

Finding an Unknown Parent Using DNA: A Case Study

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Do you have an unknown parental event in your family? Here are some key strategies for finding that unknown parent.

Match List Clusters

One Known Parent

When one parent is known, use the match list to identify matches related to the known parent. Then, remove those matches from the list. This will let you focus only on the matches related to the unknown parent. If the known parent has not tested their DNA, start with the closest relative who is related to the known parent, identify shared matches, and eliminate those matches from the list. Once the known parent matches are eliminated, follow the process below.

Two Unknown Parents

When both parents are unknown, create clusters by gathering groups of shared matches. Do not start with matches closer than second cousins because they may be related to both sides of the pedigree. Second cousins share a common great grandparent. Since you have four sets of great-grandparents, you might reasonably expect to find four basic clusters. Using third or more distant cousins to create clusters means the number of clusters doubles at each generation.

1. Start with your first predicted second cousin match. Identify shared matches.
2. Write down a list of all shared matches. Label the list Cluster #1 (or something similar).
3. Return to the match list and choose the next match not the first cluster. Identify shared matches and record the list of matches. Label the list Cluster #2 (or something similar). Repeat to create remaining clusters.
4. Review the matches in each cluster. Identify those with family trees. Explore their trees. and try to find a **Most Recent Common Ancestor** (MRCA) for the cluster. If you cannot identify a common ancestor, search for common locations. You may have to extend the ancestral lines of several matches to identify the common ancestor.
5. Once you have identified multiple descendants of the same common ancestor, research that couple and all their descendants. If you match multiple people who all descend from the same ancestral couple, it is likely you also descend from that couple.
6. Evaluate the descendants – look for connections in dates and places with known or suspected information about the unknown parent or parents.
7. Once you have identified a potential parent or relative, test their DNA or the DNA of known to descendants to prove or disprove that relationship.
8. Throughout this process, you will probably need to contact some of your DNA matches through a DNA website match list messaging service. Do this thoughtfully rather than sending out

generic messages asking how you might be related. Tailor each message to the recipient. Remember that many have tested at the request of a family member or just to find out their ethnicity and may not be genealogically inclined. Those with trees and administrators of accounts are more likely to respond. Ancestry indicates when a member last logged in which may provide a clue as to how active they are.

Build a Private Tree

As you search for clues about an unknown parent, consider creating a private tree. Start with the MRCA and then add living descendants as they are identified. Some of these individuals will be DNA matches to the unknown parent you are trying to find. Also add hypothesized relationships. This type of tree is often called a “quick and dirty” tree as it often relies heavily on hints and other trees. Create these trees using genealogy websites (such as Ancestry or MyHeritage) or using offline genealogy software.

One DNA tool that may help you sort relationships is DNA Painter (www.dnainter.com). DNAPainter has some tools to help you better understand your DNA results. Click “Tools” at the top to find the Shared cM tool v4. The Shared cM tool lets you type in the number of cMs you share with a match and will show probable relationships. The What Are the Odds: Tree version v1 tool lets you build a tree with known cousins so that you can then hypothesize how a DNA tester is related based on the shared cMs. Registration is free.

Use Newspapers, Modern People Finders and Social Networking Sites

Newspapers

Finding unknown parents requires finding information on recently deceased or living people. Use online newspapers to help piece together modern generations. Obituaries often contain names and family relationships for living people. A good list of newspaper websites, including those which require a subscription, can be found in the FamilySearch Wiki (<http://wiki.familysearch.org>). Search for the country or state and the subject of newspapers. You will likely find that a subscription website will be well worth the money.

Modern People Finders

In the old days, finding living people meant using phone books or calling a directory service. Now, there are several websites that can help. Many of these search services require a fee or may try to download unwanted tool bars and programs. One free people finder website that works well is www.familytreenow.com. Using public records, it can be surprisingly accurate at providing the names of near relatives. It also contains possible phone numbers and addresses. Some of the information is dated so cross-checking information with other websites may be helpful.

Social Networking Websites

You can sometimes find people’s profiles on social networking websites such as Facebook. If you have multiple people with the same name, family and friends’ lists can be used to help identify relatives and even those on your match lists without family trees. You can also send private messages through most social networks. Messages from non-friends end up in less obvious places and may not be seen by the person you are trying to contact. Also, wary people may also worry they are being scammed.

Reach Out Thoughtfully

As genealogists, the excitement of the “the find” can cause us to make a call or send an instant

message to a total stranger and ask, “Are you my mother?” Never do this. You have been on a path of investigation and discovery, of processing information. Confronting someone with your evidence can be startling and offensive. The gentlest way to reach out is likely to be an old-fashioned letter. It should include the following elements:

1. Introduce yourself and indicate you’ve been working on your family history
2. Describe simply the research findings you’ve come to and why they lead you to believe you are related to the “Smith” family. Connect the research “dots” as a narrative they can follow to help them understand why you are contacting them.
3. Ask if they have any information that might help and if they’d be willing to help you put together your family tree or know someone who might.
4. Indicate that you have no desire to intrude and that if they desire no further contact with you, ask them to let you know. Include a few ways they can contact you (phone, email address).

These principles are especially important if you are reaching out to someone who is likely the unknown parent you are looking for.

Following the above steps should help you progress in your efforts to determine the unknown parent of a near family member or an ancestor.