

Post Adoption Information Sheet No. 46

Social networking and adoption: an information sheet for young adults who were adopted and their parents

This information sheet for both young people and parents is designed to provide a starting point in thinking about the use of social networking sites in regards to adoption.

The existence of Facebook and other social networking sites can impact on the adoption community in significant ways. Young people may use social networking sites such as Facebook to make contact with relatives and may be contacted by relatives through these sites. Sometimes this happens in secret and young people may be unaware of the complexities associated with this.

For young adults who were adopted

It is normal and healthy for adoptees to have questions about where they come from, where their relatives are now, and to experience thoughts about connecting with these family members.

This is particularly true during the teenage years and early adulthood when young people are trying to build an independent identity and develop a sense of who they are. To highlight how normal this process is, here is a list of key developmental tasks that young adopted persons face as outlined by researchers (Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998):

- Thinking about what it means to be adopted
- Incorporating one's adoption into their sense of identity
- Coping with being physically different from one's family members
- Exploring one's ethnic identity in the case of inter-country adoption
- Coping with adoption-related loss – what it means to have lost contact with one's biological relatives and country in cases of inter-country adoption.
- Wanting to have more information about one's parents.
- Beginning to consider searching for family.

2019 © The Benevolent Society Post Adoption Services. This material may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes provided the author of the material is identified with the copyright notice.

We encourage young people to share this information sheet with their parents, as it might help to open up a conversation about ways to work together on this issue. The Benevolent Society has counsellors available to talk with adopted people at any time and to provide some confidential support for individuals experiencing these very normal questions, thoughts or feelings.

For some adopted people however, these questions and feelings lead them to begin searching or seeking contact with possible relatives online.

Points to consider if using social networking sites to search or make contact

- Connecting with a relative may bring up a range of difficult feelings such as confusion, rejection, anger or disappointment. By searching on Facebook, especially in secret, adopted people may not have the support they need to deal with these challenges.
- A young person may think that they can handle any outcome. However, it is hard to know this for sure until you find yourself in that position.
- Young people may find disturbing content on a relative's Facebook page or other websites.
- Young people may be told an upsetting or misleading version of events about the adoption, which may be distressing.
- Such approaches may not come at the right time for the other party or may lead them to feel that their privacy has been invaded and could possibly sabotage what may otherwise have been a positive contact experience.
- Sometimes the relative involved may pass on the young person's details to other relatives and the adoptee may begin feeling bombarded and pressured by contact.
- Contact through social networking sites may lead contact to move at a pace that is too fast and does not feel comfortable for either or both parties.
- Any negative contact that is initially made through Facebook or similar sites cannot be 'undone', even if professional support is sought after the fact.

For parents

Parents may wonder how to respond if they find out that their child has been engaged in searching for their relatives online or may fear this possibility. Some parents try to stop their child's social networking activity or internet access altogether due to feelings

of vulnerability, wanting to protect their children or trying to cope with the 'unknown'. This approach however, may push their child away.

If you find yourself in this position, it is important to consider what your child's underlying needs are and to realise that they are not trying to be defiant or sneaky. In fact, they may be concerned about telling you for fear that it will upset you. It is also important to remember that your child has grown with this technology and it can be very tempting to type in a name and attempt to search for their family online.

It is important to normalise your child's behavior as being about them wanting to find answers to their questions and needing information about their past to gain a better understanding of who they are. Even if your child does not vocalise these questions, it does not mean they are not thinking about them and trying to process them internally. If parents are able to communicate a sense of acceptance in this way, involve themselves and assist their children to find answers to their questions, they will be more likely to communicate with their parents honestly and openly. If contact has already occurred, your child may need a lot of reassurance and support from you.

As young people forge their own identities, it is normal for them to test boundaries, pull away from their parents and for family conflict to occur at this age. Therefore, your child may also like to talk to a third party about their thoughts and feelings in relation to their adoption as a first step. This is perfectly ok too and doesn't mean that they are rejecting you or your role as their parents.

If you find yourself in a challenging situation such as this, The Benevolent Society is always available to provide support.

Alternate ways to meet one's needs for information and contact needs

- Counsellors at The Benevolent Society are experienced in adoption search and reunion and can assist people to begin thinking about and preparing for contact down the track.
- Adopted people may be assisted to gain a greater sense of identity through counselling and age-appropriate life-story work without necessarily making contact with relatives at this time.
- You may wish to contact the respective government department that managed your child's adoption to ensure that you have as much information as possible about the adoption, to assist them with their life-story work and identity formation.
- In cases where people strongly desire contact with their relatives, it may be helpful to contact PASQ or PARC to discuss this possibility. Counsellors can talk through and explore this with you. In some cases contact with parents can be helpful for a

young person to accept the reality of their family and incorporate this into their lives in positive ways.

Tips from post adoption support service

It may also be useful to prepare for the possibility of being approached via Facebook by asking yourself or your child the following questions:

- What would you do if you wanted to know more about your relatives?
- What would you do if you wanted contact with a relative?
- What would you do if a relative contacted you on Facebook or another site?

Even without a name, a determined person may piece together bits of information they have and locate you online. Therefore, until you feel prepared for contact to occur with a family member, it is important to carefully revise your privacy settings on Facebook to maintain your privacy if this is what you are wishing at this time. You can do this by:

- Ensuring that you do not list identifiable information publicly such as your date of birth or where you live.
- Ensuring that you do not display that you are a member of a particular school or other association that may make it possible for someone to trace you.
- Ensuring that only your Facebook friends can view your profile.
- Not accepting unknown people as Facebook friends.
- Ensure your friends list is hidden to ensure that somebody is not about to glean information about you through the pages of your Facebook friends.
- You may wish to use a nickname or spell your name differently on Facebook.
- You may wish to use a cartoon or illustration as a profile picture rather than a photo of yourself.

This is not to say that contact through Facebook is 'bad' in itself. Down the track, if contact has been agreed to by both parties, these sites may prove invaluable ways of maintaining contact with one another, sharing news, photographs and building a relationship.

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC)

Location: Locked Bag 6002,
Hurstville BC NSW 1481
Phone: 02 9504 6788
Email: PARC@benevolent.org.au
Website: www.benevolent.org.au

Post Adoption Support Queensland (PASQ)

Location: Ground Floor, 189 Coronation Dr,
Milton QLD 4064
Phone: 07 3170 4600
Email: PASQ@benevolent.org.au
Website: www.benevolent.org.au