

Facebook: direct cont

In the first of two articles Helen Oakwater examines how Facebook is having a devastating effect on many adoptive families. In the next article she will explore how and why robust adoption support and detailed information makes a difference to a child's identity and might offer children some protection when facebook intrudes.

Q. HOW many of you (adopter, social worker or judge) would welcome a birth family member unexpectedly knocking on the front door where an adopted child lives?

A. None

Q. Why do many adoption orders restrict contact to an annual letterbox exchange?

A. To protect the child and help stabilize an adoptive placement

Q. Is it safe to allow unrestricted, unsupervised, direct contact between an adopted child and the birth parent from whom they were removed?

A. No

Q. Is it happening?

A. Yes. Through cyberspace it's easy.

If you think adopted children are safe from an approach by the birth family from whom they were removed, think again. Social networking has blown that protection sky high.

what's happening on Facebook?

Recent media cases have tragically demonstrated how vulnerable teenagers can be groomed via Facebook then abused or even murdered.

That is the tip of the iceberg. Facebook allows you to search for anyone and email anyone. Anyone you know, anyone you want to know, anyone you once knew or complete strangers. Present, past and future, connections can be made via the web. Relationships can be formed or rekindled. Identities can be faked, lies told, history rewritten.

Adopted children throughout the UK (and probably in other parts of the world) are being connected to their birth families via Facebook. Some children have actively searched for birth family members; others simply receive an email in their Facebook inbox which explodes in their unprotected face.

"Hello, I am your birth father. I have been searching for you ever since you were stolen by social services. You look beautiful. I love you so much".

"darlin son i am so hapy coz iv found u ere I bin lokin for ages pls rit bak coz u bin told lies bout me i always luvd u n nevr stopd thinkin bout u b gr8 2 c u."

Messages like these, some in normal English, some in 'text speak', are retraumatising adopted children. Adoptive families are being blown apart. Young adults and teenagers have no protection from this 'virtual rape'. (Rape is also defined as 'an outrageous violation'). Look at the Adoption UK website message board and you will see I am not exaggerating.

What can be done to stop this? Nothing. Younger children can be slightly protected by parents supervising their computer time, restricting sites, applying various parental filters etc. However by early teens, most kids will be way ahead of their parents in understanding the web and social networking and if you restrict

them at home, they will simply access what they want at a friend's house or on their mobiles.

Sorry to be the bearer of such a blunt message, but is the reality. There is no way this can be monitored, policed or managed. So let's get real and deal with the whys and wherefores. Facebook is the symptom; the root causes are identity issues.

identity and teenage angst

"Who am I?" "Where do I fit?" "Who do I connect to" "Where do I belong?" "What are my limits?" "What matters to me?" "Who matters to me?" "Where did I come from?"

These deep philosophical questions are all part of our quest to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world. We revisit these questions at various stages in life, particularly during crises. It's 'normal'.

The teens are the time when all children start to distance themselves from their family. Their friends become more important and they closely identify with that 'tribe'. This is a normal stage of child development and the first occasion when 'identity' becomes hugely important for every child.

Growing apart from one's family in adolescence is normal. Challenging authority is common. Who does the teenager separate from and rebel against? The family in front of them; the family they live with and can see. For adopted children, adolescence brings more complex issues because they have (at least) two families. So they rebel against the adoptive parents and often head towards aspects of their birth family – consciously or unconsciously.

Parenting adopted teenagers is already deeply challenging. The operating system and software installed in their infancy is saturated with trauma. The legacy from the neglect and emotional abuse, experienced by a child before an adoptive placement often leaves them with limited executive functioning (thinking skills), poor emotional regulation, little impulse control, low self-esteem and a bucketful of negative beliefs. So this hurt child needs therapeutic reparenting through childhood and beyond.

Imagine trying to therapeutically reparent a teenager while the birth family is 'virtually' sitting in your kitchen table and undermining you. That's what Facebook permits.

controlled contact

As adopters we have absorbed many elements of our children's birth family. We try to paint a positive picture of them, find their qualities; we recognise their constant and continuing importance in our children's lives. Many of us are happy to support our children when they reconnect with their birth family, before or after adulthood.

However any reconnection should be carefully planned; everybody's expectations managed, at a time safe for all. Years of experience has shown that support is needed by all parties. That's why we have an Adoption Contact Register. That's why independent social workers are involved and counselling is offered. Contact and reconnection after many years apart is

act with no safeguards

huge. Even if all parties wanted contact, the ramifications are enormous, because it shakes everyone to their core. For a while it can destabilise all three corners of the adoption triangle, because it challenges everyone at an identity level.

timing and loss of control

Facebook allows contact to be made anytime. The sender has no idea whether the individual they are emailing has exams; recently broken up from a long-term relationship; is mentally fragile; self-harming; suicidal; pregnant; in an abusive relationship; depressed; grieving; recently moved; in prison; is isolated; wants contact or wants nothing to do with them. The intrusion occurs when convenient for the sender. The needs and current life situation of the recipient unknown and ignored.

Recently one member of an adopted sibling group accepted an invitation on Facebook to connect to a boy from her old foster family. Through this link the birth mother was immediately able to identify them and emailed each of them on 23 December.

The impact has been devastating and is derailing each of their lives in different ways. Alcohol, anger and depression are some of the tools currently being used by this set of adoptees. One job and a university place are seriously at risk. They have also disconnected from their adoptive family.

In another adoptive family, the 15-year-old boy is being emotionally seduced by a birth mother who insists he denies any of the abuse that he can clearly remember and is documented. She says it never happened. This intelligent boy is now questioning his own sanity. His behaviour is dreadful, school is considering expulsion, his exams are threatened. A child, previously on track for eight A to C grades at GCSE may, thanks to birth mum's outrageous violation, get no qualifications and a police record.

we all want to feel loved

We all like to feel loved, important and wanted. For teenagers the number of friends you have is vitally important. On Facebook you can keep score and connect to anyone. Frankly, fewer than 100 friends makes you look sad. Adopted kids are often the ones with few real friends, so virtual friends on the web are doubly important. They can't see the security risk it poses to them or the rest of their family.

For teenagers and young adults, the web and mobile technology has given them a fast-paced, intensive, pressurised daily life with no time to reflect. Short-cuts offered by links, text language and instant messaging has given them a culture of instant information, immediate knowledge and short-term thinking. This is challenging for a 'normal' teenager; for someone with poor impulse control and/or lacks cause and effect thinking, it's even more dangerous.

They can post their current emotional state online for the world to see. You can tell all your 637 friends you have a hangover or

hate your job or bought new shoes or hate Paulo or are angry or love the new Killers album or your mum is a b***h or you've just got up or you think you're pregnant or miserable.

Each post will elicit some response – mostly inane and just one or two lines. By the way, this is how many people under 35 behave, many of them successful and high achievers; remember Facebook was started for Harvard undergraduates.

Posts are on record for ever. An emotional tirade posted in anger or when filled with vodka can't be taken back and is visible to all your 'friends'. This can destroy relationships and cause much pain.

contact

The motivation behind this behaviour is to 'keep in touch'. The basic human need to be connected to other people. The need to feel loved, desired, important, safe, secure, valued and seen.

Have your actions endorsed by other members of your tribe. Be part of the 'cool gang'. Facebook offers this in a way real life can't.

Millions of photographs are posted. You can expose your entire life history online. Some birth parents post photos of the children they want to find including recent pictures sent as part of the letterbox contact. Some adoptees post childhood photos. These can be tagged with names and linked to others though cyberspace. Permission is not needed or requested. Few think about the

ramifications. Once a child turns 18 any protection offered by adoption court orders are lost.

By the way, government proposals to allow the media to report more widely on family court proceedings need watching as they could be highly damaging. Adoption UK contributed to recent research conducted by Dr Julia Brophy, University of Oxford, on behalf of the Children's Commissioner for England which found that 'family courts' plan threaten children's wellbeing'. See www.1million.org.uk for the 'Media access to Family Courts' report.

In the adoption world contact is a huge issue. Many books, research projects and conferences address different facets. There are conflicting views on its strengths, weaknesses, short and long-term benefits, safety and privacy issues. Contact plans are outlined for every child placed for adoption. However we need to realise that Facebook and the internet have destroyed any safeguard because birth families can, and will, reconnect at any time. Adopted children can, and will, search online for their original families.

We have to face the Facebook facts. ■

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Helen Oakwater is an experienced adoptive parent, Executive Coach and NLP Trainer. Through parenting a sibling group placed in the early 1990s, she has personal experience of 'living with the child who hurts'. She has been an Adoption UK trustee since 2005. Previous articles published in Adoption Today are available at www.helenoakwater.co.uk

