Adoptive Parenting and Social Media

*The best defence is a good offence*

Experience and literature about adoption and social media encourage parents to prepare themselves for the new realities of adoption imposed by the digital world. Management includes a combination of – *Preparation and Oversight; Teaching and Openness*

When it comes to ‘untangling the web’ the best defence is a good offence.

Parents are encouraged to learn about the internet and, in particular social media; to talk often with their children about adoption; to address their children’s interest in learning more about their birth families of origin; to establish rules; and to become a source of support and information (Creating a Family, 2009)
Preparation and Oversight – for every parent

Every parent today needs to prepare for the day when their child enters the world of social media. While most parents are ‘immigrants’ to this world, young people are born into this age and can easily navigate digital space even before they have the maturity to understand and manage the complex network of opportunities and challenges within their grasp.

It shouldn’t be a surprise to parents that teens engage in the entirely normal behavior of “hanging out” with friends in the place where they spend the most time — the digital world.

Teens today use social media to stay in touch with friends they already know. A growing trend is for young people to also use social media to meet new friends. Most of these friendships stay in digital spaces however, research suggests that 20 percent of all teens have met an online friend in person.

The web is not ‘all bad’. Some advantages of the digital world might be that shy teens build confidence in ‘talking’ online, teens in small communities can expand their world and teens can connect with young people who share interests that are not available within their community networks.

However, we all know of instances of emotional upheaval for young people who are embarrassed by peers or bullied online. In the general population of teens it is in very rare cases that there are dangers associated with teens meeting new people online who become predators but this is little comfort for a parent of young and emotionally vulnerable child.

In this new and different world of friendship-making, parents need to readjust their parenting skills in order to help young people learn how to make new relationships that are safe and positive.
It’s important to remember that kids haven’t changed. The healthy urge to make new friends is the same as it has been always, it’s just that how it happens is shifting. Technology is in our children’s hands at increasingly younger ages.

Parents are wise to be wary and have concern for their children but also need to understand that they need to be pro-active in preparing for the parenting tasks related to the web and be willing to provide boundaries and oversight over activities their children engage in online.

While adults often feel the least competent to manage the use of technology in their families, they need to take on this task with the same zeal and interest as other parenting challenges.

Here are some tips:

1. When teens first join a social network (most require users to be at least 13 years of age), it’s time for parents to sign up too. This will let you “friend” or “follow” your child (but don’t be a stalker, just check in now and then to get a view of their world and if everything looks okay you can return to your Facebook feed). Hopefully they will be so excited just to finally have an account in the first place they won’t mind you lurking about. If they do, just remind them who pays for the phone and/or phone bill

2. Learn about ways that you can monitor your child’s internet use including software that can be installed to manage some oversight and privacy. This especially important for younger children, youth who are more vulnerable either because of the known challenges with birth family members or the child’s own special needs. Here is a link to an article in Parenting.com with links to help you learn more about this: Internet safety tips for kids and their parents. By Jeana Lee

   http://www.parenting.com/gallery/social-media-monitoring-kids?page=1

3. Talk to your teens about the online friends they make and the online friends who choose them. This is a chance to learn about their world, so don’t pass judgment too quickly and be prepared to listen.
4. Encourage your teens to use the privacy settings offered by their social networks (and do the same yourself).

5. Talk to your teens about their future dreams and goals, and how their “digital footprint” can help them achieve those goals. Explain how friends and followers help shape these “digital footprints.”

6. Have a discussion with your teens about meeting online friends offline. Explain how easy it is to pose as a teen online. Ask how well they really know their new online friend, if they have mutual friends, or if any of their offline friends are friends with this new person in “real” life.

7. Expect to view some mistakes. You probably made plenty of them as a kid and so will they, only theirs will just be more public and permanent. Be there to help them work through their errors and to learn from them.

An excellent resource to go to is Mediasmarts.ca and click on the Parent tab. You will view several short videos and see powerpoint presentation and resources that you can download giving you an excellent self-study program. Don’t expect to understand it all. Be willing to consult with your own teen and other young people until you feel confident in managing social media. Don’t stop here though. Social media is always changing so keep informed on an ongoing basis.

Here is the link:


**Teaching your child about adoption and social media**

Unique to adoptive parenting is the need to help young people to be aware of an additional power of the internet in relation to search and reunion with birth family members. In many cases, connections are positive in the long run but in some cases safety issues may be a concern. In almost all situations connections with birth family – whether initiated by a youth or by a birth family member have a profound emotional impact on a youth and will have impact on the relationships
within the adoptive family. Adoptive parents must be prepared to help their children understand these issues in relation to their story and encourage open discussion ongoing.

In essence, internet searches for and by birth family members are the same in character as searches for birth family always have been. As therapist Leslie Pate McKinnon (2012) notes, this is not a change in attitude but a change in degree. “Adoptees have long been going through their parent’s files, holding papers to the light to read through blacked out sections, searching phone books to try to contact birth family members. But the internet allows adoptees to search and often make contact in a matter of minutes. Because youth are often impetuous and impatient, they may make contact quickly and/or without thinking through the consequences”.

There are some important changes have occurred that we need to be mindful of
- Search by adoptees may occur at a younger age and without consultation with a parent
- Birth family members are able to search and connect directly with minors
- Both searches are likely to occur without professional guidance or parental knowledge
- Connection after contact can take place much more quickly and without self-reflection, conversation with family or friends, counseling or processing.

In this regard, adoptive parents may elect to have increased oversight and monitoring of social media activity. They must establish appropriate boundaries that would feel restrictive if a young person does not understand the valid underlying concerns.

Parents can cope with their fears about contact by mentally comparing risk – the risk of children reaching out with parental support and guidance- compared to the risk of unmediated reunions. Even when the contact has negative elements, the child’s doing it alone could be far worse. Talk openly with children about a
desire to have positive impact of birth family connections when they occur and ongoing.

If parents have access to information or connections with birth family members that they can provide to their children the need to for unmediated contact can be diminished. Some examples include reaching out to the adoption placement agency for a review of history information and any updated information that may be available. Many placements today come with an ‘ask’ for openness. At the very least, adult to adult connection can be helpful in establishing a relationship that may be helpful in gathering/ sharing information. When adult-to-adult communication is manageable it can ultimately be helpful for birth family members to accept adoption and respect boundaries imposed by adoptive parents for appropriate reasons. Having an agreement for ongoing communication established at placement can help to build relationships and mitigate the need for online contact in the teen years.

When children have a profound need to search it is important that parents have the skills to help them search and be willing to get actively and proactively involved. Sometimes an ‘online’ search can be diverted with a parent helping the youth to gain information through other sources – social histories received at placement, meeting with social workers who are still at the agency, meeting with former foster parents or even talking with a counselor.

When issues of physical or emotional risk are likely to be a part of connections, adoptive parents need to prepare themselves to ensure they can support their child, including setting up counseling for themselves and/or the child. Do not hesitate to seek advice on how to navigate connections and get support along the way. At the very least, parents need to take time to consider their reactions and have a plan to guide their children through contact and ensuing relationships.
Open to Openness

Being ‘open to openness’ is an integral part of adoption today and especially in relation to managing the challenges and opportunities imposed by the internet. It is not possible to guarantee a ‘closed’ adoption in any circumstance.

Parents need to explore their fears about contact. Take time to mentally compare the risk – the risk of children reaching out with parental support and guidance – compared to the risk of unmediated reunions. When contact is not agreed to at placement because it would be complicated or distressing, there is some likelihood that a youth will search or be found. Even when contact has negative elements, the child doing it alone could be far worse.

Adoptive parents have always had understandable fears of loyalty and family authenticity. Will my child chose them over us? Will they say I am not their ‘real’ parent. Today’s adoptive parents must be prepared to reflect on their feelings and fears.

Similarly, especially when children are adopted from foster care, information provided at placement leads to understandable fears about birth family member’s ability to disrupt the harmony of a family and questions about their ability to respect reasonable boundaries. These are normal and valid concerns that adoptive parents must be prepared to honestly explore. Setting up a very controlled and limited plan to communicate – adult to adult – may be helpful to support the ongoing connection and still manage emotional upheaval in the adoptive family. And, when issues arise, bring in mediators, counseling supports and deal with challenges head on.

Reading about openness in adoption with a focus on benefits of openness as well as the ‘how to’ of living in an open adoption can be helpful for adoptive parents even if they are currently in a ‘closed’ adoption.

Reading materials on open adoption are posted at www.adoption.on.ca/openness-resources
This material is the ‘start of a conversation’ about adoptive parenting and Social Media. Every situation is unique and every-changing. Like so many aspects of parenting ‘curve-balls’ will come from every angle. One of the main differences with this area of parenting is that there are no ‘seasoned experts’ to guide parents. Many of the ‘experts’ on social media are not much older than the youth we are seeking to guide and protect.

Untangling the web is a journey for every parent and when it comes alongside adoptive parenting, the Adoption Council of Ontario is happy to join the ride, support a parent in thinking through options and making plans to navigate through or address situations that arise.

Please contact us at: pass@adoptontario.ca or call 416 482-0021, ext 2992.

The Adoption Council of Ontario
The Adoption Council of Ontario is a not-for-profit providing outreach, support and education to all adoptees, adoptive parents, potential adoptive parents, birth families, and adoption professionals in Ontario. We deal with public adoption, private adoption, international adoption and relative adoption. Since 1987, we have been working towards a provincial community where all children have families forever.