

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

CAPTURING THE VOICES OF THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION COMMUNITY IN THE REDESIGN OF THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

Workshops, Group Discussions and Interviews

FINAL REPORT – JUNE 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of a series of workshops, small group discussions and individual interviews which aimed to capture the voices of the intercountry adoption community in the redesign of the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service (ICAFSS) to ensure it continues to meet the needs of those who have experienced intercountry adoption. The consultation included:

- **4 workshops**, each comprised of between 8 and 20 participants, including adult adoptees, adoptive parents and representatives of organisations within the intercountry adoption sector.
- **3 small group discussions** with intercountry adoptees and/or families of young intercountry adoptees.
- **32 phone interviews** with adoptees and adoptive families, with a focus on people with lived experience who:
 - were unable to, or not comfortable, attending the workshops
 - live in regional or remote areas of Australia.

This report provides a detailed summary of the input provided by participants in this consultation process, with the key themes and outcomes including:

The need for greater promotion and awareness of the ICAFSS

A large number of workshop, group discussion and interview participants (including over 40% of all interviewees) noted that they were either unaware of the ICAFSS or had been unaware of it until very recently. It was noted that many adoptees and adoptive parents wished they had been aware of, and able to access the support of, the ICAFSS earlier. Many consultation participants also noted the need for greater nationwide promotion of the ICAFSS.

The importance of greater involvement of people with lived experience

Participants noted the importance of greater involvement of people with lived experience in the design and delivery of support services. This included the opportunity for people with lived experience to provide basic training to funded providers, provide support for their peers and peer leaders, and educate prospective adoptive parents and new adoptive parents. Other ideas commonly suggested included formation of a paid advisory group of people with lived experience, and provision of opportunities for those with a lived experience to be involved in funding decisions and in the development of service delivery processes.

The need for greater support for peer support groups and activities

A large number of participants highlighted the need for greater support for peer groups (with this the most commonly mentioned idea for supporting adoptees in both workshops and interviews), with a focus on providing additional opportunities for those within the intercountry adoption community to access, lead and participate in peer support events. A large number of consultation participants also noted the importance of increased support and funding to establish or grow existing mentoring programs and activities.

The importance of improved availability of, and access to, intercountry adoption aware practitioners

A large number of consultation participants (including over 50% of interviewees) suggested that there needs to be greater availability of, and improved access to, intercountry adoption aware and trauma-informed counsellors. It was also commonly noted that it is important for intercountry adoptees to have access to practitioners who are appropriate to their needs, as well as greater flexibility in terms of consulting hours and locations, greater consistency of counsellors, and availability of a larger number of free counselling sessions.

Greater training of educators and support for adoptees and parents in community and school settings

Intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents highlighted the importance of providing basic information and resources to other major services and supports adoptees and their families engage with within their communities, such as support-lines (e.g. Lifeline), mental health services, general practitioners and education institutions. In particular, adoptive parents expressed the need for improved support within school environments, including intercountry adoption training for educators and school leaders and providing parents with additional support in schools to explain the needs of their children.

Greater coordination of relevant information and support options

Many consultation participants expressed the need for better, and more coordinated, access to information and resources for adoptive parents to assist them at all stages of the adoption process, as well as for intercountry adoptees throughout their life stages. This included resources or case studies developed by those with lived experience. It was also noted that a central hub could be important in providing all of those within the intercountry adoption community with access to relevant resources and listings of relevant services and support.

Greater support for searching for origins

Large numbers of adoptees and adoptive parents (including over 40% of interviewees) highlighted the need for more practical and emotional support throughout the processes of tracing and reunification. In terms of practical support, it was noted that there should be a central repository of important information, with links to support, as well as better access to country-specific support and information, and improved support for tracing and reunification processes within the country of origin.

The importance of improved funding for the process of searching for origins was also noted. The need for greater emotional support for intercountry adoptees and their families was suggested, including the importance of trauma-informed and country-specific counselling before, during and after searching and/or reunification processes, as well as support for managing expectations and to help adoptees and families to deal with the ongoing realities of the various outcomes of search processes

Improved national accessibility of the ICAFSS

Many participants suggested options for regional outreach, or partnering with and training of existing services in regional areas, to enable more face-to-face counselling and support for adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas. This was the most commonly suggested idea for ensuring improved accessibility of the ICAFSS. Some suggested leveraging networks and activities that already exist by enabling peer support groups to extend their reach into regional and remote areas. Consultation participants noted the need to fund travel to enable the participation of adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas and facilitate enduring connections with others that have a similar experience. There were also a range of suggestions for digital resources and learning tools to support these adoptees and parents.

OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND

The Government has heard calls from the intercountry adoption sector, particularly adult adoptees, for greater involvement in service design and development. In response to these calls, the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) coordinated nationwide consultations which aimed to capture the voices of the intercountry adoption community in the redesign of the Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service (ICAFSS) to ensure it continues to meet the needs of those who have experienced intercountry adoption.

Gilimbaa, a communications and community engagement company specialising in trauma-informed consultation, was engaged to facilitate a series of workshops, small group discussions and individual interviews, with a focus on capturing the needs and ideas of those with lived experience.

It should be noted that while consultation participants were asked about their experiences of the ICAFSS, they were also asked to reflect on their experiences of other services they had accessed or, if they had not accessed services, what would have best or better supported them. The focus throughout was on developing a clearer understanding of the support needs of those in the intercountry adoption community, as opposed to purely focusing on their perceptions of the current ICAFSS. Unless an organisation is specified, generic comments about a service relate to service provision in general and are not specific to any provider.

Overview of workshops

Four workshops were held between 24 February and 4 March 2020, with each workshop comprised of between 8 and 20 participants, including:

- Adult adoptees
- Adoptive parents
- Representatives of organisations within the intercountry adoption sector
- Researchers and academics experienced with intercountry adoption.

Each workshop lasted for 4-5 hours, and included a range of options for participants to provide input in formats which were most comfortable for them, including:

- Discussion at tables and as a whole room
- Recording of written responses in individual workbooks
- Adding their ideas to posters and prompt cards in three Discussion Areas (allowing participants to focus on specific areas of supports most important to them)
- Writing key words or phrases, or drawing, on a 'graffiti wall' to express their ideas for support/s most important to them.

Opportunities were also provided at each workshop for all participants to engage in one-on-one discussions with the facilitator and/or DSS representatives to ensure their views were recorded.

After each workshop, time was allowed for all participants to remain and add their input (through all mediums listed above) in their own time.

Specific opportunities were also offered to all intercountry adoptees to meet individually or in small groups with the facilitator to provide input that they may not have been comfortable sharing in the workshop setting.

Each workshop included a range of practices and processes designed to ensure a safe space for all participants, including:

- Provision of a range of options for providing input in a private and individual way (including specific options for adoptees).
- Options for support during and after the workshop, including accessing support services such as Lifeline and Beyond Blue, accessing intercountry adoption counselling support through the ICAFSS, and having individual conversations or debriefs with the facilitator and/or DSS representatives.
- Availability of a quiet space in all locations for participants to move to if they were distressed, upset or needing a break.
- Use of a 'group agreement' at the beginning of all workshops to ensure all participants agreed on how the workshop would be conducted in a respectful and supportive manner.

The table below provides a summary of the attendance at the four workshops:

Location	Date	Adoptees	Adoptive parents	Others*	Total
Canberra	25/02/2020	2	2	3	7
Sydney	28/02/2020	8	4	7	19
Adelaide	02/03/2020	7	5	2	14
Melbourne	04/03/2020	10	2	4	16
Total		27	13	16	56

* 'Others' includes representatives of intercountry adoption support services and organisations, as well as other organisations with a relationship to the intercountry adoption sector.

Note: A planned Brisbane workshop was cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak. All attendees were offered the option of a phone interview.

Overview of small group discussions

In addition to the workshops, targeted small group discussions were used to gather specific input from those with lived experience in a range of locations.

Each discussion lasted between 60 and 90 minutes using a semi-structured approach, with a discussion guide used by the facilitator to guide and direct a shared conversation among participants.

This form of discussion allows participants to generate questions and concepts, express opinions, and pursue their own priorities in their terms and using their words (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999). By allowing the small groups to be flexible and fluid in nature, participants can be encouraged to express a wide range of opinions, as well as developing shared values in a group setting (Waterton and Wynne, 1995). Group discussion was encouraged as part of the process, allowing the development of collective notions shared and negotiated by members of the group (Gunter, 2000).

The table below summarises the attendance at each of these small group discussions:

Location	Date	Number of participants	Adoptee community
Sydney, NSW	28/02/2020	3	Adult adoptees
Melbourne, VIC	04/03/2020	4	Adult adoptees
Melbourne, VIC	04/03/2020	10	Parents of young adoptees



Overview of phone interviews

A total of 34 semi-structured phone interviews were also conducted with adoptees and adoptive families between 3 March and 25 March 2020, with a focus on people with lived experience who:

- were unable to, or not comfortable, attending the workshops (including those who had planned to attend the cancelled Brisbane workshop).
- live in regional or remote areas of Australia.

Each interviewee was referred to DSS by a key organisation or support service within the intercountry adoption community, with Gilimbaa then following up to organise the interview. Each participant was provided, in advance of the interview, with:

- an Information Sheet clearly explaining the purpose of the interview and how it would be conducted
- a Consent Form which included details of the confidential and voluntary nature of the interview.

These interviews were fluid in nature, allowing interviewees to freely express their views about their support needs and how these could be met through the redesign of the ICAFSS.

This type of semi-structured interviewing allows clarification of points, extension of responses, and the ability to remind respondents of points they might not have explored or mentioned (Gillham 2000). While the interviewer attempted to facilitate without overly directing the interviewee’s direction (Rapley, 2004), it is acknowledged that the interviewer in some cases needed to guide the interviews to ensure the key areas of the discussion guide were covered, recognising that “all interview statements are actions arising from an interaction between interviewer and interviewee” (Jensen, 2002).

A total of 14 interviews were conducted with intercountry adoptees, and 20 interviews were conducted with adoptive parents. The locations of the interviewees were:

Location	Number of participants
Australian Capital Territory	1
New South Wales	5
Northern Territory	7
Queensland	9
South Australia	1
Tasmania	3
Victoria	6
Western Australia	1
South Korea	1

This section of the report provides a summary of the key themes and outcomes from the workshops, group discussions and interviews.

KEY THEMES AND OUTCOMES

1. THE NEED FOR GREATER PROMOTION AND AWARENESS OF THE ICAFSS

A large number of workshop, group discussion and interview participants (including over 40% of all interviewees) noted that they were either unaware of Intercountry Adoption Family Support Service (ICAFSS), or had been unaware of it until very recently. It was noted that, in many cases, the support offered by the ICAFSS to intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents was highly valued and important, mainly due to:

- It being a free service, with many adoptees and parents noting that they have struggled with the costs of accessing counsellors through other avenues.
- Its counsellors being intercountry adoption aware and trauma-informed. Many adoptees and adoptive parents noted that the counselling they received through the ICAFSS was the first time they had access to intercountry adoption aware support.

It was noted that many adoptees and adoptive parents wished they had been aware of, and able to access the support of, the ICAFSS earlier.

Many consultation participants suggested the need for greater nationwide promotion of the ICAFSS, with a focus on:

- Promotion through existing support groups for intercountry adoptees and/or adoptive parents.
- Provision of information on the ICAFSS service to all relevant practitioners, health services and community organisations.
- Regular and ongoing contact with intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents to remind them of the support they can access. This included the need for improved coordination of contact details and/or databases of the intercountry adoption community.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF GREATER INVOLVEMENT OF PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

Participants highlighted the importance of greater involvement of people with lived experience in processes and services which provide support for their peers.

This included the opportunity for people with lived experience to provide basic training to funded providers, provide support for their peers and peer leaders, and educate prospective adoptive parents and new adoptive parents. Many comments focused on the importance of formal involvement of intercountry adoptees in leadership positions and/or advisory boards, with the importance of providing funding to support the work of leaders within the intercountry adoption community highlighted.

There were also a number of suggestions for harnessing the advice and experience of intercountry adoptees through capturing case studies, co-design of resources, and improved support for research by those with lived experience.

3. THE NEED FOR GREATER SUPPORT FOR PEER SUPPORT GROUPS AND ACTIVITIES

A large number of participants highlighted the need for greater support for peer groups (with this the most commonly mentioned idea for supporting adoptees in both workshops and interviews), with a focus on providing additional opportunities for those within the intercountry adoption community to access peer support and participate in events such as camps, conferences, workshops and social activities. It was noted that more support and coordination is needed for peer support groups and activities, with suggestions here including:

- Funding of roles for peer support coordinators to lead the formation of new groups, and to support and coordinate the activities of existing groups.
- Small grants for planning and delivery activities of individual peer support groups. This recognises that many of those who currently take on these roles do so in a volunteer capacity outside of their work hours and with very limited time and resources.
- Funding for national or regional events such as camps or conferences.

A large number of consultation participants also highlighted the importance of increased support for mentoring activities, including options for individual and small-group mentoring, and with a focus on older adoptees supporting teenagers or young adults. It was noted here, again, that funding could be provided to establish and maintain mentoring programs and/or to support those who are already taking on roles as mentors.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVED AVAILABILITY OF, AND ACCESS TO, INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION AWARE PRACTITIONERS

A large number of consultation participants (including over 50% of interviewees) noted that they have been unable to access counsellors, therapists or other practitioners who are intercountry adoption aware and/or trauma aware. It was noted that there needs to be:

- Greater availability of intercountry adoption aware and trauma-informed counsellors.
- A central hub or coordinated service providing listings of practitioners with specific expertise in working with intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents.
- Greater training of counsellors, therapists, doctors and allied health workers to ensure better support of, and appropriate referrals for, intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents.

It was also commonly noted that it is important for intercountry adoptees to have access to practitioners who are appropriate to their needs, including options for practitioners or support workers:

- with lived experience
- from the same country of origin
- of the same gender.

It was also noted that, for many intercountry adoptees and/or adoptive parents, there is currently limited choice in terms of the counsellors they are referred to by the ICAFSS or through other referral processes, and that there needs to be:

- More options for trained counsellors to ensure there is a positive 'fit' and relationship with the person seeking support.
- Greater flexibility in terms of consulting hours and locations, with many adoptees and adoptive parents noting the options they were given did not fit with their jobs, availability or location.

- Greater consistency of counsellors and other staff providing support to adoptees and parents; as changes in staff can have impact on the ability to form lasting and trusted relationships.
- Availability of more free counselling sessions, with many consultation participants noting the need for ongoing support and counselling, and that the amount of sessions they have been able to access is inadequate.

5. GREATER TRAINING OF EDUCATORS AND SUPPORT FOR ADOPTEES AND PARENTS IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

A large number of intercountry adoptees and, in particular, adoptive parents highlighted the importance of improved support within school environments.

The importance of improved intercountry adoption training for educators and school leaders was noted, along with the need for adoptive parents to be provided with additional support to explain the needs of their children to teachers and senior school staff.

Intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents also highlighted the importance of providing basic information and resources to other major services and supports that adoptees and their families engage with in their communities, such as support lines (including Lifeline), mental health services, general practitioners and education institutions.

6. GREATER COORDINATION OF RELEVANT INFORMATION AND SUPPORT OPTIONS

A large number of consultation participants noted the importance of having better and more coordinated access to information and resources to assist them at all stages of the adoption process and at all life stages and phases for intercountry adoptees. It was noted that there needs to be:

- Simple and clear guides and tips to help intercountry adoptees and/or adoptive parents to negotiate common issues or problems.
- Intercountry adoption specific resources that are available and searchable based on country, life stage and topic.
- Resources or case studies from those with lived experience, including video case studies of intercountry adoptees.

A large number of participants highlighted the importance of having access to all of these resources in one central website or 'hub'. It was noted that a central hub could be important in providing all of those within the intercountry adoption community with listings of relevant services (including intercountry adoption aware counsellors and allied health workers), peer support groups, and upcoming events or activities.

7. GREATER SUPPORT FOR SEARCHING FOR ORIGINS

Many adoptees and adoptive parents suggested there needs to be more practical information on the processes of tracing and reunification. It was noted that there should be a central repository of important information, with links to support. Related to this, a large number of adoptees and adoptive parents noted the importance of having access to better country-specific support and information, as well as better support for tracing and reunification processes within the country of origin. It was noted here that it is important for government to both support and fund the process of searching for origins as it is fundamental to the well-being of many intercountry adoptees.

The importance of practical support, as well as funding, for DNA testing, accessing documentation, translation and language support were also noted.

A large number of adoptees and adoptive parents also highlighted the need for greater emotional support for those involved in searching for origins, including:

- The need for trained and intercountry adoption aware counsellors and case workers to support people through the process of searching for origins.
- Counselling to maintain realistic expectations, as well as counselling to assist adoptees to process the psychological impacts of finding and/or meeting their biological families.
- Additional peer support and options for adoptees who have already reunited to provide advice and support for those going through the process, with the importance of mentoring noted by many adoptees.
- Funding for peer support and mentoring activities to support those searching for origins.
- Improved screening, training and/or support for prospective adoptive parents.

8. IMPROVED NATIONAL ACCESSIBILITY OF THE ICAFSS

Many participants suggested options for regional outreach to enable more face-to-face counselling and support for adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas. This was the most commonly suggested idea for ensuring improved accessibility of the ICAFSS. Related to this, many participants suggested accessibility of services and support could be improved in regional and remote areas through leveraging of existing networks partnering with regional organisations and service providers, and training of existing service providers.

There were a number of suggestions for using existing peer support groups and supporting them to extend their networks and activities into regional and remote areas.

Many consultation participants also highlighted the need for funding to support travel and engagement by adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas.

The need for better data and databases to both clarify the needs, and numbers, of intercountry adoptees in regional and remote areas, and to direct them to available supports and services was also noted.

There were also a range of suggestions for digital resources and learning tools which may be useful for adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas, including online learning tools and resources, self-paced video learning, podcasts, apps, chat or text services, and increased use of social media.

This section of the report provides a detailed summary of the feedback gathered from the workshops, group discussions and interviews. This includes a summary of the feedback provided by all consultation participants on:

- The support needs of those in the intercountry adoption community.
- Options for addressing the support needs of those in the intercountry adoption community.
- Ideas for different forms of support that could be provided to those in the intercountry adoption community.
- Support that could be provided to those searching for origins, as well as those supporting someone to do so.
- Options for improving the national accessibility of the ICAFSS.
- Ideas for capacity building within the intercountry adoption community and sector.

DETAILED SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF THOSE IN THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION COMMUNITY

PEER SUPPORT, INCLUDING SUPPORT GROUPS, EVENTS AND MENTORING

A large number of intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents highlighted the importance of **peer support** and being able to access opportunities to engage with other adoptees and/or families. This was the most commonly mentioned theme in relation to the support needs of those in the intercountry adoption community. In particular, it was noted that it is important for adoptees to be able to engage with people with similar backgrounds, cultures and/or experiences.

“Most important to me is having people who are going through the same thing as our family.”

Adoptee, workshop

The majority of comments in this area focused on the importance of mentoring programs, with mentoring seen as important by both adoptees and adoptive parents.

“There needs to be an adoptee mentoring program. They could look at the model that Relationships Australia has where they have peer mentoring from older adoptees to younger adoptees. Those peer mentors get trained. They’ve been running that program for decades and it’s very, very good and a huge uptake, and a lot of adoptive families want that for their young children and the adult adoptees really enjoy being part of giving back to the community like that.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

My children have attended mentorship events, these have been invaluable in creating relationships and role modelling.”

Adoptive parent, workshop

The importance of supporting and training mentors was also noted here; including by tapping into the expertise of adult adoptees from the range of professions they take up as adults, with adequate recognition or payment. Importance was also recognised in linking young adoptees with older adoptees with a similar cultural background to provide them with positive role models who understand the specific issues they are going through.

Many adoptees (over 50% of those involved in the consultations) noted that **peer support events or activities** they had attended, such as retreats and camps, had been highly positive for them and had linked them with other adoptees and/or families who they have since maintained a connection with. It was suggested that this kind of informal interaction with others from a similar background could be “life-changing” for many adoptees.

“The adoption camps I attended as a child were so helpful for me and my family as they linked adoptive families together and created a sense of community.”

Adoptee, workshop.

For many parents, peer support events or activities have created an opportunity to share experiences and advice, and to help them learn that “you are not alone in what you are going through”. Annual or regular gatherings of adoptees and parents, including adoptee family groups and/or play groups, were seen as important sources of support and socialisation for adoptive parents and their children. Some parents also noted positives around accessing peer support groups not specifically for those in the intercountry adoption community, including those for adoptive parents more broadly and those for parents of children with autism.

Many participants highlighted the need for **greater coordination and support for peer support groups**. It was suggested that there needs to be more funding of the peer community, with options including small grants to establish new peer support groups, develop their capacity, and enable adoptees and families to equitably access all opportunities for peer engagement and support, including for people with disability. It was noted that there could be a central body or contact point to help support and coordinate peer support groups and enable access of adoptees and adoptive parents to these groups.

ACCESS TO COUNSELLING

Large numbers of adoptees and adoptive parents (including over 50% of interviewees) highlighted the importance of having access to appropriate, accessible and well-trained counsellors. In particular, comments here focused on the importance of having access to counsellors, and support and social workers, who reflect adoptees in terms of their race and gender. For many it was important not to only have counselling staff that look like “white adoptive mothers”, as this can be a barrier for some adoptees in terms of their ability to build trust in the therapeutic relationship and open up.

“Going to a lot of different counsellors when I was younger, and then going to one Korean counsellor a couple of years ago, that was an eye-opening experience where I was like, oh, I haven’t been talking to any of the counsellors I’ve previously had.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

“Most of the therapists I’ve seen have been middle-aged white women, and they’ve been good therapists, but for a program that’s working with trans-racial intercountry adoptees I think that ideally the therapists should be more diverse.”

Adoptee, interview

A large number of participants commented on the importance of having access to safe, trauma-informed and intercountry adoption aware counselling.

“I’ve had different counselling experiences as I was growing up, and they’re not aware of that dynamic, or if they are they don’t have a complete understanding of that, and whether they understand that as part of trauma or part of development complexities, they don’t look at it like that as a holistic approach.”

Adoptee, interview

It was also noted that adoptees should be empowered to be more involved in choosing their counsellors to ensure that the person they are seeing suits them and their needs.

A large number of workshop, discussion and interview participants (over 40% of those consulted with) also highlighted the importance of more intercountry adoption awareness and trauma-informed training of counsellors, educational psychologists, GPs and allied health workers.

“Particularly a psychologist who specialises in attachment and abandonment and trauma, because they’re pretty thin on the ground here in (name of location).”

Adoptive parent, interview

It was noted that there is currently a lack of availability of practitioners and support workers with an understanding of the specific issues facing adoptees and their adoptive families.

“Everywhere I looked, the GP had no clue, she was a very good GP, but she knew nothing about the psychology of intercountry adoption, so she didn’t know where to refer me to.”

Adoptive parent, interview

“They’ve got professional qualifications, but they’ll try to help you from that perspective that they’ve been trained in, but they don’t necessarily have that adoption experience or knowledge. So the way they try and help you they may think it’s something else and that trauma that adoptees may or may not have may not even come into question in the advice or help they try to give you.”

Adoptee, interview

It was noted here that unskilled or non-intercountry adoption aware counsellors or therapists can cause trauma for adoptees, as well as feelings of guilt for parents. Participants relayed that this can result in serious and negative outcomes such as mental health issues, suicidal ideation, or criminal behaviour. It was suggested that there should be an accessible list of “counsellors and psychologists who have experience in intercountry adoption”, as well as more counsellors with lived experience.

A large number of adoptees and adoptive parents suggested the need for **greater availability and flexibility of counselling.**

Many adoptees and/or parents expressed that they experience long wait times before being able to access much-needed counselling. It was also noted that the number of counselling sessions provided is not adequate and does not allow adoptees or parents to adequately address issues, “build a program” or have consistency and ongoing trusted support.

A need for greater flexibility was suggested, in terms of the times offered by counsellors and the locations offered for counselling, with many participants saying the options they were offered were limited and did not meet their needs.

“They were only available during the day, which meant my husband and I taking time off work. So yes, it was great to meet with them to start with, we thought she (the counsellor) was good, but from a practical perspective my husband just couldn’t keep taking time off work.”

Adoptive parent, interview

It was suggested here that more recognised providers of counselling in some locations are needed to ensure the best fit for the adoptee, noting a best fit may not be achieved with the first or only counsellor they are referred to. Related to this, the need for a greater variety of therapy types in locations around Australia was also noted.

“There’s a six to twelve month wait for play therapy in (location), and even then neither of the therapists really understand attachment theory in relation to adoption.”

Adoptive parent, interview

The importance of having access to case workers was also highlighted, along with the importance of consistency of case workers and counsellors, with participants noting that these roles often change, making it hard to build trusted relationships and resulting in the need to “tell my story over and over again”. The important role of social workers in providing informal support, or support that is “less rigid than that of a counsellor”, for intercountry adoptees was also noted.

“It wasn’t until a few years ago when (name of service) employed a social worker that we had the right kind of support for our daughter in that they took her out socially for just an hour and they maintained that over the course of 18 months or maybe two years. And my daughter started to open up and share her inner world a bit with those social workers.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Adoptees also suggested here the need for less formal ways of accessing counselling services.

“If there was somewhere that I could leave a note or just organise something online or do a Skype meeting or something like that I feel like I would have done that long before I got into contact with a person over the phone.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

It was also noted that there needs to be more options for referrals to, and support from, a range of allied health workers to support the needs of adoptive children. The importance of adoptive parents being listened to and have their needs taken seriously was expressed here, as well the importance of the ICAFSS remaining a free service, noting the high costs of all of the supports required for many intercountry adoptees and/or adoptive parents.

Many adoptees noted the need for different or diverse models and modes of therapy, including:

- Trauma informed counselling
- Trauma-based therapy
- Therapeutic counselling for teenagers
- Relationship counselling through the lens of adoption
- Filial therapy
- Play therapy
- Arts and physical therapy

“Not just sitting down and talking, because adoption is trauma-based, and so where does trauma live? It sits in the body or lives in the body. I’ve been doing a lot of, over the years, art therapy, dance therapy, different things, acupuncture. So access to that, but that costs money.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

The importance of improved access to crisis support was highlighted, along with the need for improved mental health support for typical presentations such as addiction, depression, anxiety or eating disorders.

Many participants also noted the need for more funding for counselling, noting that “\$900,000 per year is not adequate given the size of the intercountry adoption community and the issues they face”.

Relating to **the current ICAFSS counselling service, delivered by Relationship Matters, positive feedback from participants** were that the service:

- Is free.

“Because it’s free, that’s really comforting because over the past 15 years or so I’ve spent a lot of money paying different therapists that were recommended to me, some of whom had some specialisation in trans-racial adoption and some who didn’t. So I’ve spent a small fortune, I think, on my mental health and I think when those therapists didn’t have an understanding of adoption, even if they were good therapists, I think in some cases that was just money down the drain.”

Adoptee, interview

“It’s critically important for this service to continue. You can’t not continue, I think it would destroy some beautiful children and families, to be honest, that otherwise wouldn’t be able to afford the costs of the process”.

Adoptive parent, interview

“We are still looking for a good paediatrician for my son, and I can’t pay \$250 on a monthly basis at the moment and pay \$100 for speech and pay \$50 for OT and pay for psychology.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Provides access to counsellors who are intercountry adoption aware.

“The person that I spoke to was very knowledgeable and knew her stuff really well. I didn’t expect her to understand where I was coming from not being an intercountry adoptee, but that didn’t matter because she was, and still is, really good at what she does. So having someone who got me without me having to explain too much.”

Adoptee, interview

- Provides a central point of contact for adoptees and adoptive parents “so you know where to start”.
- Has helped parents through challenging periods with their adoptive child.
- Allows adoptees to bring partners or family members to counselling sessions.
- Fills gaps in service provision and counselling support left by state and territory support.

“The ACT government was sort of like, we can offer you two counselling sessions, I think. But then (the ICAFSS staff member) was like ‘I don’t think it should be just be two, we can offer you more than that’. So it was a bit of a godsend.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Is effective in providing referrals to more specialised support when needed, including mental health services.

Many parents also commented positively on the specific ‘case manager’ or ‘case worker’ support that had been provided by International Social Services Australia, noting that this was highly effective and supportive, especially in guiding parents through the adoption process and the process of searching for origins.

“Just some practical, hands-on, really effective suggestions of what to do in this moment when you’re feeling really excited and quite overwhelmed and not sure where to get the best advice from.”

Adoptive parent, interview

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Large numbers of adoptive parents (including over 60% of adoptive parents interviewed) commented on the importance of having access to education, training and support throughout their adoption journey.

Many parents noted the importance of pre-adoption support and counselling for prospective adoptive parents. It was noted that this includes:

- Inter-country adoption family counselling.
- Conversations with, and advice of, adult inter-country adoptees and other adoptive parents.
- Encouraging of pre-adoptive parents to learn the language of the country they are adopting from.
- Translation of key documents accessed by many prospective adoptive parents.

“If the basic stuff could be translated and kept updated, that would be a huge help, rather than just seeing it as a stop sign or huge barrier to overcome.”

Pre-adoptive parent, interview

Adoptive parents (including prospective adoptive parents and adoptive parents reflecting on their own experiences prior to adoption) highlighted the need for support within the country they are adopting from, including clarity around the support they can access through in-country contacts.

“There’s a person that’s been paid by the government to provide support in whatever form he can, but there’s no list of what he can offer or provide, so you’re kind of going in blind. Looking forward, if there was a formalised list of the services that they offer, whether it be information on translators that they’ve used in the past that have been successful, lawyers, or security in the country, or travel agents, things like that that the person can assist with.”

Prospective adoptive parent, interview

Inter-country adoptees also suggested the need for better screening of prospective adoptive parents, as well as mandatory education of prospective adoptive parents to ensure they understand the trauma associated with inter-country adoption. Adult adoptees and adoptee-led advocacy groups saw a role they could have in educating prospective adoptive parents. The importance of ongoing support for adoptive parents to ensure the well-being of adoptees was also noted here.

“I wish that all adoptive parents had mandatory education in terms of the trauma that adoptees may experience, the lifelong trauma that they might experience, because there’s still this belief, this peddled belief, that ‘oh, this kid’s now adopted, we love it, it’s getting basic human rights, you know, shelter, food, etc., why is this kid angry? Why aren’t they bonding with me?’”

Adoptee, interview

Many adoptive parents suggested the need for greater and more sensitive support during the waiting period between being allocated an adoptive child and being able to meet them. It was noted that departmental inactivity, lack of responsiveness or insensitivity could create distress and anxiety for parents during this period.

Many participants also highlighted the importance of early intervention and support for parents immediately after adoption occurs, specific to needs of the family and child.

“The early intervention, the early support, before children are really displaying even any signs, in lots of cases, can be some of the most beneficial. The earlier you start with children, the more likely it is that they’re not going to get to that crisis.”

Adoptive parent, small group discussion

“We really could have done with some family counselling at that stage from somebody who understood the unique journey of an older adoptive child. I think we attended some counselling through a local counselling service, but we didn’t persist because we felt that they didn’t understand where we were coming from.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Many parents also highlighted the need for **ongoing and long-term support**, therapy, education and training and support. It was noted here that initial support for, and contact with, adoptive parents often “drops away” over time. Some parents noted they had no, or little, post adoption support in any form.

“We had nobody support us, contact us, no one’s been with us through that entire journey.”

Adoptive parent, interview

It was noted here that the ongoing support needs of adoptive parents include:

- support to engage with the cultural communities of the country their child comes from.
- support for parents to be more active in providing cultural safety and cultural experiences for their children.
- ongoing support over long periods of time to help parents to workthrough significant issues such as problems with attachment.
- organised trauma informed parenting support.
- support for parents to deal with emotional stress and/or burnout.
- proactive engagement by support services to reach parents who are less engaged or active in seeking support and communicating with them when events and activities are available.
- support for parents to engage schools and/or practitioners.
- support to help parents understand the difference between the needs of their adoptive and biological children.

It was also observed that many parents may not want to reach out for support due to not wanting to be seen as bad or potentially harmful parents.

“For families that have really big difficulties with their children, they’re actually scared of telling anyone, so they hide it and they’re too fearful if their child will be removed or if they’ve got subsequent applications.”

Adoptive parent, interview

It was noted that normalising the challenging experiences families will face and proactively breaking down barriers to help seeking was viewed as critical to supporting new adoptive families.

Additional ideas for support which is valuable for adoptive parents included access to telephone or helpline support services.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND AVAILABLE SUPPORTS AND SERVICES

Many participants (especially those in workshop settings) suggested the need for easier access to useful and reliable information, as well as more readily available information on available services and support.

Comments here focused strongly on **the need for information about available support to be easy to find**. Many participants noted the need for a one-stop-shop or hub to guide people to the support and information they need. The importance of localised information and support was also raised, with a role for local coordinators or ICAFSS workers suggested here to “meet adoptees and families, build trust and link them to appropriate local services”.

Many participants also suggested the need for grants and/or support for existing support groups, particularly those that are adoptee or adoptive family led, who are doing important and trusted work with those in the intercountry adoption community.

“We’re coming from the perspective of: we don’t care who offers these services, just so long as they’re there. Please help our community. We’re the backbone of what we want, and we’ve been saying it for years, so why aren’t you funding us?”

Adoptee, small group discussion

The importance of greater promotion of available services was raised here, including the need for greater promotion and advertising of the ICAFSS and other services.

“In my experience it was challenging to access or know about services”

Adoptee, workshop

“As a person with disability, having access to an individual support person to get to events and knowing about the existence of this service. I only found out about ICAFSS through Red Cross in 2015”.

Adoptee, workshop

Participants highlighted the importance of developing new, practical resource guides, fact sheets, case study videos and website content. Adoptees were willing to contribute to the development of such resources, with appropriate support.

Intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents also commented on the importance of providing basic information and resources to other major services and supports adoptees and their families engage within their communities, such as support-lines (Lifeline) mental health services, general practitioners and education institutions.

SUPPORT FOR SEARCHING FOR ORIGINS

Many adoptees and adoptive parents noted the importance of accessing support for the tracing of origins and reunification processes. This included the need for support for:

- Undertaking DNA testing, including preparation support, guidance on results and the need for this to be free.
- Search and reunification assistance, including advocates who can help facilitate this.
- Support across borders and within the country of origin, including clarity around the support that can be accessed.
- Assistance with paperwork and access to records, including the ability to question inaccuracies in information.
- Translation and cross-cultural support.
- Counselling and emotional support during this process.
- Practical support and guidance for dealing with invasion of privacy and other issues relating to adoptees being traced by their birth families.
- Support for adoptees whose adoptive parents are not supportive during this experience.
- Legal support.

More detail on the practical and emotional support adoptees and adoptive parents suggested were needed is provided in the specific section on searching for origins later in this report.

INVOLVEMENT, LEADERSHIP AND VALIDATION OF THOSE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

Many adoptees suggested there is a need for more involvement of adoptees in planning, in engaging with DSS and the ICAFSS, and in advisory groups and key sector bodies. It was noted here that having people with lived experience in these roles would ensure valuable experience and knowledge is retained in the sector on a long-term basis.

“For us, as a community, it very much feels like a one-way street. If they’re going to help us, it means doing it in a way that’s sustainable long-term and means we’re not repeating ourselves 50 million times every time their staff changes over.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

Suggestions to achieve this included development and support of an adoptee advisory or reference group, as well as funding and support to empower key people in the community with lived experience.

The need for more research to define what adoptee needs are and what an effective service is was expressed here, along with the need for the adoptee community to have more clarity around how they can get involved in supporting others and in decision-making processes.

Adoptees also highlighted the importance of validation of their experiences, both formal and informal. It was noted here that it is important that there is acknowledgement that everyone deals with a story of adoption differently, as well as acknowledgement of the complexities around individual and family experiences.

OTHER IMPORTANT AREAS OF SUPPORT

Other support needs which participants suggested were important to them included:

- Support that meets the different requirements of adoptees and adoptive families at different stages, including lifecycle specific support at all life stages and phases. It was noted that this needs to include support for families early in the process to “help the family as a whole”, as well as specific support for adoptees who are pre-teens, teenagers and adults, with adolescents seen by many as a key group who need support, including counselling and access to peer activities.
- Country-specific support, including building of cultural competency among associations, support services and practitioners.
- Cultural community support and ideas for how to join or create cultural communities.
- The need for more cohesion between federal and state agencies, and between sector organisations, as it is “hard to trust and form relationships when there is no cohesive framework or responsive central authority”.
- Support to help adoptees and parents to address racism, including development of a better understanding of racism in all its forms, what to recognise, how to explain this to children, and when to call it out.
- Building of broader community awareness and understanding about intercountry adoption.

- Greater support for intercountry adoptees within schools (as outlined in more detail later in this report), including more resources for explaining adoption trauma to teachers, counsellors within schools, and assistance for dealing with schools and educators.

“They get to schools, they’re behind, they’ve got a whole load of things they don’t understand. They need some learning supports, they need some advocacy in schools, all those sorts of things.”

Adoptive parent, small group discussion

- Support for parents to find the school which best meets the needs of their adoptive child/ren.

“Parents need to be supported to help their kids find somewhere where they feel safe and valued and part of the school group.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Better support for adoptees living in rural and remote communities, or those who are isolated in any way.
- Support for siblings who are not adopted.



This section of the report provides a summary of ideas provided by workshop, discussion and interview participants about how the support needs of adoptees and adoptive parents could be met. This includes specific feedback on support in the following areas:

- Social and emotional support
- Counselling and information related to:
 - identity formation
 - cultural connection
 - family formation
- Parenting support and education.

ADDRESSING THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF THOSE IN THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION COMMUNITY

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

The most commonly mentioned source of social and emotional support adoptees and adoptive parents noted as important to them was **support from others with shared experience**. This incorporated a range of forms of peer support, including:

- Connection to other families.
- Mentoring, especially for young adoptees and teenagers.
- Access to role models.
- Online interaction and Skype.
- Regular social events.
- Wellness retreats.

It was suggested that there needs to be more funding and support to ensure options for social and emotional support from peers are better coordinated, with the important role support groups play in helping adoptees to connect with their culture and community noted here.

Large numbers of workshop, group discussion and interview participants (over 50% of those consulted with) also commented on the importance of accessing counselling to assist them with social and emotional support. This included the importance of counselling for parents, as well as a range of modalities of counselling or therapy for adoptees, including life story work, play therapy, art therapy, equine therapy and other forms of therapy.

Parents of young adoptees highlighted issues with costs when finding a good counsellor or support person, noting these are usually in private practice. It was also suggested that the amount of sessions offered to adoptees through different services is not enough.

Many adoptees and adoptive parents commented on the importance of being able to access counsellors with intercountry adoption experience and training, with the importance of having a choice of counsellors, including cultural background and gender, noted.

Many participants also highlighted the need for **different types of support for adoptees and/or parents at different ages, stages or phases of life**. It was noted by some parents that they would have benefited from accessing services such as the ICAFSS earlier in their journey and while their adoptive child was younger.

“Had such a service been available, had we known about it, it could have changed my daughter’s life and it would have changed our lives.”

Adoptive parent, interview

The importance of specific support for adoptive teenagers, or those aged 15-21, was commented on, with adoptees and parents noting this can be a critical, and often difficult, period of identity formation. It was also noted that there needs to be specific support around key dates and life events, such as birthdays of adoptees.

Some workshop, group discussion and interview participants also suggested the importance of:

- Greater central coordination of available support, with the need for consistency or clarity in terms of who provides services and support.
- Greater awareness and promotion of available social and emotional support, including greater awareness of the ICAFSS (as outlined in the previous section of this report).
- Validation of experiences (both formal and informal).
- Support to help to address post-adoption depression, grief for adoptees and parents, and trauma.
- Support to deal with issues such as racism and isolation.
- Improved access to crisis support for adoptees and adoptive parents.
- Normalising access to support and counselling, and reinforcing the confidential and non-judgemental nature of many support options.
- Training of doctors, psychologists and allied health workers.
- Training and education of teachers and schools, with participants noting the need for:
 - More support for schools and teachers in how to work with and “support adoptive kids”.
 - Greater input of parents in schools and “having their concerns or issues listened to and acted upon”.
 - Linking of authorities and counsellors to schools to support parents and adoptees more directly.
- Access by adoptees to tools to help understand and analyse their experiences.
- Development of greater community awareness, acceptance and support, including addressing social normatives that “adoptees are okay” and media narratives which portray adoptees as being “saved”.

COUNSELLING AND INFORMATION RELATED TO IDENTITY FORMATION, CULTURAL CONNECTION AND/OR FAMILY FORMATION

Many adoptees observed that it is important to understand that 'family' is a complex term for adoptees, who can be caught between three families: their own, their adoptive family and their birth family. It was noted that care should be taken when referring to the 'family' of an intercountry adoptee.

Many adoptees and adoptive parents highlighted the **importance of counselling**, including:

- Attachment focused and trauma informed counselling.
- Therapeutic groups for adoptees.
- Support for addressing racism.

The importance of matching therapy and modalities of therapy with the specific needs of individuals and families was also noted here.

Many workshop, group discussion and interview participants highlighted the importance of **education and support for parents**, noting that this needs to begin as early as possible and that there is a need for early intervention and foundational work with adoptive parents, recognising that "this is a different type of parenting". It was suggested here that there needs to be more proactive promotion of the availability of support and information for parents, as well as regular checking in with parents by services such as the ICAFSS.

Some workshop, group discussion and interview participants also suggested the importance of:

- Improved support to ensure the well-being and safety of adoptees within family units.
- Greater clarity around available services and support and "who provides what and at what stage".
- Exploration of ways to engage with younger adoptees who may not participate in peer activities or 'open up' during counselling.
- Adoption-aware crisis support for families and individuals.
- More, updated and "more useful" online resources.
- Greater access to informed and intercountry adoption aware counsellors.
- A focus on practical strategies parents can use to help their children.
- Learning of language in school and promotion and support of cultural connection for intercountry adoptees.
- Workshops and support on managing intimate and significant relationships as an adoptee.
- Mentoring for adoptees by other intercountry adoptees.

PARENTING SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Many workshop, group discussion and interview participants commented on the importance of **embedding parental support and education into the start of the adoption process** so that “parents can help their children when support becomes needed.” The importance of pre-adoption screening and ensuring parents know, as much as possible, the “full story” of the child they are adopting was also noted.

Some workshop, group discussion and interview participants also suggested the importance of:

- A one-stop shop or online hub database to show what services and supports are available to parents and to provide them with practical information resources, including:
 - Webinars.
 - Video resources and case studies.
 - Examples of how to address trauma related issues and approach difficult conversations.

Areas of education and support which it was noted are important for parents included:

- Education around the country of origin of their child and its culture.
- Specific trauma-informed parenting information and training.
- Building of parental understanding of cultural identity, trauma and developmental trauma.
- Attachment-based parenting.
- Dealing with racism.
- Addressing racism within the adoptive family.

It was suggested that parents need to be better **supported and equipped to support adoptees at all ages**, with specific support and resources to help parents when their adoptees are children and teenagers.

It was also noted that there is a need for:

- Immediate and 24-hour crisis support options for parents.
- Ongoing support and services, as these are seen to drop off once adoption has happened.
- Education for extended family and friends.
- Peer support and “more online communities” to help parents understand issues that may emerge at different ages and stages.
- Specific support for intercountry adoptees who become parents.

Many participants also suggested that it may be important to **provide information and resources to a wide range of services and supports** that intercountry adoptees and their parents come into contact with. It was noted that provision of awareness- raising resources and information to a range of services and supports, including allied health services, will ensure greater understanding of the specific needs of intercountry adoptees.



This section of the report provides a summary of ideas provided by workshop, discussion and interview participants about how support could be better provided for intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents. This includes specific feedback on support in the following areas:

- Counselling, relationship education and support to address past adoption experiences that can impact mental health and wellbeing.
- Counselling, relationship education and support to address family relationship issues arising in connection with undertaking an intercountry adoption process.

IDEAS FOR DIFFERENT FORMS OF SUPPORT

COUNSELLING, RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION AND SUPPORT TO ADDRESS PAST ADOPTION EXPERIENCES THAT CAN IMPACT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

A large number of those involved in workshops, group discussions and interviews (including over 40% of interviewees) highlighted the **importance of peer support and mentoring in preventing and supporting positive mental health for adoptees**. This was the most commonly mentioned theme in relation to increasing ways to support positive mental health and included a strong focus on the importance of group events or activities, which include 'informal counselling' and support for adoptees.

Many adoptees noted here the importance of mentoring of adoptees by others with lived experience to help prevent mental health issues and promote well-being. Ideas here included:

- Small group activities and get-togethers.
- Teen support groups.
- Therapeutic discussion groups.
- One-to-one mentoring for children who may be resistant to group activities.
- Mentoring support to help with issues such as anxiety or attachment issues.
- Fun activities with a mindfulness focus for young adoptees.

It was suggested here that funding and support needs to be provided to enable peer support groups and mentors to provide much-needed support to other adoptees. This included ideas for the development of a database or list of willing adoptees who are willing to mentor or support younger adoptees, as well as small grants to groups to support adoptees in terms of their mental health and wellbeing.

A large number of those involved in workshops, group discussions and interviews commented on the importance of counselling for adoptees to help them with their mental health and well-being. It was noted that counselling needs to be free, accessible and flexible, with opportunities to enter and exit counselling over the lifetime of an adoptee and options for intensive and regular counselling when required.

Adoptees also highlighted the need for:

- Group counselling to normalise emotions.
- Support throughout all life stages and phases, including support and counselling for children and teenagers.
- Trauma-based or trauma informed counselling.
- Diverse modalities of counselling and support, including 'non-talking' therapies.
- Family therapy and support.
- Access to therapeutic based case management.

Many adoptees and adoptive parents noted the importance of **training of practitioners and key people such as teachers to be more intercountry adoption aware** to assist in preventing and addressing mental health issues for adoptees. Comments here focused on the importance of education and training for practitioners, as well as support for and improved access to more practitioners who are aware of, and trained in, intercountry adoption, including those with specific country-based understandings. It was suggested that there is a need for:

- Uniform and high-quality intercountry adoption training for practitioners.
- Support services and mental health services with adoptee and/or culturally and linguistically diverse representation.
- More adoptees in counsellor roles.
- Clear referral pathways to enable adoptees to access the best possible mental health support.

Many workshop, group discussion and interview participants commented on the need for **greater promotion and support of existing and accessible mental health and well-being supports and services**, including promotion in rural and remote communities and development of a database or central information hub of intercountry adoption aware and trauma informed services.

It was noted that it is important to recognise and support existing networks and experts, as well as empowering those with lived experience. Adoptees highlighted the importance of engaging with those with lived experience respectfully, as opposed to "mining the experts of their Intellectual Property". It was suggested that it is important to remunerate adoptees appropriately for their time and expertise. It was also suggested that small grants could be provided for the mental health and well-being activities of community groups and peer support services, with this funding flexible and adequate, and not "breadcrumbs".

Other suggestions for preventing and/or addressing mental health issues in the intercountry adoption community included:

- Development of a comprehensive online information portal, including specific information accessible for people based on their country of origin and their support needs.
- Development of a one-stop hub for access to services and resources. This was seen as critical by parents of young intercountry adoptees.
- National coordination, standards and guidelines
- Ensuring integration of, and cooperation between, federal and state services to support adoptees and/or adoptive parents.

- Improved mapping or research of existing support pathways.
- Development of practical information resources, including ideas for:
 - Articles and factsheets.
 - Website content.
 - Online support and information for teenagers.
 - Case studies.
- Placing a focus on the prevention of mental illness and promoting mental health and wellbeing (not just addressing mental illness).
- Better pre-screening of potential adoptive parents.

It was also noted that some adoptees do not present themselves as in need of support “due to a lifetime of feeling the need to please others, often due to fear of rejection”, and that it may not always be obvious to others, including mental health workers, when they need support.

It was suggested that the specific needs of adoptees should be recognised when applying for a mental health plan, and that they should be directed to specific intercountry adoption support.

Participants highlighted that there needs to be more regular and proactive engagement and ‘checking in’ with families and adoptee children as part of a preventative approach to mental health, as well as more support for addressing the impacts of key issues such as racism.

COUNSELLING, RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION AND SUPPORT TO ADDRESS FAMILY RELATIONSHIP ISSUES ARISING IN CONNECTION WITH UNDERTAKING AN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION PROCESS.

Many adoptees and adoptive parents referred to the importance of **access to appropriate counselling** to help address family relationship issues, including the importance of:

- Specific counselling for parents.
- Whole family counselling or family therapy relating to navigating being an adoptive family and the challenges that come with this.
- Age appropriate and specific support, including specific support for children, teenagers and young adults. It was noted here that the teen years can be a critical and difficult part of the life of an adoptee, with counselling highly important at this stage. It was also noted that young adult life is another pivotal period where adoptees are “cementing our identities” and may need specific counselling and support.
- Real-time support options for young people and instant or timely access to support when needed.

It was suggested that all adoptees and their families need access to a database of all services and support available to them, and that this should include a clear listing of, and links to, supports available at different ages and stages.

Many workshop, discussion group and interview participants highlighted the need for **intercountry adoption aware training for parents and families** as a key way to address family relationship issues. This included a number of comments relating to the importance of cultural inclusivity training before, during and after adoption to raise awareness of the importance of culture and cultural identity for adoptees. Other suggestions for training for adoptive parents included:

- Race and cultural awareness training.
- Awareness of the impacts of racism.
- Awareness of trauma and complex trauma.
- Training for parents to “expect the crisis, rather than be surprised by it”.
- Therapeutic parenting.
- Mental health training.

Many workshop, discussion group and interview participants commented on the **importance of access to peer support to assist families to deal with relationship issues**. The importance of socialising and “normalising the process” was noted here, with suggestions for peer engagement including adolescent groups, retreats, weekend family activities, and tailored support for adult adoptees to undertake training to be mentors to other adoptees. It was suggested that peer activities need to be fun and less formal when involving children and teenagers, and that this should include “doing normal activities together so the focus is not always about being adopted”.

Other suggestions for addressing family relationship issues arising in connection with undertaking an intercountry adoption process included:

- Increasing and enhancing intercountry adoption awareness and competence among social workers and in mental health and other services.
- Ensuring both initial and ongoing contact with adoptive families, with a continuity of care which includes follow ups and check ins, especially through the teenage years, but also into adulthood. This included suggestions for 'life stage checkpoints' to ensure support is provided at critical junctures in the life of an adoptee.
- Greater awareness and promotion of the ICAFSS, as well as of all assistance available to intercountry adoptees and families at all ages of the adoptee's life.
- Online support for young intercountry adoptees.
- Development of educational tools, books, articles, and "reports of the adoptee experience".
- Development of an online resource library and programs, including case studies or stories about identity or exploration of cultural roots and featuring adult adoptees talking about their experiences.
- More evidence-based support and information.

This section of the report provides a summary of the practical and emotional support intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents would like from a service when searching for their origins or supporting someone to do so.

SEARCH FOR ORIGINS

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Large numbers of adoptees and adoptive parents (including most workshop attendees) commented on the need for **more practical information on the processes of tracing and reunification**. It was noted that there should be a central repository of important information, with links to support. It was suggested that information needs to be provided about:

- how to start the process
- common barriers and things to be aware of
- common issues around contact and reunion
- awareness of the probability of success of the searching process and likely outcomes.

Many participants also suggested here that the process for searching for origins needs to be streamlined, with a more holistic approach to counselling, support and translation.

Related to this, a large number of adoptees and adoptive parents noted the importance of having access to **better country-specific support and information**. Comments here focused on the need for those searching for origins to have access to clear information on processes, regulations, eligibility and other key considerations in each country. It was suggested that there needs to be:

- Country specific workshops, facilitated by adoptees from the country of origin.
- Links to relevant embassies, support services and organisations in the country of origin.
- Trusted local contacts and support, and access to reputable organisations and agencies in the country of origin.

“All this different information coming out of different agencies, and not knowing whether you could trust them. Hearing all of the horror stories and the lies that have been told through those agencies.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

- Skilled staff to assist in navigating search options in each country.

“When I was searching I had no one. I couldn’t even ask another adoptee because they weren’t from my country.”

Adoptee, interview

- Clear communication from support staff about process and timelines for the relevant country of origin.

“We had a lovely lady who really did all of the intercountry connection with (country of origin) directly for us, and she was fantastic in keeping us very up to date with what was going on and very open and honest, so we knew exactly what we were going into.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Support for training of support workers and services in each country of origin.
- Funds to find the right services and people in the country of origin.
- Support for adoptees and parents to develop a full understanding of the bureaucratic process in the country of origin in order to navigate the system.

Many parents of young adoptees observed that International Social Services Australia had provided excellent support in assisting them through the search and unification processes in their relevant countries.

Participants also noted the need for the Australian Government to ensure there are safe and endorsed processes and to address problems with corruption and coercion in countries of origin, including profiteering, manipulation of information and DNA test results, and bribery.

A large number of adoptees and adoptive parents highlighted the importance of having **access to professional support, counselling and case workers** throughout the processes of searching and reunification. This included the need for appropriate counselling options, as well as support to:

- Guide people through the process and explain what information needs to be provided at each stage.
- Explain privacy and confidentiality aspects relating to the search and reunification processes.
- Provide legal support and representation and assist with understanding of international law.
- Assist with understanding of consent and the inappropriateness of unsolicited contact.

Many comments here focused on the need for a model where a case worker is able to accompany the adoptee to their country of origin and “provide them with the same duty of care as when they originally left the country”.

“You might as well be shooting yourself to the moon. You land somewhere, you feel like a complete alien. I don’t think any of us speak our language, we’re all learning our language. So we can’t speak the language, our social cues are screwed, we can’t read politics, we can’t read the body language, there’s nothing that’s guiding us.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

It was suggested here that there needs to be consistency and continuity of case managers and counsellors to ensure that adoptees are provided with ongoing and trusted support throughout this difficult process.

“It was pretty [crap], if I think about it, to be given a case worker, develop that trust relationship: here’s what we’re going to be able to do for you, and oh, I’m going off on leave now and here’s another one.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

Many adoptees and adoptive parents commented on the high costs involved with the process of searching for origins, along with the need for funding support from government. It was noted here that the current lack of funding “sends a message that you’re on your own”, which is isolating and shows adoptees they are not valued. It was also observed that there are currently “ad hoc processes” and a gap between federal and state processes when it comes to funding and support for searching for origins.

“What happens is when it goes back to states to provide us with post-adoption support, it just doesn’t happen. They give it all to local adoption, and intercountry gets no funding, and you’ll see that in every state except South Australia.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

Adoptees and adoptive parents suggested there needs to be funding for:

- Hiring of professionals, search workers or investigators to assist with searches.
- Paying for in-country advertising.
- Legal support and representation.
- Costs to access documents or records in the country of origin.
- Applying for Australian or country of origin citizenship.
- Costs involved in applying for and accessing records and information.
- Applying for visas or passports.
- Accommodation while in the country of origin.
- Translation and interpreter services.
- Visits by biological parents to Australia.

It was noted here that it is important for government to both support and fund the process of searching for origins as it is fundamental to the well-being of many intercountry adoptees.

“I can’t really articulate the words about how much better my life is since knowing my family, and it was something that was really crucial for my well-being to know where I came from and to know my story. For so many people, they don’t get that opportunity, and they have this big hole in their heart and this big question mark around that.”

Adoptee, interview

Many adoptees and adoptive parents also highlighted the need for **translation services and cultural support**.

“They need support, and especially cultural and language support.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

“I did not know who to go to if I had a question about ‘oh, my birth family said this or they did this, and I don’t know whether that’s just Korean culture or what’s the expectation here?’”

Adoptee, interview

The need for **greater support to access documentation and information** was referred to by a large number of workshop, discussion group and interview participants. It was noted here that finding and accessing correct information is highly important and can be difficult, and that there can be issues with falsified records, as well as issues with the translation of, or accuracy of, information from the country of origin. It was suggested that there needs to be:

- Someone available to talk through and explain the adoptive records when they are provided for the first time.
- Better management of expectations around availability of information and building of awareness of privacy laws and cultural restrictions in information provision.
- Better initial and ongoing creation and maintenance of records, both in Australia and in countries of origin.

Related to this, some adoptees and adoptive parents highlighted the need for **more timely and better communication from state agencies or services**. It was suggested that there needs to be more clarity around requests for information or lodgement of forms, with timeframes in place in the form of a service guarantee to let adoptees know their requests or information have been received and what the next steps are. It was also noted that there needs to be personal engagement, where possible, with adoptees and adoptive parents as this can be a “traumatic and isolating experience”.

Many people also commented on the need for widening or strengthening of government policy in relation to searching for origins. It was noted here that government recognition of the importance of this process, along with funding, is essential. Suggestions here included:

- The importance of better coordination between agencies and/or service providers.
- Ensuring support provided to intercountry adoptees reflects that provided to domestic adoptees.
- Using learnings from programs such as Link Up to improve searching processes and support.
- An increased role for the Australian Government in brokering relationships with other governments for adoptees and their families, as well as connecting better with other countries to share information and “make the process easier”.
- The need for the Australian Government to hold other countries accountable where there are barriers or issues.
- The need to address the issue of adoption as a result of trafficking and provide upfront and proactive support to adoptees affected by these practices, including legal support.
- The need for support or funding for adoptees to have a voice at the United Nations.

Some adoptees and adoptive parents also suggested the need for support to undertake DNA testing, including the importance of having access to reliable information and guidance, and the need for financial support and funding, and central coordination of testing.

A number of adoptees and adoptive parents indicated there is a need to return to previous models of support for tracing and reunification processes. It was noted here that a case worker-based approach to support was seen as highly effective, including support for children and support to link families to trusted support in the country of origin.

“If there is any chance of reviving that funding... to continue doing that work, that would be great, because otherwise people are forced into the hands of operators, you don’t know how ethical they are, how reputable they are, they charge quite a lot of money.”

Adoptive parent, phone interview

Positive comments on previous service models also focused on the importance of a sensitive approach to support, with specific guidance provided around how to work with those in the country of origin.

“It is so incredibly emotive, and you need to be trusting the person you’re talking to and you need to know that they have an awareness of the wider issues in intercountry adoption and an awareness of the amount of information which can be misrepresented cross-culturally, the awareness of the relinquishing parents or families and how things might affect them. That sort of individual case manager guidance is invaluable.”

Adoptive parent, interview

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

A large number of adoptees and adoptive parents highlighted the need for **trained and intercountry adoption aware counsellors and case workers** to support people through the process of searching for origins. This was the most commonly suggested emotional support needed by those searching for origins or supporting someone to do so. This included pre-search counselling to maintain realistic expectations, as well as counselling to assist adoptees to process the psychological impacts of finding and/ or meeting their biological families.

The importance of having access to social workers and counsellors with the same background as the adoptee was referred to, along with the importance of ongoing training and support for case workers, and the need for continuity of support workers, case managers and/or counsellors.

The importance of open lines of communication to enable mental health and emotional support from counsellors, therapists and advocates was also noted.

Many comments focused on the need for **emotional support to help adoptees to manage their expectations and to deal with the impacts and effects of meeting family**. It was suggested that it is important that adoptees are supported to:

- Have a full understanding of the reunion process.
- Have a full understanding of the ramifications of the outcomes of tracing, including emotionally preparing for all possible scenarios or outcomes.
- Deal with the difference between their expectations before meeting family and the realities of what this looks like, and how it impacts both the adoptee and their families.

“There’s the narrative you see in the media about this really joyful reunion, and then we don’t hear anything about what happens after that.”

Adoptee, interview

- Have a “safety net” and be supported through outcomes such as rejection, not finding their family, having contact only for a while, and/or negotiating this relationship over time.
- Provide ongoing support after reunification, with adoptees noting here that often the support they had received dropped away after their initial meeting with their birth family.

“Once the reunion happened, it was kind of like ‘well, my job’s done’, and there were no services offered about counselling or support. Nothing was offered, and there was no ongoing relationship after that.”

Adoptee, interview

- Dealing with the feeling of disconnectedness that results from visits to the country of birth, and upon return to Australia.

“It’s awful to feel that disconnect. I feel it every time I go back to Vietnam, it feels so good, and then you come back and you just basically crash.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

Many adoptees highlighted the importance through the process of searching for origins of peer support and learning from others. It was noted that adoptees who have already reunited can be effective in providing advice and support for those going through the process, with the importance of mentoring, as well as funding to support this, noted by many adoptees. Other suggestions for peer support for those who are going through the process of searching for origins included:

- Open forums or workshops to share experiences and to provide others with support and understanding.
- Options for support from friends or others during processes such as case reviews.

It was also suggested here that additional support may need to be offered for people who are from countries where there are few adoptees.

“I only met one other Malaysian adoptee recently, not while I was searching, so there wasn’t anyone I could talk to, so that makes it hard.”

Adoptee, interview

Some adoptees commented on the importance of **training and support for adoptive parents** to ensure they are assisting and supporting adoptees through this process. Suggestions here included “ongoing conversations throughout the life of an adoptee”, as well as provision of information and support to enable parents to understand what ‘going back’ can mean for an adoptee.

Other suggestions for emotional support that could be provided to those throughout the process of searching for origins, and on an ongoing basis, included:

- Support for adoptees in terms of managing emotions related to discovering differences in information relating to them, including names and dates of birth.
- Ongoing support for the ongoing impacts of reunification and ‘checking in’ with adoptees and families after reunification. It was noted that the reunion is not the end point, and that “it’s an ongoing thing which will or may mean further support is needed”.
- Sharing of stories of other adoptees who have been through this process or journey, including video case studies.
- Co-design of resources with, and by, adoptees, with no “dry policy documents and resources” as these won’t be used by the younger generation. Suggestions included more innovative means of communicating, including the use of multimedia.
- Provision of tips on when parents should share their child’s story and information.
- Management of, and advice around, the issue of unwanted contact, including addressing the increasing role of social media in allowing adoptees and/or birth families to search and make contact outside of normal processes.

This section of the report provides a summary of the ideas provided by intercountry adoptees, adoptive parents and representatives of the intercountry adoption sector for alternative service delivery models that would support national delivery of the ICAFSS and ensure equitable access for people living in regional and remote areas.

NATIONAL ACCESSIBILITY

Many participants suggested options for improved **regional outreach** to enable counselling and support directly to adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas. This was the most commonly suggested idea for ensuring improved accessibility of the ICAFSS. The importance of face-to-face meetings was commented on by many adoptees, noting that options such as Skype are not appropriate as adoptees want to “talk to a real human being”.

Suggestions for ways to provide more face-to-face support to people in regional and remote areas included:

- Mobile services and counsellors, case workers and/or practitioners visiting regional locations.
- Development of a central hub, or regional hubs, to outsource therapists or other suppliers to meet the requirements of those outside of urban areas.
- Employment of regional coordinators or ICAFSS workers, such as, for example, employing a coordinator for each state and territory to meet adoptees and families, build trust and link them to appropriate local services.
- Use of regional meetings, forums or information workshops, camps and retreats to form groups and connections in regions, connect people to support and facilitate self-sustaining community connections.

Related to this, many participants suggested accessibility of services and support could be improved in regional and remote areas through **leveraging of existing networks** and partnering with regional organisations and service providers.

This included suggestions for training of existing service providers to deliver intercountry adoption aware services and support in regional and remote communities. Many participants noted ideas for skilling and training of regional and remote allied health services, development of a community of practice, and better general education of practitioners, including seminars, webinars, professional development, and embedding of intercountry adoption training in university courses.

“You’ve got to go to the heart of the education model for psychologists so that more of them can actually help in an educated, informed way.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Options for linking the ICAFSS directly to adoptive parents in regional and remote areas during their pre-adoption training were suggested here, along with the idea of having video profiles of counsellors and therapists so that people in regional and remote areas can “see who they are” and get a better sense of the people who might be available to support them.

There were also some suggestions for broader intercountry adoption education in regional and remote communities, as well as training and awareness-raising among teachers and educators.

There were a number of suggestions for working with existing peer support groups and supporting them to extend their networks and activities into regional and remote areas, including:

- Funding peer support networks through small grants to support expansion into regional areas and/or the development of peer groups in smaller communities.
- Funding peer support groups in major centres to hold events in regional communities.

“For us to take our (country of origin) camp to Dubbo. It could be that we hire a room and that could be supported, or maybe the dinner can be supported.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Cross metro/regional links with families and adoptees who have previous experience and can help direct people to relevant support, as well as providing additional peer support.
- Establishment of a peak body to lead the support and coordination of regional peer support groups.

Related to this, the importance of linking of young adoptees in regional and remote areas to mentors and/or support groups was noted, including ideas for retreats, camps and national gatherings to establish mentor relationships and mentoring groups.

“My daughter only gets that one adoption thing each year, but it’s enough. She absolutely loves it, and we wouldn’t have the time or money to do anything else.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Other suggestions for peer support activities or events which could be targeted towards people in a variety of locations around Australia included:

- Joint camps of multiple cultural groups to ensure support for smaller or less empowered groups.
- An annual gathering or conference, with funding support for those in regional or remote communities to attend.

Related to this, many participants highlighted the need for **funding to support travel and engagement** by adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas. This included ideas for travel expenses or transport grants for people to travel to access counselling or support, along with funding for people to attend peer support events or activities in major centres.

Many participants also commented on the need for better promotion of available supports and services, including the ICAFSS, in regional and remote areas, as well as throughout Australia.

“The service seems to be available, however people don’t seem to know about the service.”

Adoptive parent, workshop

It was suggested that key sector organisations and peer support groups should be contacted and engaged with regularly by the ICAFSS, and that there should be more clarity around “who does what and when”.

Many participants also noted the need for **better data and databases** to both clarify the needs and numbers of intercountry adoptees in regional and remote areas, and to direct them to available supports and services. Suggestions here included:

- Searchable databases to show people where there are adoption informed services and supports in their area.
- Mapping of the number of adoptees in regional and remote areas.
- Use of postcodes to develop knowledge of where adoptees and adoptive parents are and improving data of where people are that may need support.

There were a range of suggestions for digital resources and learning tools which may be useful for intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents living in regional and remote areas, including:

- Online learning tools and resources
- Videos, including case studies
- Self-paced video learning
- Podcasts
- Social media, including monitored social media groups and a central Facebook page to provide information from one trusted source, connect people to each other, and promote information about birth countries and cultures (such as promoting milestone or cultural events through the year).

Some participants highlighted the importance of **increased flexibility of access points and delivery types for counselling and support**, including:

- Activities or support after hours, on weekends and during school holidays.
- The need for different types of therapies and modalities, not “just talk therapy”.

Adoptees also noted the need for greater **parent education around the realities of living in a regional or remote community** with adoptive children.

“We really shouldn’t be allowing adoptive parents to adopt a child who lives way out in the boogas, because it’s not in the best interests of that child. They become the only coloured child in a white society. I’ve been that, and I know what it’s like to grow up in rural Australia where you are the only non-white child. It’s not something you want children to be going through in the 21st Century.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

Other suggestions for support for regional and remote intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents, and ways in which these could be delivered, included:

- Crisis support options, including accessible telephone support for people living in all time zones, or options for a 24-hour helpline service or after-hour phone service.
- Greater responsiveness of services when requests for support come from regional and remote communities.
- Use of chat.
- Use of texts.
- Development of an email list of adoptive parents in regional or remote communities and regular sharing of information such as parenting tips.
- More videoconference support or services.
- More accessible and relatable information resources, including engaging or interactive tools for young adoptees (e.g. comic books).
- Ensuring all documents and forms comply with accessibility requirements.

This section of the report provides a summary of ideas provided by workshop discussion and interview participants about how capacity could be built within the intercountry adoption community and sector. This includes suggestions for:

- Supporting or encouraging capacity building and improved collaboration in the service sector.
- Supporting or encouraging peer support and mentorship among adoptees and families.
- Encouraging the development of support networks and information resources for adoptive and prospective adoptive parents.

This section of the report includes a feedback around a number of themes already covered in this report, with more detail included here about the views of those in the intercountry adoption community for how capacity can be built to improve outcomes for adoptees and their families

CAPACITY BUILDING

SUPPORTING OR ENCOURAGING CAPACITY BUILDING AND IMPROVED COLLABORATION IN THE SERVICE SECTOR

A large number of participants highlighted the importance of building capacity through **ensuring those with lived experience are involved in the planning and design of service delivery**, with this the strongest theme emerging in this area from the workshops and small group discussions. A large number of intercountry adoptees suggested there needs to be a peak advisory body of adoptees, as well as the need to have adoptees on boards and in paid consultancy positions.

Adoptees suggested the provision of grants for capacity building for adoptee organisations and groups, along with support for an incubator model for development of more support groups.

“A shortish thing as part of the program that enables a peer to peer supported community to help them to get the kickstart they need to be able to create some sort of presence that doesn’t exist, or to leverage an existing one.”

Adoptee, small group discussion

Other suggestions included:

- Support for more research by adoptees.
- Encouraging and supporting adoptees to share their experiences with others, and to take on roles as counsellors.

“We’re the experts in that field, and with the qualifications and the experience to fall back on, giving us a platform to share that knowledge and that lived experience with people.”

Adoptee, interview

“Having a counsellor who has never adopted or never known someone adopted is not helpful, in my opinion.”

Adoptee, workshop

As noted in earlier sections of this report, a large number of participants (including over 40% of adoptees and parents interviewed) also highlighted the importance of more, and better, education and training of practitioners. This included workshops or training in developmental trauma, as well as training for GPs to support adoptees and provide appropriate referrals to specialist supports and/or counsellors.

“Everyone working in this sector should have much more training to be experts in their field before working with clients. Having annual training conferences or monthly supervision is not good enough to work with a highly traumatised adoptee.”

Adoptee, workshop

It was also suggested that there needs to be better training of social workers to support adoptive parents early in the adoption process, with the need for supportive case workers or advocates at this time also noted.

“The social workers, many of them had come through Child Protection, so kind of came at the job through a lens of mistrust of the parents and suspicion of the parents.”

Adoptive parent, interview

The importance of having counsellors with awareness of issues specific to each country of origin was again commented on here. It was also noted that this is a particularly important issue for smaller or more regional communities where there is currently less choice of experienced and intercountry adoption aware counsellors and therapists. It was suggested that in these locations therapists and counsellors could be linked with intercountry adoption aware specialists in other locations to build their capacity and provide them with advice and support.

It was also suggested that there needs to be greater awareness of the complexities of the needs of intercountry adoptees among practitioners, with it noted that “all children are different and applying the same ideas and therapies to them all does not help anyone”. It was observed here that it can be hard for parents to find doctors or other practitioners who understand the complexity of issues affecting intercountry adoptees, including those related to both mental and physical health. Related to this, it was suggested that adoptive parents should be listened to more by practitioners in terms of the being able to articulate the needs of their child/ren, and that they should be given greater choice of available services, counsellors and allied health workers.

As noted in previous sections of this report, many participants referred to the need for **more and improved education and training of teachers and educators**. Suggestions here included:

- Trauma awareness training for teachers and educators.
- Provision of counsellors to attend schools to help adoptees settle in and deal with key issues as they arise.
- Linking with, and education, of school counsellors.
- Training and education of principals.
- Greater engagement of services and authorities with schools and educators.

“The authorities should have gone to the school and said ‘you need to understand that this boy has come from a traumatised background’, and some guidelines on maybe dealing with this kind of need or behaviour.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Related to this, some participants suggested that there needs to be greater training, education and provision of information to a wide range of services and supports who come into contact with and/or provide support to intercountry adoptees and their families. This included helplines such as Lifeline, mental health services, general practitioners and education institutions.

Some participants also noted the need for **better cooperation and coordination of support within the intercountry adoption sector**. It was suggested here that there needs to be:

- Greater coordination of service delivery and greater cooperation between state/ territory and federal departments, agencies or services.
- Linking of department agencies throughout the adoption process and beyond to provide coordinated support.
- More partnerships between central authorities and service providers.
- Encouragement of child and family support services to recognise the needs of the intercountry adoption community.
- Linking of smaller support groups to larger ones, with support from government.

Some participants commented on the need for a one-stop-shop for coordination of service provision and trusted information which can be easily accessed by adoptees and adoptive parents.

“In terms of coordination, there should be one place, because that creates effectiveness and efficiency.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Comments here also focused on the need for greater consistency and coordination in terms of the people adoptees and their parents need to deal with in accessing support, with the idea of a central and consistent contact point suggested.

“I just want one person. There just should be one network of trained counsellors. All I want is one or two people who know us and who we can learn to trust, and they can help us learn parenting strategies, but equally importantly they can give (name of adoptee) somewhere to go.”

Adoptive parent, interview

It was noted that without this central coordination point or hub, there is a need for adoptees and parents to have to “tell our story over and over” to different people. It was suggested that there may also need to be local coordinators or ICAFSS workers in each state and territory to enable them to meet adoptees and families, build trust and link them to appropriate local services.

Some participants also suggested the need for:

- Improved mapping of intercountry adoption aware services and practitioners available to adoptees and/or adoptive parents based on their needs.

“It would be great if there was a method to pair up the symptoms and the behaviours that you’re struggling with with experts that have experience in those symptoms and behaviours, rather than generalising and thinking that adoptive kids have the same behaviours and that it’s all attachment and trauma related.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Development of resources for adoptees and/or parents to provide to practitioners to help them to be more intercountry adoption aware.
- Building awareness of the ICAFSS, including advertising through GP practices and schools, TV ads, brochures and campaigns.
- Development of a role at the ICAFSS for a person who is responsible for getting “information to the right people who adoptees and adoptive families will approach”.
- More networking meetings, events and conferences.
- Greater use of social media, including the suggestion of online communities with trained moderators.
- Building of more community awareness and knowledge of intercountry adoption issues and experiences.

SUPPORTING OR ENCOURAGING PEER SUPPORT AND MENTORSHIP AMONG ADOPTEES AND FAMILIES

A large number of adoptees and adoptive parents (including over 40% of interviewees) highlighted the importance of building capacity in the area of peer support and engagement, building on similar comments noted in earlier sections of this report.

“Having peer support is really important and really good because of the fact that we do understand where each other is coming from and we have different experience, because we’re all on different parts of our journey, so we can help each other and give each other advice on how it’s best to go about things.”

Adoptee, interview

Many comments here focused on the need for **greater support for existing peer support programs**, including increased funding and promotion.

“There are quite a few young people that I’m aware of that really need mentorship and peer support, but the services that I’m involved in don’t do that, because there’s no funding.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Common suggestions related to this included:

- Supporting and funding a peer support coordinator or peak body to support, nurture and educate peer support groups.
- Providing training and/or funding for leaders of existing support groups.
- Providing funding for running and expanding of groups, including small grants.

“If we had some funding so we knew that we could lock in certain events or certain classes or workshops.”

Adoptee, interview

- Funding for support coordinators to collate and update resources and information or use by the intercountry adoptive community.

“If there were proper coordinators that were able to spend time collating all of the information coming in and updating a main set of resources, that would be extremely beneficial for everyone.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Development of a nationally recognised hub for all intercountry adoptees and adoptive parents to access, with a list of events and activities.

Related to this, a large number of adoptees and adoptive parents noted the need for **more opportunities for face-to-face group engagement**. Suggestions here included:

- More workshops, camps and retreats.
- An annual conference or retreat for adoptees and their families, supported by government.

“I find it’s one of the most important things, when adoptees meet other adoptees, even if it’s only one meeting.”

Adoptee, interview

- Regular events or retreats for country specific or age specific groups (including teens).

“If it could be increased, the number of community events where we can get together and celebrate the culture, but also learn about services available to us.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- More flexibility and availability in terms of the locations and times of peer events.

- Fun or team-building activities for both adult and younger adoptees, with it noted here that activities have “to be something that attracts attention and is worth their time and money”.
- Forums and guest speakers.
- More support groups for parents, especially for those whose children have been adopted from a diverse range of countries.

“A group of parents who could get together to share information, but also just to support each other, to back each other up when you feel your life’s being derailed.”

Adoptive parent, interview

Facebook groups and other support mechanisms were also valued by new parents, but it was observed here that these can sometimes “taper off” or be reliant on the efforts of a small number of dedicated parents.

A large number of adoptees and adoptive parents also highlighted the importance of building capacity through **greater support of mentoring programs**, with this theme especially strong in the workshops. While it was noted that mentoring “may be stigmatising and further isolating if not done well” and that some adoptees are resistant to being involved or being defined as being an adoptee or ‘different’, mentoring can make a positive difference in the lives of younger adoptees.

Suggestions here included:

- Development of a database of mentors, including adoptees willing to be mentors for other adoptees.
- One-to-one or small group mentoring.

“I think mentoring is great, because my daughter works better one on one. And particularly for these children for who the essence of it is disrupted attachment and relationships, working through a relational approach is the best. My daughter just kept saying ‘I just want someone who gets me’.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Mentoring of younger adoptees by older adoptees.
- Funding for training and support of mentors, including training to help mentors deal with difficult issues among their mentees such as mental health issues or suicidal ideation.

Many participants also observed there is a need for **involvement and leadership by those with lived experience** in developing plans for supporting peer engagement activities and programs. Suggestions here included the need for any resources developed to be workshopped with or co-designed by adoptees, along with supporting the development of resources for adoptees by adoptees. The importance of more employment of people with lived experience within the sector was also noted, along with the need for grants or funding support to encourage lived experience leadership.

Some participants also suggested the need for:

- More targeted support for adoptees and at all ages and stages.
- More support for parents of young adoptees, with parents noting that there are less young adoptees and “less families coming through”, which may mean issues with a lack of ongoing support for these young people.

- Linking of prospective and new adoptive parents with others to let them know what to expect, how to set their house up, things to watch out for, etc.

“I would be open to sharing, or mentoring another parent through it so they’re not having to do the amount of work that I had to do. I would have loved someone who could have mentored me, and that’s something I feel like I could offer and would love to offer a parent going through this journey.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Providing options for parents who are facing difficult issues with their adoptive children to engage with and support each other.

“I’d love to be with other parents who are dealing with the same things and questioning the same things. I would like to be in a group with similar presentations or needs.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Raising awareness of the importance of mentoring and peer support.
- Removal of any negative connotations around seeking support, and encouraging proactiveness among the intercountry adoption community in terms of addressing any issues or concerns.
- Greater use of social media, with suggestions for social media groups, a Facebook page for young adoptees, and a Facebook page for parents.
- Use of an online app or chat service (similar to R UOK?).
- Greater engagement and mutual support and promotion between existing peer support services.

ENCOURAGING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUPPORT NETWORKS AND INFORMATION RESOURCES FOR ADOPTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Similar to comments in earlier sections of this report, a large number of participants highlighted here the importance of **building increased awareness of the ICAFSS** among the intercountry adoption community. A large number of workshop, group discussion and interview participants (including over 40% of all interviewees) noted that they were either unaware of the ICAFSS or had been unaware of it until very recently. It was suggested that information on the ICAFSS could be provided at parenting seminars, through peer support groups, and through “all points of contact for pre-adoptive and adoptive families”.

A large number of participants also referred to the need for a **single website or hub** where all adoptive parents can access relevant information and be guided to appropriate intercountry adoption supports or services.

“My dream is to have some kind of website, that the resources are there so that the parents can look through and say: this is the behaviour, this is my kid... this is what someone else has done or this is an expert in your area and this is their expertise.

That would be the ideal thing, to find some way that parents can have a look on a website or an app to find the people they need easily.”

Adoptive parent, interview

The importance of having “trusted and accurate information in one place” was highlighted here, with parents of young adoptees in particular noting the importance of having a single location to develop and disseminate resources, coordinate training and promote activities and networking.

“There needs to be the correct information, and people need to know where to go to get the information, and people need to not be scared to ask for information.”

Adoptive parent, interview

It was noted that this central hub of information and support needs to have an element of triaging, such as a flow chart to direct adoptive parents to the support and information they need depending on their circumstances.

A large number of participants commented on the need for additional **training and support for parents**. Building on similar comments outlined in earlier sections of this report, this included suggestions for:

- Better support for parents pre-adoption to ensure there are no ill-informed adoptions and that all information about the adoptive child is conveyed to parents.
- Improved pre-adoption training and education.

“I feel that the education seminars, from the word go, should be really comprehensive in saying okay, these are going to be the examples of things that are going to be coming up. And of course, when they say that, you think: oh, that’s not going to happen to me, it will happen to somebody else maybe, we’ll be okay. And how that impacts upon existing biological children in the family, how that impacts upon perceived racism that you may find from friends or family that you didn’t know existed before, and things like that.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- More clarity around the processes in the pre-adoption phase so that parents have clear information about the steps they will be taking and how long each step will take.

“So like, they’ve got your file, now you’ll be matched and then this will happen and now this will happen. Then we got matched, and oh no, now this is what’s going to happen and this will happen. So it was really frustrating, because we just felt like the milestones and markers kept shifting, like there wasn’t one resource, and the timelines they were pulling from were just their own opinions.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Ensuring prospective adoptive parents are aware of the services and support they can access before they travel, so that they can access required services and support more easily when they return with their child.
- Mandatory training for prospective adoptive parents that prepares them better, “not just one Q&A session with adoptees”.
- Support for parents to have pre-adoption cultural and language training.
- Ongoing support, contact and regular check-ins with adoptive parents.
- Early intervention and training, with a focus on prevention of problems before they become crises.

“Had I known what to look out for earlier, I would have got support earlier, both for (my child) and myself and my partner, just to help manage the extreme behaviours and the confusing environment that we were find ourselves in.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Therapeutic parenting programs.
- Training around the importance of life story awareness for children.

Many participants also noted the need for **simpler and clearer information and resources for parents**, with suggestions here including:

- Shorter videos to suit time-poor adoptees and/or parents.
- Simple guides and tips (similar to US resources), including guides for parents for things like behaviours to be aware of or how to navigate the health and/or mental health system, as well as practical information about attachment, trauma and the impacts of trauma, and building of cross-cultural identity.

“I often seek out American information and podcasts, and then try and apply it to whatever is relevant to here, take out what I can. So there was no advice, and no pre-empting what we were going to face.”

Adoptive parent, interview

- Practical information for parents on topics relating to the well-being of young adoptees, such as sleeping strategies, nutrition, dental care, occupational therapists, or core muscle strength.
- Regular sharing of information, advice, hints and tips.

“Information and advice that gets sent out regularly on: if your child is at this phase or stage, or having these challenges, here’s a couple of simple things you could do”.

Adoptive parent, interview

- Advice and information on self-care for adoptive parents.
- Content from intercountry adoptee leaders.
- Case study videos, including real-life examples of other parents and adoptees and how they have dealt with issues or problems successfully.

“Showing this is what we accessed... we went through this process and these are these steps we went through. So having real-world stories I think helps people to relate to it, and then you have what areas they can access.”

Adoptive parent, interview

“Even having short videos of people and snippets of their story or snippets of how they’ve overcome a particular thing, and having it all in a central point on a website or something like that would be ideal.”

Adoptee, interview



- Webinars.
- Social media groups.
- An App to “provide information and allow two-way communication”.

Related to this, it was observed that many existing resources need to be updated, and that the development and updating of resources needs to be supported and funded by government, with parents noting that they are currently taking the lead in this area with little or no support.

Many participants also highlighted here the need for more support for peer support groups and activities for parents. This included suggestions for:

- More workshops and face-to-face engagement.
- Networking programs.
- Matching and connecting like-families to become lifelong supports and resources for each other.
- Discussions among and between adoptees and parents to share stories and experiences.
- Guest speakers, including practitioners and those with lived experience.
- An online community to facilitate regular social engagement and activities.

It was noted again here that there needs to be funding to support the growth and development of new and existing peer support groups.

Some participants also suggested the need for greater linkages with, and more resources and training for, schools and educators. Parents of young adoptees, in particular, noted that school engagement is highly important, especially to support adoptees through transitions to high school.

“If I have \$100 to invest in this process, I’d be putting it into education and getting some experts into schools that have the intercountry experience to train teachers.”

Adoptive parent, small group discussion

Suggestions here included:

- Provision of professionals to support parents in their engagement with schools and teachers to ensure they are aware of the specific needs of intercountry adoptees.
- Professional development and training for teachers.
- Training and education of principals.