



# Finding An Unknown Father Using DNA

Tanner Tolman, AG®  
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## Misattributed Parentage

Taking a DNA test can reveal unexpected and painful truth such as the fact that the man you raised you was not your biological father or many other family secrets. DNA can prove that someone in your family, maybe even a parent, committed adultery. When Jesus was presented with a woman who was caught in the act, he refused to condemn her saying “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” I suggest you treat your relatives and ancestors the same way.

I believe that DNA can only add to your family. Both biological and legal family are equally valid and real. If you uncover a family secret, think of it as an opportunity to expand your family. Celebrate life and its origins whatever they may be. Believe evidence, love unconditionally, accept reality.

## Methodology to Find Your Unknown Father

### Getting Started

1. If your mother is alive and you feel it is safe to do so, ask for the name. Consider verifying that name with DNA if you feel it is appropriate, if so, move to step 2
2. Take an autosomal DNA test. For genealogical purposes, the five main companies are 23andme, Ancestry, FamilyTreeDNA, Living DNA, and MyHeritage. Each company has some strengths and weaknesses compared to the others for more information click here [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Hiring\\_a\\_DNA\\_Testing\\_Company](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Hiring_a_DNA_Testing_Company)
3. Once your results come in, look at your predicted genetic relatives and determine which ones are on your unknown father's side. Ancestry can now split your DNA matches into Parent 1 and Parent 2 and it usually does a great job. If you are using Ancestry, simply look at the matches on each side and determine which ones you recognize as being maternal. The matches belonging to the other parent are related to your unknown father.
4. Occasionally, Ancestry struggles to split the matches by parent effectively. If this happens to you or you are using a different provider, start by looking at the closest relatives that you are sure are on your mother's side. Look at the shared matches

between you and them. Most likely, all of those matches are also on your mother's side even if you do not know who they are. Mark those matches somehow. In Ancestry and MyHeritage, you can assign a colored dot to those matches. With other providers you may want to create an excel file where you record which matches are on which side. Once you have marked all the maternal matches you can, the ones that remain should belong to your unknown father.

5. If you do not have close matches, test or upload your DNA into another company to see if you have better matches there. DNAngels has a policy that you need at least four matches above 150 cM's before they will assist you. This is a good rule of thumb. If you do not at least have this, you are unlikely to find your father using that database.
6. If you are male, consider also buying a Y-DNA test from FamilyTreeDNA. If your closest matches have a reasonably low genetic distance and all come back with the same surname, then that is likely the surname of your biological father.

## **The Leeds Method**

1. Once you have your DNA somewhere where you have reasonably close matches, your next step is to start clustering them into groups of matches that are all related to each other. The ideal situation would be that all of your paternal matches fall into one of two distinct clusters, one representing your unknown grandfather and the other your unknown grandmother. A great way to do this is by using the Leeds method. Click on one of the closest matches below ca. 400 cM. Click on the shared matches and mark all of them. All of them should be related to just one grandparent. For more information about the Leeds Method click here <https://www.danaleeds.com/the-leeds-method/>.
2. Now find the next closest unmarked paternal relative. Check the shared matches, to make sure none (or at least most) of them are also new unmarked relatives. If so, then these people represent a new cluster in your family. Give a different marking to all of these relatives.
3. Continue clustering and marking paternal relatives until you have made it down to ca. 30 cM's. If you have more than two clusters, then probably some of the clusters represent people related through a more distant ancestor such as a great grandparent.

## **Quick and Dirty Trees**

Now is the time to figure out how the matches in each cluster are related to each other.

1. Start by looking at the closest matches who have provided useful pedigrees. Then work your way down to the harder trees. There should be an ancestral couple who is repeating in their trees. That couple is the source of the shared DNA and your unknown father is also related to them, often he descends from them somehow.

2. Some of your matches will have pedigrees that are useless because all the people in them are marked as private. Others will have pedigrees that may appear useless at first but they have provided you with enough information that you can build the rest out using traditional genealogy. This is called creating quick and dirty trees. For more information about quick and dirty trees, click here.  
[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/img\\_auth.php/a/ac/Creating\\_Quick\\_and\\_Dirty\\_Trees\\_S\\_Larson\\_Apr\\_2022\\_JMR.pdf](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/img_auth.php/a/ac/Creating_Quick_and_Dirty_Trees_S_Larson_Apr_2022_JMR.pdf)
3. Some of your matches might not have pedigrees that you can expand, but you can figure out what their pedigree is by researching that person. Searching for the person's name on white pages can reveal their age, residence, and closest relatives. People also reveal a lot of information on Facebook under the relatives section. Even if they don't try scrolling through their feed. They may, for example, reveal who their mother is in a Mother's Day post. Try to figure out enough about them that you can build the rest of their tree using traditional genealogy.
4. Try searching for their name or the names of their relatives in quotes and then with the word obituary. For example, Google "[First name last name]" + obituary. The hope is that this will reveal an obituary of a relative that they are mentioned in.
5. If you can trace their pedigree back to a deceased relative, don't forget to check FamilySearch FamilyTree to see if there is any information there for this family already.

## Searching for Marriage

Once you have identified the ancestral couple belonging to each cluster, your next goal is to figure out how the clusters intersect in a way that explains the DNA matches you have.

1. Now that you know how several people in each cluster are all descended from a key ancestral couple, build a descendency pedigree showing how all those DNA relatives are related using DNA Painter's What Are the Odds (WATO) tool. Enter the amount of centimorgans each match shares with the test taker and then it will calculate the most likely places that the test taker falls into the tree. Some of the places WATO suggests can be eliminated if you are sure what it is suggesting is impossible. For more information about WATO click here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6LxMH0zS54>. WATO is free. Note that WATO will predict where you go, not where your unknown father goes.
2. WATO can guide you where to look first, but your goal is to find a point where the two clusters intersect. That is almost certainly where your unknown father will be found. For example, suppose you have two clusters, a yellow one and an orange one. You then find that a man in the orange cluster married a girl in the yellow cluster. One of their sons is your father. Verify that the cM's with your other relatives are correct for that to be true, but most likely it is.

## **One of Two Brothers**

A common point to get stuck at is when you know who your grandparents are and you know your father is one of their sons, but how do you prove which one?

1. If any of the potential fathers are alive, consider calling them if you feel it is appropriate. They may be able to confirm your theory and may be able to tell you which of their brothers is the most likely one.
2. Target test if you feel it is appropriate. In order to use DNA to prove which one is your father, each of them either needs to test or one of their posterity does. The amount of DNA they share with you will prove if they are a father or an uncle. If one of their children tests, the amount of DNA should make clear whether they are a first cousin or a half-sibling.
3. Ship them a test and pay for it yourself. You are the one who wants answers, not them.

## **Common Mistakes to Avoid**

1. Once you have your DNA in a database with good paternal matches, a common mistake that people make is they immediately start messaging all of their matches and asking if they know anything. This seldom works and is usually off putting to people. Unless you have very close matches (1700+ cM's), then I recommend you do your homework before contacting any of them. 1700 cM's will typically be a half-sibling, aunt or uncle, or a grandparent.
2. Be sensitive. You may be revealing to them, that their grandfather had an affair or something else that they were not prepared for.