

Help, I'm Adopted! Finding Your Biological Family Using DNA

By: Dana Palmer, CG[®], CGL^(SM)

dana@treasuredlineage.com

www.treasuredlineage.com

Getting Started

Even if you are adopted, you don't have to be an expert to find your biological family. There are many tools that can help you figure it out. Start by the following questions:

- Does your adopted or extended family members know anything about your biological family?
- Do you (or they) have any paperwork from your birth and / or adoption?
- Have you taken a DNA test?

Finding the original birth certificate

Upon adoption, the adoptee is issued a new birth certificate with the adopted parents' names. Many states keep the original birth certificate which usually lists the names of the biological parents. The name of the father on these original certificates may or may not be true depending on the laws of the state.

If the original birth certificate still exists, you will need to order a copy from the state health department. For most states, you will need to go in person and bring a copy of your driver's license or another form of identification, then complete the application, and pay the fee. Some states allow you to mail in a copy of your driver's license with a signed affidavit by a notary, the completed form requesting the certificate, and the payment fee in the acceptable form of payment.

Getting copies of related records

In addition to getting a copy of the original birth certificate, you should obtain copies of the adoption papers from the court, and if possible, the adoption papers from the adoption agency. Sometimes the court and adoption agency papers are essential to finding your kin further back in time.

If you don't know which court oversees the adoption cases, go to the FamilySearch Wiki for the state where the adoption occurred and click the applicable county. They usually will have details in the vital records section or at the top of the page. Click the link for the applicable court website (this is often at the very top of the Wiki page for that county underneath the address for the court and near the image of the map).

Go to the court page and search for details on which court oversees adoptions. The name of the court varies from state to state. In Ohio it is the Probate Court; in New York it is the Surrogate Court. Check if they have a phone number or email, then contact them and ask what is the best method to get copies of the adoption papers. In some states these may be sealed and can only be opened by a judge's court order.

DNA Testing – What should I do?

Determining which test you need to take largely is dependent on your biological gender. The more tests you take at various companies, the better your chance at finding family and figuring out your ancestry.

There are three types of tests that can aid in family history research:

- Autosomal – tests all lines
- YDNA – tests the male line
- mtDNA – tests the female line

The majority of the companies out there use **autosomal DNA** testing in their base package. Ancestry.com has the largest number of people in their database, so it is recommended you start with this test. Watch for sales on their DNA test to save money. Autosomal tests evaluate all of your DNA lines and provide the cM value which shows how closely your matches relate to you. Each relationship has a cM range it generally falls into. Knowing these values can help you determine how your match is related to you. Keep in mind half-relations will have half the cM values are full blooded relations. Use Blaine Bettinger's Shared cmProject to visually see these values www.thegeneticgenealogist.com

YDNA tests are good for connecting your male ancestors. This DNA often does not change for thousands of years, which makes it very helpful in tracing the male surname back in time. Only biological males get DNA from their fathers. If there is a non-paternal event (the father isn't who you think it is), your relation's DNA won't match other YDNA relations that have tested. If your line does not have any living males to test, go back in time until you get to a generation that has a son who has a son, etc. that can test. It doesn't matter how far back you have to go down to get a YDNA candidate, as long as they are biologically related to the surname you want tested. The more markers you have tested, the better your results. FamilyTreeDNA is the only company that does YDNA testing. If possible, have your male relatives take the Big 700 test. If they choose to take a test with less markers (such as the Y-111), they can always upgrade later. Again, watch for their sales as it can save you money.

mtDNA tests are good for tracing your female line. All people have mtDNA, but only biological females pass the mtDNA to their biological children, regardless of their gender. FamilyTreeDNA is the only company (that I know of) that does mtDNA testing. This type of DNA testing isn't as useful for most genealogists unless you are trying to prove your direct line female descendant comes from the same family as a sibling to that line through their direct line female descendants. The government military repatriation cases use mtDNA to test both males and females for DNA connections to Soldiers who died overseas or who were considered missing in action.

Who Benefits from DNA testing?

- Anyone wanting to find family can benefit from DNA testing
- Adopted individuals
- Proof needed for brick wall ancestors
- Military repatriation cases
- Lineage society application, especially those in area with record loss (YDNA testing usually used)

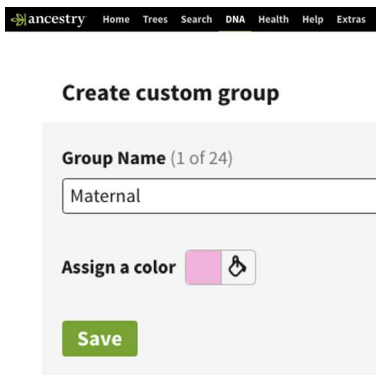
Grouping DNA Matches on Ancestry.com

Ancestry.com is a great for finding and making contact with potential cousins through DNA testing. Each person has unique DNA, so the more family members you have tested, the more potential relatives you might find, since each person inherits DNA differently. Make sure to use the Shared cM Project table (www.thegeneticgenealogist.com) to help you identify how closely your matches are related to you.

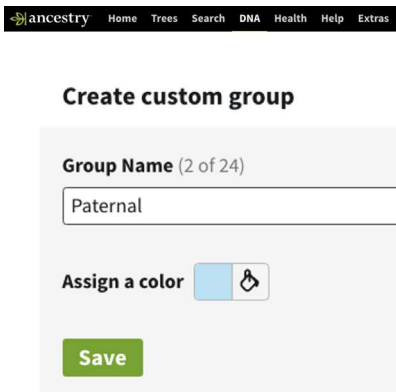
Tips:

- Link your DNA test results to the tree you have added.
- Add groups for specific family lines (e.g., baby blue – father’s line, baby pink to mother’s line)

Adding your contacts to specific groups will help you be able to better visualize how your DNA matches relate to you and through which specific side of your family at a glance. This is especially helpful for matches that do not have trees attached or linked. You can use the “Shared Matches” to see what other of your relatives they DNA match which can help you determine which side of your family has the connection. This will take time to do but is well worth the effort.



The colors to be selected for the groups



An example of how you might color each of your DNA generations

What's Next

Once you have identified your family and grouped them by your father's or mother's side, you need to create what is called a "dirty tree". You should make this tree private so only you can see it on Ancestry.com. The idea behind this tree is you are trying to figure out the relationship of your matches and how they relate to you to help you figure out your biological family. This can take some time and be tricky. If you need help, consider hiring a professional DNA specialist.

Make sure you contact those relatives who come up as your matches. They may know more about their family and can help you piece the family together by adding details to your tree. They may even know the gossip and untold stories surrounding your birth and adoption. It's also possible that these people have a similar situation and don't know much about their biological family either. Collaboration really can help you find your family. Those taking these DNA tests are much more likely to be helpful as they want to find their family too.

Once you've correctly identified your biological family, make sure to change your tree to be public and add correct the tree on FamilySearch. Remember that anyone you note is living will not have identifying information that shows on either website.

Finding Living Relatives

Social media websites and other search engines can help you make contact with potential relatives you have identified to be DNA tested who don't already appear in your matches:

Facebook	Been Verified
Twitter	That's Them
Classmates	We Relate

Contacting your living relatives

If you are calling or emailing potential relations, keep your initial contact brief. Be tactful. Don't give too many details. You don't know who might read the email or if they are really related. You don't want to cause problems if current family members are unaware of your potential relationship to them. Give them time and wait for a response. They may not believe you are related, or your testing may uncover secrets some may wish were not discovered.

Some examples of how to send an initial email:

- "I took a DNA test through Ancestry.com and notice that we match. I believe we match through my paternal line. I would like to know more about your relationship to my father's line. I believe my father is ..."
- "I took a DNA test through Ancestry.com and notice that we match. I was adopted and know nothing about my family and hoped you might know how we relate ..."
- "I took a DNA test through Ancestry.com and notice that we match. Based on the Cm values, I think you might be my half-sister / brother / cousin, etc. Do you know how we relate? I'd love to swap info and find out more about my family."