Facing up to Facebook: A survival guide for adoptive families.

Social networking sites have raised new issues for adoptive families


This is a very helpful guide for adoptive parents who may be wondering what the implications of social networking sites may be for their family, and what, if anything, you can or should do. It looks at internet safety and how to protect your child’s identity online, as well as the more complex issues of communication, relationships and identity and “the difficult balancing act between responding to your child’s desire to know more and growing need for autonomy and protecting him( sometimes, from himself).”

The importance of openness is addressed in Chapter 1, with reference to maintaining contact. ‘It shows the child that, even when information is difficult, you have the emotional resources to cope even if you may not like it. It also creates a sense that, even when issues are painful, it is better to share and talk about them and that they don’t need to be kept a secret because you might be upset’. Fursland emphasises that it is normal, natural and healthy for adopted children to be curious about their birth families.

Chapter 2 looks at what to do if your child wants to know more about what is happening in their birth family now. This may happen even when you have always been very open with them. ‘Reassure your child that you are not hurt, insulted or rejected by their wish to know more, and that any anxiety you may have comes from concern, not criticism or fear of the birth family’. It has a list of What if ..? questions to talk through with the young person as well as other suggestions like contacting the adoption agency for further information. Fursland suggests that the questions for adoptive parents are ‘What is the best way?’ and ‘When is the time right?’, not whether your child should know.

Going it alone or seeking the support of the adoption agency is discussed, and the pitfalls of establishing contact through social networking sites identified. Concern is raised over the speed of communication taking away the chance for people to really think things through.

Chapter 3 looks at birth relatives, most of whom do not want to disrupt their child’s life with their adoptive family. It looks at research by the University of East Anglia into the experiences and attitudes of birth relatives whose children have been removed by local authorities. Issues raised by birth relatives and children searching for each other on the internet are examined, and the potential risks for both parties are highlighted.

It also considers the way the child may view his adoptive parents’ actions and decisions about contact when they are older.
Chapter 4 looks at Young people and the internet.

“Many adopted children and teenagers may be more vulnerable than their peers online. This applies both to the general risks, which apply to any of us and our children, and to the more specific risks of searching for or communication with birth relatives online. Many adopted children have long-lasting vulnerabilities, however significant a recovery they may have made since being placed in their adoptive homes…” (p31).

The chapter contains a useful ‘beginner’s guide’ to internet searching aimed at parents. It looks at ‘where are you now?’ sites, as well as location services on mobile phones, internet chat rooms and so on. This may be helpful for parents whose children are more adept at internet use than they are.

Chapter 5 looks at online safety and protection of privacy.

Apparently 53% of parents of 8-11 year olds use parental control software to regulate internet use. Whilst this section illustrates the variety of ways in which parents can try to regulate use, it cautions that the best internet security is no substitute for talking to your child about his adoption and birth family. Accepting and declining Facebook friends and the use of privacy settings are discussed, as well as using Facebook to search for people. Page 52 gives a useful guide ‘How young people can protect their privacy on social networking sites’.

Chapter 6 Facebook and adoptive families. This chapter considers the risks of adoptive parents and extended family members inadvertently including identifying information on their Facebook profiles and gives advice on this. It also looks at the ethics of adoptive parents finding out information about birth parents.

Page 57 gives a helpful check list on ways to talk with your child about Facebook, reproduced here with kind permission of BAAF. (Copyright Eileen Fursland).

Talk about Facebook with your child

Sit down with your child and talk about her Facebook page and who could view it. Some young people may never have considered changing the default settings or thought about the implications of having their information publicly available.

Explain to your child (if she doesn’t already know) that if her privacy settings are set to “Everyone”, then anyone visiting the Facebook site is allowed to view her page.

If she will let you, sit down together and look at her Facebook profile. Look at it while you are logged in (from your own account) and when you are logged out, to see what is visible in both cases.
You may be able to see who your child’s “friends” are and lots of personal information about her. Some young people include lots of information that could help someone identify them (e.g. date of birth) and locate them (e.g. their school, their town or village).

Ask your child what she does if someone sends a message asking to become her “friend”. Does she accept all requests, even from people she has never heard of? Or does she only accept people she knows and has met in the real world?

Discuss why some people have to keep their Facebook profile more private than others – e.g. young people who want to apply for a job in a particular profession might not want potential employers to be able to check out their Facebook page and see what they get up to on nights out with their mates. And people who work in, say, the police force or mental health (or schools) might not want to be easily traced on Facebook.

Explain that, in the same way, someone who has been adopted might not want to be easily traced. Talk about why being adopted means having to do some things differently from your child’s friends. Empathise with her about the fact that her life is more complicated.

Talk to your child about the risk that, without the right privacy settings, she can be contracted out of the blue by a birth relative through Facebook. Ask her how she would feel about this. Perhaps she might want to avoid this because it is not the best way to make this contact?

If she is receptive, you could suggest other ways she could keep her online identity private (see using privacy settings is vital, p.45).

Remind her about what she can do if she wants to know more about her birth relatives or if she wants to make contact (see Chapter 2 of this book). Make sure you show her that you are open to the idea of making contact and that you accept it is something she may want to do.

The idea of being in control may appeal to her. Explain that having the right privacy settings on Facebook and not accepting random people as “friends” means that she keeps control. It means that she is the one who decides whether and when to have contact. This is better than being taken by surprise when she might not be ready or it is a bad time, e.g. the night before an important exam.

Talk to your child about the nature of internet communication and how it is easy for people to do or say things on the spur of the moment without thinking, which they might later regret. Remind her how, once you have given someone certain information you can never get it back.

Chapter 7 Photographs and your family. In most cases sending photographs as part of letterbox contact does not pose a risk but there can be a risk that a photograph can be used as a way of tracing a child. It is important that decisions about sending photographs or not is proportionate to the risk and based on proper risk assessments. This chapter gives guidance on taking
precautions, what can be done if a photograph has been posted inappropriately.

Chapter 8 looks at managing the consequences of unmediated contact, that is where contact has been made without the support of an adoption agency. The pitfalls of ‘instant’ communication are outlined and illustrated by helpful case studies. There is a section on ‘Understanding the pull of the birth family’ which reminds adoptive parents of the strangeness for their child of living in a family they were not born into. Fursland quotes Nancy Verrier:

“No Matter how nurturing, loving or affluent the adoptive parents may be, living with genetic strangers is a very hard life for a child; he has to spend tremendous amounts of energy trying to fit into a family in which he feels alien”, ….. “the main issue for adopted people is that of loss, the loss of the birth mother. If adoption is to be helpful to a child who needs parents, the adoptive parents as well as the professionals who work with them will have to first acknowledge the existence of the child’s loss and the issues which ensue.”
(Nancy Verrier. Coming Home to Self pub 2010 by BAAF).

The chapter also considers the issue of genetic attraction; how and whether you will know if your child is in touch with birth relatives, especially given that adolescents are often uncommunicative; and the pain and distress for adopters at feeling excluded and disregarded, in much the same way as parents of adopted adults can feel when they seek information about their origins. Page 80 gives suggestions on how to manage the contact.

If adoptive parents do not manage this, the consequence is children being:

“left with the task of moving between the two ‘parents’ managing the amount of information they passed about each to the other and somehow almost certainly managing the two sets of parents’ anxiety about each other.”
(Schofield 2009, in Fursland 2010.pg 82)

Chapter 9 Help and support for adoptive families looks at the responsibility for provision of adoption support services, as well as raising the issue of contact through social networking sites when drawing up and reviewing contact agreements. It looks at parent’s fears and suggests strategies for managing.