

'Social' use of the internet means using it to find people, make links, communicate and share personal information, photographs and so on. Examples of social networking websites include Facebook, Twitter and Myspace.

The following are three real-life examples of what is happening as a result of the revolution in social networking.

- A 12-year-old girl who was adopted and had never had any contact with her birth mother found her on Facebook and sent her a message saying: 'Hi, I think I might be your first child.'
- A 15-year-old boy who was adopted found his older birth brother on Facebook and was communicating with him, without his adoptive parents' knowledge. His behaviour deteriorated and he became angry and started self-harming, refusing to go to school. The communication was proving too demanding for him to cope with and was triggering memories and upsetting feelings from his past.
- In a 'letterbox' letter to an adopted brother and sister, a birth father wrote that he was now on Facebook.

What is the impact of social networking on adoption?

Social networking is having a huge impact on adoption as increasing numbers of adopted teenagers turn to the internet to trace and contact members of their birth families.

Powerful internet search capabilities make it possible to search for someone without even knowing their surname. An unusual first name or combination of names, together with a date of birth, a town or someone's occupation, is enough in some cases.

In most cases of unplanned and unmediated contact between an adopted child and their birth relatives, it is the child who initiates the contact. Driven by curiosity and without thinking through the possible consequences, things can start to spiral out of control. Phone numbers are quickly exchanged and the birth relative may pass contact details to other members of the birth family.

Birth parents or other relatives sometimes present a different version of events from the one the young person has been told. They may feel confused, angry or even choose to believe their birth parents rather than their adoptive parents.

Sometime contact proves damaging or dangerous for the young person because:

- they may feel overwhelmed by the response of a birth parent who has been hoping for contact for a long time and is desperate for a reunion
- they may be bombarded by messages, emails, phone calls and texts
- they may come under pressure to meet face-to-face
- one person ignores or rejects the other person's approach, or quickly loses interest and stops responding, leaving them feeling confused or rejected
- it can re-awaken upsetting memories of previous abuse and trauma
- there may be accusations, recriminations and/or hurtful abusive messages (from one side or both)
- they could be drawn into a damaging or abusive relationship or risky behaviour.

Protecting an adopted child from unwanted approaches

New technologies linking mobile phones to social networking profiles can make it possible for a person's online 'friends' to know exactly where they are, in the real world, at any time. This has a huge implication on keeping adoptive children's personal details confidential and their location secret.

The following precautions can help to protect a young person's online identity:

- use privacy settings to restrict access to personal information
- limit the amount of information on their 'public' profile – avoid putting their mobile phone number, address, schools attended or photos that could identify their location
- never accept random friend requests from people.

What if my child wants to be found and is searching?

If your child does want to be found or is actively looking for their birth family, the chances are they will ignore or sabotage any attempts you make to protect their privacy. Trying to prevent your child from using social networking sites is doomed to failure – with an internet-savvy teenager who has a strong urge to know, you won't get far. Remember that access to the internet is everywhere – home, school, libraries, internet cafes, some mobile phones and games consoles.

The most important thing that you can do is talk to your child about what might happen and how the child would react. Ask them what they want to know, and if you don't have the answers promise to help them find out. It is better to be involved and be able to support your child rather than for them to feel the only way to pursue things is in secret.

Every adopted child will at some point be curious about their birth family – the urge to find out is a powerful one. Think about what you can do to try and make sure that your child turns to you, not the internet.

If you're a Devon resident and your child wants to meet their birth family, then contact the Devon Adoption Team.

Our first task would be to help your child understand the reasons why they couldn't grow up in their birth family. We can access their original files if they were placed by Devon, or ask for information from other local authorities files. Local Authorities are required to store adoption records for 100 years.

You may already know most of all the information, but some of it may be new to you and difficult to hear, and our social workers can support your child, you and your family with this.

It may be that we set up a confidential letterbox exchange between their birth family and yourself, if your child is under 18, or directly with your child, if they are over 18. This will enable your child to ask questions in a safe way, and their birth parent has the opportunity to tell some of their story.

If your child still wants to meet their birth family, then we can look at ways to do this as safely as possible, and in a way that will be as useful to your child as possible. This will also involve working with your child's birth family to help them consider the implications of meeting too.

If you want to talk any of this over, then give the adoption team a call on **01392 384848**, or email us at adoption@devon.gov.uk

*Factsheet adapted from the article 'social networking and adoption' by Eileen Fursland, first published in **Adoption Now** magazine.*