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Facing Facebook

Adoption is being transformed—in ways both good and bad—by Facebook and other social networking sites. People from every area of adoption are using these sites as resources to a number of different ends.

Some young pregnant women are using these sites to share information about themselves, if they are considering placing their children for adoption, or have already decided to do so. People are stating on social networking sites what they are looking for in a family for their child-to-be, what kind of parents they want for their child.

Some people are looking for surrogates, and some people are looking for donors, and some people are looking for that young woman mentioned above, who is considering whether or not to place her child for adoption once he/she is born.

Child welfare agencies are using social networking to find foster parents, to find kinship family and extended family that belong to a child who is in foster care and who needs a permanent plan.

Children, young adults, and adults are searching for their birth families, and their birth family members are searching for them.

There are also some people out there doing the *wrong* things—people who are trying to scam, to trick, to hurt people by making false promises, by using people, and by saying they are someone who they are not.

Then, of course—and most importantly—there are the children.

There are children and teens and young adults who are searching, searching, searching—each one of them searching for his/her past, truth, and story. If these children have *any* information,

- **Maybe they will find a sibling from whom they were disconnected after the removal from their birth parents when they were all placed in different homes.**
- **Maybe that child—who was placed as an infant in a closed adoption—will find her birth family on Facebook.**

- **Maybe that birth mother—whose mother forced her to place her baby for adoption when she herself was only 15 years old—can find the son she never even saw.**

In the news recently, there was a story about a woman who found her lost children—kidnapped and taken out of the country by her ex-husband against the legal arrangements of their divorce—when *fifteen years later*, she was on Facebook and saw her daughter's face.

An 11-year-old went on Facebook and found her birth father, who turned out to be a rather unsavory character. After being in contact with him, she began feeling very guilty and fearful. Her grades started to fall, she was having a hard time at home and in school, and finally her school guidance counselor told her parents what was happening. The girl had confided in her guidance counselor about the Facebook connection she had made with her birth father. The guidance counselor encouraged this discussion, then told her this was potentially dangerous and was hurting her too much. The counselor said, “I am a mandated reporter, and I feel this is dangerous, so I need to tell your parents,” and she did.

There is a 14-year-old who remembers her older brother who took care of her and protected her and who took care of everyone else in the family. Then they were all removed because their mother was not able to keep them safe, and was not able to care for them, and was in another domestic violence situation. They were removed, and they were separated, and her adoption was a closed adoption, but she never forgot her brother, and he never forgot her, and she found him on Facebook. She finally found him.

People are finding people.

In addition to the opportunities for abuse listed earlier, another potential pitfall of Facebook and social media is the fact that, although some security is changing, it is possible to lift pictures and copy them, and potentially to post them for other people to see, or to share pictures freely given that may not have been meant to be for the public. At PACT (Pre/post Adoption Consulting and Training), we have been dealing with some breaches of trust with birth parents who have received pictures of a young child from the adoptive parents. The birth parents posted the child's picture on their wall without the parents' permission—the parents who are the child's legal guardians. This is not a unique concern for these adoptive parents. Parents might worry that, although they want the birth mother personally to have pictures of the child, they don't want everyone to see the child, to know where she lives, to know what is going in her life, or what she looks like. There are issues of privacy.

Contact handled through adoption agencies and pictures sent via agencies, or other intermediaries hasn't always been fair, because some of those agencies and facilitators have not always done the right thing and have simply filed things and not

passed them on to the intended recipient. More times than I would like to remember, I have sat in a room at a reunion between adoptive parents and birth parents, who are opening a closed adoption, only to learn that the agency *never* sent the pictures and yearly letters the families religiously passed on through them over the years. Mistakes or failures like this on the part of intermediaries can create feelings of mistrust between birth and adoptive parents—each party thinking they would be keeping in touch with each other, each party keeping their side of the bargain, each party thinking the other side was letting them down—when it was the agency who did not follow through on their part. These types of mistakes lead people to circumvent the agency, feeling that they are withholding, or unfair, or untruthful, or even that they might have policies or procedures to which they adhere that are not in the best interests of the choices the adoptive parents or the adopted person or the birth parents wanted or want to make.

There is no more secrecy as we knew it; or rather, there is secrecy, but there are new ways to get around it. We have always been able to approach the court and ask for our records—the names, the information that is about us. We have always been able to hire a detective to search on our behalf. We have almost always been able to place information on a Soundex Registry and to hope that the other party would do the same, so that we could be connected. We have always had possibilities, but now those possibilities have expanded for the good and/or for the bad.

Some of you might think this is all very bad news and extremely scary.

Some of you might think this is all very good news, finally to be able to find each other.

In reality, it is some of both of those things, and for some people—especially children, especially adolescents and sometimes even young adults—it may be important to have some help and guidance along the way. I am not suggesting therapy necessarily—not everyone needs or wants therapy—but some people need coaching, some people need preparation, some people need support, some people need help to discern what the next steps should be, and some people need guidance.

The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) is working on guidelines so that social workers will know what to do when dealing with these kinds of issues¹. They are getting calls from distressed adoptive parents, distressed birth parents, and distressed adult adopted people, because a bad connection at the beginning of a reunion can lead to a bad relationship. The relationships among all the people involved in an adoption are sacred. These relationships need to be carried out and

¹ Beckford, Martin, Telegraph.co.uk, “Facebook poses risk to adopted children and families, charity warns,” 21 June 2010:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/7841599/Facebook-poses-risk-to-adopted-children-and-families-charity-warns.html>

responded to in a very careful way, because it's never just about that one meeting. It is about the whole relationship, and it is our mandate to keep children safe. When they make contact with people, we (the parents and adults in their lives) need to know with whom. It may be that they are not connecting with the right person. As I have always said "Just because you are related, does not guarantee a relationship and in closed adoption there are many intimate strangers that one needs to build relationship with carefully."

It may be that some predator is out there waiting for a child in need, and looking for a situation where they might do something harmful.

When a child or adolescent contacts one of his/her birth parents, it is heart-warming and wonderful when that birth parent immediately contacts the adoptive parents, and together they decide what they are going to do. There is a feeling of trust that builds and a feeling of mutual concern for the child.

Parents by birth and by adoption should know about social media tools: what they are, how they work, how they impact all of these people who make up the very extended family of these children. If safety is a concern, parents need to be proactive. They need to take care of their children and teens. They need to make sure their children are not put at risk, and they may need to tell their children that they support them and will help them, but that these things must be done in a certain way, with a certain pacing, and in a certain time.

Connections are essential to human growth and development. Connections are essential to emotion and psychological wellbeing.

Marge Piercy says it best...

"Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet

Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet

Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree

Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden

Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses

Live a life you can endure: make love that is loving

Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket a bramble

Wilderness to the outside but to us interconnected with rabbit runs and borrows and lairs

Live as if you like yourself, and it may happen:

Reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in

This is how we are going to live for along time: not always,

For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the

Long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.”

Use these social connections wisely and take your time. These are probably relationships worth assessing and working on or carefully-not casually- choosing to discard.