in 1945, a time at which closed adoptions represented standard practice in NSW. He was removed from his birth family in 1949 because of neglect. After spending some time in institutional care environments, Frank was placed with foster carers in 1950, who went on to adopt him in 1955. As Frank’s caseworker, I needed to help him prepare for the journey of looking back on his time in OOHC.

Frank is now seventy, retired, and is very happy with how his life has turned out. Frank is married, and has grown children of his own. He also had a very happy adoption experience, and grew up in a loving family home. Despite all of this, Frank still had unanswered questions which he held from his experience of closed adoption. Frank says that the big questions about his identity – where he came from, and who he is – continue to affect him.

Last year, Frank made a formal request to the NSW government to receive his adoption information. This meant that Frank would receive a document called an Adoption Information Certificate, which outlines and provides details of his adoption including identifying details about his birth parents. He also joined the Reunion and Information Register (RIR). The RIR is a passive way of making contact with members of a birth family because once two parties to the same adoption are registered, it creates a ‘match’. This means that both parties already know, even before they make contact, that they want to know more about each other.

What were some of the most challenging aspects of this case?

Frank’s first big discovery about his birth family was that he was one of ten siblings! While this represented an opportunity for Frank to explore all of these family connections, it was also personally daunting for him. High quality casework was conducted respectfully and sensitively to explore each of these sibling connections, and this was important to ensure good outcomes could be achieved for Frank.

Frank discovered that eight of his brothers and sisters had also gone into care of the Minister, and six of them had ultimately been adopted. The Adoption Act allows identifying information about adopted siblings to be released to an adopted person (but not about birth siblings who have not been placed for adoption). Frank faced a number of big emotional challenges as he embarked on his adoption discovery journey. One of Frank’s sisters, Kate, had previously joined the RIR a few years earlier, which created a ‘match’ when Frank joined. I advised Frank about the match and he was overjoyed. I then wrote to Kate to also let her know about the match.

Frank expressed his excitement about moving forward. Kate also responded with excitement, but expressed that she felt a little overwhelmed as well. Kate was able to provide contact details for some other siblings which led to Frank’s
discovery of other brothers, also seeking information about their own histories. It created a snowball effect, with letters and contact information being excitedly exchanged between the brothers and sisters who had come forward wanting to make contact.

As an adoption information caseworker, it was my job to help Frank emotionally prepare for the information which might lie in his OOHC and adoption files. Records from this period were prepared very differently to today, with the entries being less thorough and with many gaps.

As Frank’s caseworker, I needed to help him prepare for the journey of finding out about his birth family and origins. I also needed to emotionally prepare him for the fact that while he would receive more information about his life, he would still be confronted with many missing pieces, and it may take time to make sense of it all. I also talked with Frank about the disappointments that may lie ahead. Frank would not be able to obtain identifying information about his non-adopted siblings, though it would indeed be possible for Frank to gain deeper understanding of what led him to be adopted, and the challenges his birth family had faced leading up to his removal from their care.

Frank discovered that one of his sisters, Sally, had lodged a Contact Veto in the early 1990s. A Contact Veto means that Sally did not want to be contacted by members of her birth family. As part of my role as a caseworker it was my legal obligation to inform Sally that Frank had applied to receive her information. In researching this case, I noted that Sally had lodged her Veto over 25 years ago. I also understood from my own experience as a caseworker that people’s views about their adoption experience can change quite markedly over time. This represented a good opportunity to see if Sally’s views had changed over the years. Frank prepared a letter for his sister, just in case she did wish to receive it. I wrote a very respectful, discreet and sensitive letter to Sally.

I needed to help Frank navigate the complexities surrounding the release of information, the Contact Veto and the RIR. Frank faced so many highs and lows through this process, and he had so little knowledge of his birth family. He had vague memories of only three siblings, and he was uncertain of his own recollections.

What did you do?

I acted as the intermediary in the match process between Frank and Kate as well as mediating the process of the veto with Sally. Frank signed an undertaking not to make contact in respect of Sally so that he could receive her identifying information. My role in this process proved to be extremely important. Frank needed to understand the implications of the legal document he was signing, and to know that serious legal implications would arise should he breach it. Sally responded to
my discreet letter and she stated that she had a ‘feeling’ the letter was regarding her adoption. I explained to her that her brother, Frank, had made an application for his adoption information, which by association, would also include her identifying information.

It was my job to sensitively and compassionately explain the adoption legislation to Sally so she could understand why her identifying information was being released to Frank. It was a difficult but important conversation. Sally was upset that I had contacted her. Although she initially showed some interest in reading Frank’s letter, she ultimately decided against it. She said she did not want to have any contact with her birth family. She did pass on some important medical information she had about her family, and she was happy for this information to be passed on to Frank, but she stated she did not want further contact. I was able to talk through this discussion with Frank. I made sure that I was properly prepared for this conversation beforehand. I looked more closely at the history of closed adoption and the likely personal, social and emotional implications for people who had experienced this system. This knowledge helped me to have a more meaningful conversation with Frank, so that he could understand why people react to their experiences of closed adoption so differently.

What makes you proud of this case?

My experience with Frank was so interesting and rewarding. While I could offer emotional support, I also helped Frank logistically work through the challenges of exploring the legacy of a closed adoption. I provided advice about his entitlements for further searchers, including through the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages and accessing further information from the hospital where he was born and the Supreme Court of NSW. This gave Frank some tools moving forward which would enable him to continue discovering his family history.

Frank describes his journey as rewarding, but emotionally draining. He has lost siblings, some siblings have not been willing to make contact, and with others he has shared reunions. Frank has had the opportunity to take the sad, but important journey of visiting one sister’s grave site. In meeting his brother Gary, Frank was overjoyed and emotional and stated that he felt like they had never been apart, even after so many years of separation.

This work is so rewarding because it requires so many skills. I acted as intermediary and counsellor. I also needed investigative skills. I needed to support both Frank and his sisters who had individually come to have very different feelings about their closed adoption experiences. Having a sound
knowledge of the Adoption Act is also important, because this shapes a person’s entitlements, responsibilities and ultimately their ability to access information.

The approach in this case was intensely collaborative, and this led to great outcomes for Frank and for his family. The FACS Adoption Information Unit was efficient and timely. A frontline caseworker prepared Frank and worked closely with him to prepare him for information about his adoption and birth family. Working with the RIR also provided a unique opportunity to see first hand how an adult adoptee can explore their past and continue to answer questions about their adoption experiences even very late in life.

I feel privileged. Frank was so overjoyed and happy with the information he received, and was so pleased to be reunited with family members that he did not even know existed. He even gave me a big hug at the end of it all! After knowing so little for so long, many missing pieces of Frank’s life have begun to fall into place.

Best practice examples of open adoption casework present in this case

✔ Positive relationship building

✔ Understanding of the legislation and what responsibilities and entitlements this provides to adoptees

✔ Consultations with family members conducted sensitively and respectful of their wishes regarding contact

✔ Deeper levels of insight regarding the history of closed adoptions, and how this might shape personal biases regarding current adoption practice

✔ The provision of post-adoption supports

Designation of caseworker | Adoption Information Caseworker, FACS
In order to protect the privacy of the children involved, names have been changed in the report, and no images depict the real children or families involved in the stories.

**further information**

For further information on OOHC adoption, caseworkers are advised to contact their local Regional Adoption Caseworker by emailing the ‘OOHC Adoption’ mailing list (in FACS) or for NGOs by emailing OOHC.Adoption-HeadOffice@facs.nsw.gov.au