

Adoption and Social Networking



Social use of the internet is widespread amongst adults and children. Children and young people are very comfortable and advanced in their use of social network websites. Sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Myspace are widely used. They can be used to search, share personal information and photographs and build friendship networks. They can also be used by all parties in adoption.

Impact on Adoption and Social Networking

Social networking has had an impact on adoption with young people using such sites to make contact with birth relatives. Birth relatives are also using such sites to make contact with children. Some young people are seeking contact and others may be looking for information.

It is possible for a search to be carried out with limited information. Some examples we have dealt with have included:

- A young person made contact with their birth parents via social media and met with them in secret without the adopters knowing
- A birth relative posted pictures of her child on Facebook leading to a breakdown of the contact arrangement

We recognise that increasing numbers of young people are turning to the internet to trace and contact family members. They are often driven by curiosity but a lack of information about their background can also be a factor in why they search.

Many of these young people may have been adopted as a result of neglect or abuse. They do not consider the consequence of a search and the impact for them or their relative or any potential risk to themselves.

Their birth relative is likely to present a different version of events to that of their adopters. This may leave them confused or feeling angry towards their adopters.

Impact of Unmediated Contact

- Loss of control for the young person
- They may feel overwhelmed by the response of the birth relative and emotionally unready.
- The relative may bombard them with emails and phone calls.
- Pressure to meet with the birth relative.
- Expectations may differ from that of the birth relative
- Painful feelings and emotions of past abuse or trauma may be awoken.
- Risk of rejection for the young person.
- Birth relative may still be leading risky lifestyle which the young person could be drawn into.
- Damage to relationship of trust with adopters
- Young person having to manage secrets
- Danger of emotional or physical abuse

Protecting your Child from Unwanted Approaches

Technology linking mobile phones and social network sites can make it possible for some online communities to know where you are in the world at any time. This has implications for keeping young people's information confidential as well as their location.

- It is important to talk to your child about internet safety
- Advise them to use privacy settings
- To not put their mobile phone number or other identifying information on their profiles
- To only accept friend requests from people known to them
- For you to take up training offered by Tower Hamlets on E-Safety
- Take an Interest in your child's online life
- Take care what information you post online about your child and use privacy settings

Preventing Unmediated Contact

- Be open with your child about their adoption to ensure they feel comfortable talking to you or asking questions. Provide them with age appropriate information as they are growing up
- Use their Life Story Book to help them to understand their background and how they became a part of your family
- Provide information as and when they ask
- If you need information contact us and we will obtain information from the adoption records for you
- Talk to your child about what they would do if they were contacted by a birth relative

Adopted children will be curious about their birth family. There is some evidence that children who have little or no information are more likely to seek to make contact with birth relatives in this way. This 'information gap' acts as a driver for them to search.

If your Child is Searching and is under 18

Access to the internet is everywhere, schools, libraries, mobile phones and internet cafes. Telling them to stop or banning them from the computer will not work. Young people are far more internet literate than parents and if they are wishing to find their relatives they will subvert any attempt by you to stop them.

If you become aware that your child is searching you will need to talk to them about the possible impact for them and their emotional readiness and seek to ascertain what it is they want to happen. Offer to support them in seeking contact or information and enlist the help of an adoption support worker to achieve this.

If your child is over 18 and wishing to search they should approach an adoption support team for help to access their adoption records. They can then ask for an Intermediary Service and would be helped and advised by a

social worker during the process. We do not advise making contact using social network sites even as adults without prior preparation.

How Can Tower Hamlets Help

If your child is under 18 and is searching, we can help and support you and your child by –

- Obtaining and sharing information with you. If the child was placed by another agency we can obtain information from them for you
- Providing Life Story work- we have a dedicated worker skilled in doing this work
- Advice and counselling for your child about their adoption story.
- Seek information from birth relatives including extended family members to help
- We can set up letterbox exchange in the first instance with birth relatives and support them in providing the letters if they need help.
- Counselling and support to birth relatives if the child wishes to meet with them to ensure they are prepared. We can also direct them to an independent support service if necessary
- If the young person wishes to meet, we will work with you and your child and the birth relative to consider the implications of meeting.
- We can set up and facilitate a meeting for your child and their birth relative in as sensitive a way as possible and can continue to provide post reunion support as needed

Further Reading

- **Facing up to Facebook:** Eileen Fursland. A must have book for adopters in understanding social media and how to manage unmediated contact. Available from BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering) www.baaf.org.uk

Useful Agency

- **CEOPS** (Child Exploitation and Online Protection): Crime agency protecting children from harm on and offline. Provides advice to adopters on safeguarding children online.
www.ceop.police.uk

If you would like to talk to someone in Adoption Support give us a call on 0207 364 5431. You can write or email us at:

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