

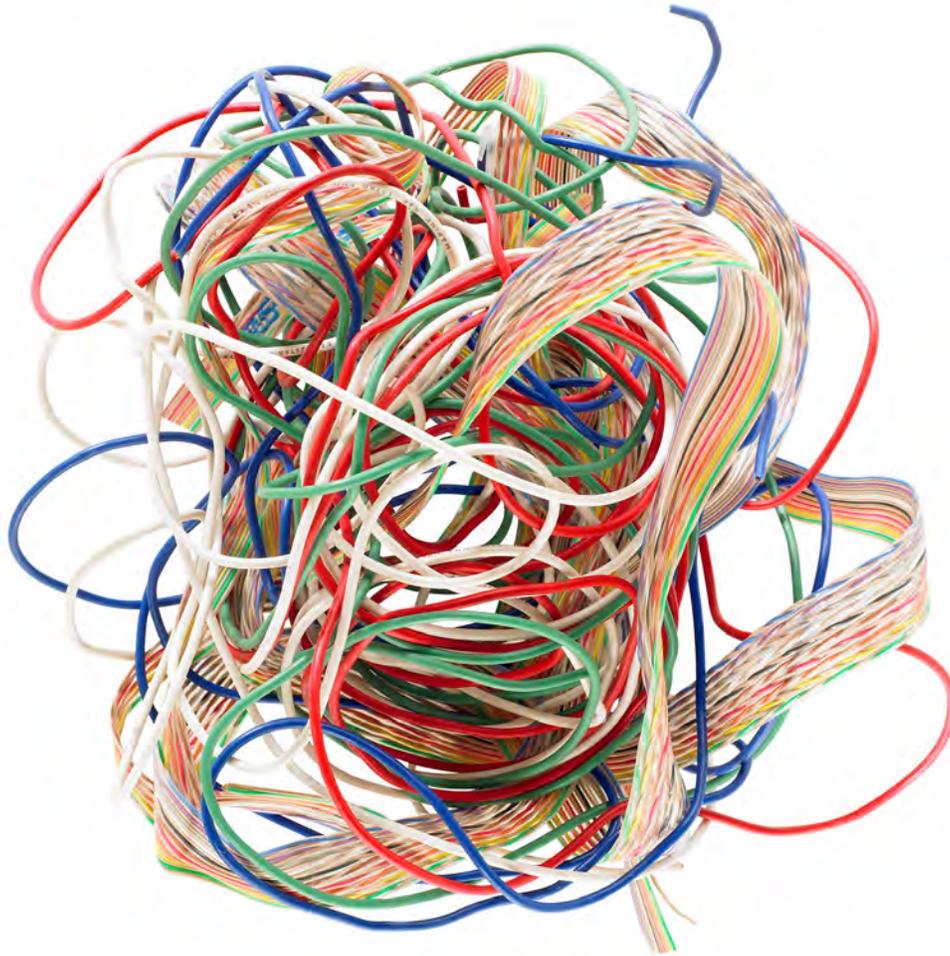


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UNTANGLING THE WEB

THE INTERNET'S TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON ADOPTION



POLICY & PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

December 2012

Jeanne A. Howard, Ph.D.

EVAN B. DONALDSON

adoptioninstitute

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Policy & Practice Perspectives are research-based publications that focus on important and timely issues in the field. This report was researched and written by Dr. Jeanne A. Howard, Policy & Research Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. It was edited by Adam Pertman, the Adoption Institute’s Executive Director. We are very grateful to the adoption scholars and professionals who reviewed this paper and provided research and editorial assistance. They include Professor Bruce Boyer of Loyola University School of Law; Madelyn Freundlich, JD; Leslie Pate Mackinnon, LCSW; Dr. Ruth McRoy of Boston College; Dr. Jini Roby of Brigham Young University; Susan Ogden of Adoptions Together; and Susan Livingston Smith, Program & Project Director of the Adoption Institute. In addition, we thank our intern, Arrielle Millstein of Widener University School of Law, for all her assistance.

The Institute also would like to express its gratitude to the principal donors who enabled the “Untangling the Web” project to proceed by generously adding to the Institute’s financial contribution to this work. They include: William and Elizabeth Rands, Spence-Chapin Services to Families, Lutheran Social Services of New England, Parent Match, National Adoption Center, the Barker Foundation and several other anonymous supporters.

Cover design by The Imagists.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is difficult to describe the extent to which the Internet is changing the everyday realities of adoption – and the lives of the millions of people it encompasses – without using words that sound hyperbolic. But a yearlong examination of the effects of this very new technology on a very old social institution indicates that they are systemic, profound, complex and permanent.

Social media, search engines, blogs, chat rooms, webinars, photo-listings and an array of other modern communications tools, all facilitated by the Internet, are transforming adoption practices, challenging current laws and policies, offering unprecedented opportunities and resources, and raising critical ethical, legal and procedural issues about which adoption professionals, legislators and the personally affected parties, by their own accounts, have little reliable information, research or experience to guide them.

The Donaldson Adoption Institute's research for this report affirmed that substantive information about the Internet's impact on adoption is scarce in the scholarly literature – or anyplace else – so there is little reliable knowledge to inform policy and practice, or to guide families or professionals. To begin filling this gap, the Adoption Institute has embarked on a multiyear, first-of-its-kind study of the Internet's impact on all aspects of adoption. Because there is a dearth of evidence-based information, most of the content of this report was derived from searching the Internet and getting input from the affected parties through a variety of means, including interviewing them and setting up a special email address to which they could send their input.

One key goal of this initial report by the Adoption Institute is to stimulate a national discussion about the Internet's impact on adoption and how to regulate Internet-based adoption services to assure that they are legal and ethical, and that the interests of all those affected – particularly children – are protected. This report provides an overview of the evolving landscape; an explanation of the scope and impact of the changes; resources (albeit limited ones) to inform, protect and assist all those affected; and preliminary recommendations on legal, policy and practice reforms intended to better respond to adoption's new realities. Our ultimate intent is to identify and promote policies and practices that enable this powerful technology to best serve the millions of children and families for whom adoption is part of everyday life.

The Adoption Institute's key findings on the Internet's impact on adoption to date include:

- A growing “commodification” of adoption and a shift away from the perspective that its primary purpose is to find families for children. This is particularly the case in domestic infant adoption, where a scarcity of babies available to be adopted heightens competition. Unregulated websites compete with traditional practitioners, sometimes by making claims and utilizing practices that raise serious ethical and legal concerns.
- Finding birth relatives is becoming increasingly easy and commonplace, with significant institutional and personal implications, including the likely end of the era of “closed” adoption and a growth in relationships between adoptive families and families of origin.
- An indeterminable but growing number of minor adopted children are contacting and forming relationships with biological siblings, parents and other relatives, sometimes without their adoptive parents' knowledge and usually without guidance or preparation about the complex emotional and interpersonal repercussions for everyone involved.

- A rising number of useful, positive sites, such as ones that expedite the adoption of children and youth who need families, notably including those with special needs; and more places to get information and education, networking opportunities, support services and other resources that are a clear contribution to professionals, policymakers, researchers, journalists and the millions of personally affected individuals.
- Evidence that the Internet has many additional positive effects on adoption and the people it touches. For instance, there are growing numbers of opportunities for affiliation, support and information-sharing that would be impossible to achieve without the technology and reach of the Internet and, in particular, social media.

Because the territory covered by this review is extensive and on-going, these initial findings are necessarily general, as are the recommendations presented below. The Adoption Institute will follow up in the coming months and years with more-detailed additional research, as well as education and advocacy initiatives to improve Internet-related laws, policies and practices.

Practice recommendations:

- Key organizations and experts in the fields of child welfare, foster care and adoption (Child Welfare League of America, National Association of Social Workers, American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, and representatives of major agencies and stakeholders) should convene for the purpose of devising best-practice standards and identifying other guidance/materials for use in the short-term while additional research is being conducted. The Adoption Institute plans to organize such a meeting in mid-2013.
- Education and training programs should be developed by and for adoption professionals so that they gain a better understanding of the positive and negative uses of the Internet and social media (including improved understanding of the technology itself), They then need to develop comparable programs to pass on this knowledge to their clients.
- Adoption practitioners, social workers and others who deal with birth and adoptive families should revise their curricula and training regimens to reflect the reality that many if not most affected parties will be able to find each other at some point, if they wish, and should provide their clients with commensurate information, education, counseling and other supports that recognize most adoptions likely will be “open” to some extent.
- Adoption practitioners of all sorts need to receive training and devise materials that enable them to better assist the growing number of adopted individuals, first/birthparents and other members of families of origin, adoptive parents and others who are coming to them for assistance in search and reunion activities.
- Child welfare organizations, researchers and other professionals should devise and post information on the Internet for prospective parents (adoptive and birth) explaining how to assess the array of online services and thereby enable them to make informed decisions based on a clear understanding of the ethical, personal and legal issues involved.

Policy and law recommendations:

- Policy-makers at the state and federal levels should commission research and hold hearings to determine whether changes in law or policy are needed to serve their constituents who are affected by adoption, and to ensure that everyone is protected from scams, exploitation or the risk of psychological harm.
- Policy and law-enforcement officials at all levels should routinely examine adoption-related activity on the Internet to determine whether fraud, exploitation or other illegal or

unethical practices are taking place, and should follow up, as warranted, by issuing warnings to violators, pressing charges and/or instigating statutory changes.

- Social media and Internet companies, particularly Google, Facebook and others that have a major impact on the issues discussed in this report, should conduct and enable research to inform their activities and should re-examine their policies and practices to determine if they need to be altered in light of the findings of this report.
- Laws that impede or prevent the parties to adoption from gaining important information, including statutes preventing adopted adults from accessing their original birth certificates, should be repealed since the Internet obviates their primary contemporary rationale (i.e., keeping the affected parties from learning about and finding each other.)

Conclusion

The list of positive, negative and complicated changes occurring in the world of adoption as a result of the Internet goes on and on, with many already in place and others still evolving. The common denominator among them is that they are not best practices derived from lessons learned from research and experience; rather, overwhelmingly, they are transformations that are happening simply because new technology enables them to happen. It is critical that those concerned about ethical adoption practice alter this reality by determining how to use the Internet to assure the rights and well-being of all parties, while improving adoption overall.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has instigated, enabled and facilitated historic changes throughout society, a growing number of which are being scrutinized by academics, legislators, child welfare organizations and others with the intent of responding with well-informed laws, policies and practices. To date, however, the effects of the Internet – particularly social media – on adoption have only begun to be examined. The following examples provide a glimpse into some of the positive and negative ways in which the Internet is transforming adoption:

- A headline reads, “Facebook reunites mother, daughter given up for adoption.” The article describes the joyful reunion of Helen Torres, who felt pressured to give up her child when she was 17 and unmarried in the 1940s, with her daughter, now 63. Her daughter had never been told she was adopted and, when her adoptive parents died, thought she was alone in the world.¹
- Adoptive parents learn that, without their knowledge or involvement, their 13-year-old daughter has been contacted by her birth family on Facebook. They are unprepared and their family is in turmoil (e-mail communication to the Adoption Institute, 2012). Another family, of an 11-year-old girl adopted from foster care, reports that their daughter is back in intensive therapy after being contacted on a social media site by her birthfather, who had abused her as a child and had been ordered by a court to sever all contact with her (personal communications to the Adoption Institute, 2011).
- Parents struggling with the complex behavior problems of their child adopted from foster care find little support in their community. They want to talk to other parents who are struggling. Through an Internet search, they find the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), which helps them find a support group in their area.
- A young woman placing her child for adoption does not feel drawn to any of the couples whose profiles she reviews from the agency assisting her. She goes online and finds a list of potential adoptive parents with approved home studies, including one who has interests and a history that appeal to her. She contacts the couple’s agency, meets them and ultimately places her child with them. This process makes her feel she has much more “say so” in her choice (Leslie Mackinnon, personal communication, Oct.17, 2012).
- A couple sees a picture of a beautiful infant on an adoption agency website featuring Kazakhstani children. They make a considerable financial investment in arranging to adopt this girl. Just before they leave for Kazakhstan, the prospective mother notices a blog with a picture of the same child whom another couple plans to adopt from the same agency. After much Internet sharing among prospective adoptive parents, the agency is exposed as a fraud, and its director is convicted of cheating multiple families out of hundreds of thousands of dollars (Wallace, 2009; Meagher, 2011).

¹ <http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/facebook-page-reunites-mother-and-daughter-after-63-years/>

² “Independent adoptions” are those in which parents are advised by an attorney rather than receiving the services of a public or private agency. Such adoptions are legal in most but not all states (CWIG, 2007).

The Internet is having a profound, permanent impact on modern adoption. For better and worse, it is reshaping how pregnant women and their partners find prospective adoptive parents and how those prospective parents (and their agencies, attorneys and adoption facilitators, whether ethical or unscrupulous) find them. It is circumventing procedural and legal barriers – including “closed records” statutes that seal adopted people’s original birth certificates in most states (Howard, Smith, & Deoudes, 2010) – that had prevented adoptive and biological relatives from locating each other, while accelerating searches and reunions to an extent and speed unimaginable just a few years ago. The separation of original and adoptive families, which already was becoming a less- and less-common practice in domestic adoptions and increasingly even in ones of children from other countries (Siegel & Smith, 2012), appears on its way to fading into history.

The Internet connects people of all ages who have mutual, adoption-related concerns and questions, offering support, counsel and a sense of community. It also enables unfiltered contact between adopted minor children and original family members without their parents’ knowledge or consent. And it allows people with a few dollars and some basic skills to establish a web presence and look like a legitimate resource when they are not, seeking to cash in on women in crisis pregnancies and on hopeful adoptive parents when they are most vulnerable.

There have long been concerns about unethical and illegal adoption practices, including coercion or exploitation of pregnant women and first/birthparents (Smith, 2006); lack of independent legal counsel for all parties (Samuels, 2006); withholding of information from or scamming of adoptive parents; influence of money and market forces (Pertman, 2011; Samuels, 2006; Smith, 2006); and abrogation of expectant/birthfathers’ rights (Schweitzer & Pollack, 2006; Smith, 2006; Pertman, 2011). But never before has there been a means of reaching so many susceptible people so easily, so extensively and with so little regulation or oversight.

Ethical Adoption Practice: An Overview

Adoption is a social institution designed to meet the needs of children in need of families. Its impact is far-reaching, affecting millions. They include expectant parents contending with the issues around an unintended pregnancy; making a complex, usually excruciating decision about relinquishing their children for adoption; navigating the process of doing so; and dealing with the resulting impact for the rest of their lives. They include prospective adoptive parents contending

“ **It is imperative that professionals working in adoption act ethically to ensure the rights of all the involved parties at all points in the process.** ”

*Child Welfare
Information Gateway*

with the issues around infertility; making a complex, often-difficult decision about forming their families with genetically unrelated children; navigating the process of doing so; and dealing with the resulting impact for the rest of their lives. And, of course, they include the infants, children and youth who are adopted, who typically have no voice in the process (unless they are older children); who navigate the complexities of adoption as they mature; and who deal with its impact in numerous ways for the rest of their lives.

The parties to adoption often are vulnerable even before the process begins. Pregnant women and their partners frequently are not empowered to make fully informed choices because they have financial problems, emotional challenges and limited information about their choices. Prospective

adoptive parents, especially those struggling with infertility and wanting mightily to form families, can become susceptible to alluring promises and outright scams by those who promise quick placement of healthy babies. And adopted people are at risk as well, as illustrated by recent international scandals where infants were sold or taken without their parents' understanding that adoption is meant to be permanent.

It is in the world of domestic infant adoption that the Internet's impact has been greatest to date. With an increase in the availability of birth control and abortion, along with greater social acceptance of single parenting, there has been a steep decline in the number of babies placed for adoption. But many if not most people who initially consider adopting think about newborns – so, to put it in market terms, demand greatly exceeds supply. Meanwhile, the money involved is usually considerable: tens of thousands of dollars per adoption. Add to that mix the reality that there is limited oversight and regulation, especially in the realm of the Internet, and the conditions come together for potential fraud and exploitation, as well as a heightened need to protect children's best interests (Roby & White, 2010).

Safeguards and Regulations of the Adoption Process Vary Widely. Three major categories of practitioners can be involved in infant adoptions today: licensed agencies, which usually are non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations operated under the auspices of social work professionals and providing a range of services; attorneys arranging independent adoptions², usually focusing primarily on legal services; and unlicensed facilitators whose function typically is limited to linking prospective adoptive parents and pregnant women. There are restrictions in approximately 14 states that in effect limit child placement to licensed agencies, or to birth relatives/guardians (CWIG, 2012). Additional states restrict independent adoptions through other means, such as prohibiting advertising by pre-adoptive parents for pregnant women considering adoption for their babies (CWIG, 2012). In approximately half the states, licensed agencies, attorneys and unlicensed facilitators operate simultaneously.

The variety, range and length of services provided to expectant and pre-adoptive parents can vary considerably by the type of practitioner. In agency adoptions, parents relinquish their children to the agency, which assumes legal custody. There are both non-profit and for-profit agencies, all of which must meet licensing standards set by their states. Licensed agencies frequently offer crisis pregnancy counseling services, whether or not a woman is considering adoption; that is, they help her assess the range of available options, including adoption. They also can provide counseling to the parties involved, conduct home studies to verify the suitability and capacity of pre-adoptive parents, and offer education, counseling and other support after child placement. Agencies also may provide temporary foster care for infants whose parents are ambivalent about relinquishment and need more time to consider their decisions (Smith, 2006).

In many adoption agencies, pregnancy-related expenses are paid from general funds and, although prospective adoptive parents pay fees that go into such funds, they often do not directly pay for legally permitted costs directly to the expectant parent(s). The practice is intended to maximize a pregnant woman's ability to consider all her options and minimize the possibility – to the extent possible – that she will feel pressure to place her child for adoption with specific parents because they have provided her with financial support. In addition, agencies maintain records on their adoptions that theoretically are stored indefinitely. Of course,

² "Independent adoptions" are those in which parents are advised by an attorney rather than receiving the services of a public or private agency. Such adoptions are legal in most but not all states (CWIG, 2007).

the quality and integrity of agency practices vary, but most have histories of professional practice interwoven with current social work knowledge and ethics. In addition to meeting state licensing requirements, many agency-based adoption programs also are accredited by the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children, which has standards for both Adoption Services³ and Pregnancy Options Counseling/ Birth Options Counseling.⁴

Over the last few decades, a growing percentage of prospective adoptive parents, as well as pregnant women considering adoption, have turned to attorneys to connect to one another. While any attorney licensed in the state where the adoption occurs can provide services, some have developed expertise in this area, and many of those are members of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys. The Academy's 340 members in the U.S. and Canada must subscribe to its Code of Ethics and are subject to grievance procedures should their conduct violate this code.

Today, largely as a result of the Internet, many prospective parents and expectant mothers locate each other independently – that is, with little or no professional assistance – and hire attorneys solely or primarily to receive guidance and ensure that all legal procedures are followed. Birth and adoptive parents sometimes are attracted to this type of adoption because they perceive they will have more control and will deal with less red tape. Some adoptive parents also believe they will wait less time for a child with this process, but there is no research to support or counter this belief.

The final type of practitioner is a facilitator (sometimes called an intermediary). This person, who generally is not a licensed professional, acts as a matchmaker to connect the client (the pre-adoptive parents) with pregnant women considering adoption. Prospective parents sometimes employ facilitators in addition to agencies in order to enhance their prospects for adopting.

State laws vary significantly not only regarding adoption processes, but also in relation to the types of practitioners involved. The lack of regulation and oversight in many jurisdictions can threaten everyone's interests, particularly those of the women dealing with crisis pregnancies.

States have the power to regulate agencies operating within their borders, often through licensing. Licensing does not guarantee quality, however; rather, it identifies standards to be followed. Fraud and deception can be addressed through criminal or consumer law, but it is unclear how often complaints about adoption providers are prosecuted or even investigated. Because the Internet vastly extends the reach of adoption practitioners, including across state lines, it is important for the field to examine the extent to which law enforcement protects consumers in this realm. The lack of regulation and oversight allows those searching for business via the Internet, or even looking to perpetrate scams, to be increasingly bold in engaging in dubious practices (Prof. Bruce Boyer, Nov. 12 & 26, 2012, personal communication).

Guaranteeing that ethical, legal adoption practice occurs is a challenging mission for even the most reputable agencies and professionals, as well as for states that actively seek to protect all parties to adoption. Some states also attempt to ensure that those parties are fully informed of their rights. Illinois, for instance, requires that adoption professionals provide their clients with

³ http://www.coastandards.org/standards.php?navView=private§ion_id=85

⁴ http://www.coastandards.org/standards.php?navView=private&core_id=650

one of two documents, “Birth Parents’ Rights and Responsibilities” or “Adoptive Parents’ Rights and Responsibilities,” and that the documents be signed by the relevant parties.⁵ Minnesota provides a booklet outlining the rights of all parties, but does not require signatures.⁶ Some agencies also provide documents to clients outlining their rights. An example is the “Birth Parent Bill of Rights” provided by Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children.⁷

Whatever legal or procedural safeguards a state imposes, the Internet can render them meaningless. For example, some states prohibit advertising within their borders for pregnant women or adoptive parents, or restrict adoption work within their borders to licensed attorneys or adoption agencies. The Internet knows no boundaries, however, so people who live in states where ads are banned still get to see them in cyberspace, and people who live in states with practitioner restrictions can sign up with an online service in another state.

Aspects of Ethical Adoption Work. Before considering the special challenges to ethical adoption posed by the Internet, it is important to review commonly accepted standards generally. State laws and licensing standards, as well as practitioners’ professional licenses from accrediting bodies, are all means of regulating adoption practice; however, these are often abstract ideals rather than readily enforced standards. There are, however, common basic practices and protections that should be in place. Extracting from professional literature on adoption ethics and sound adoption practice, fundamental principles include (Child Welfare League of America, 2000; Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County, 2006;⁸ Freundlich, 2000; Groza & Rosenberg, 2001; Smith, 2006):

- Respect for the importance of children being raised in families of origin. Adoption should be an option only when the biological parents feel they or their families cannot do so or in cases of maltreatment, when the state determines it is not in the child’s best interests.
- Commitment to the child as the primary focus of the adoption process and respect for the child’s human dignity and protection from commodification;
- Respect for the dignity and worth of each individual, including avoidance of discrimination toward expectant parents, adopting parents and children;
- Non-directive, non-coercive and ongoing counseling to enable pregnant women and their partners to make informed decisions based on understanding of all options;
- Accurate, complete information to all parties, including clear presentation of the permanence and irrevocability of voluntary termination of parental rights;
- Ongoing, concerted attempts to identify, locate, and include the father of the unborn child in counseling and decision-making;
- Recognition that an informed choice about adoption cannot occur until after the child is born, i.e., decisions reached during pregnancy should be re-examined after birth;
- Counseling and support for prospective adoptive parents and expectant parents by credentialed, trained providers;
- Assistance in arranging openness arrangements and education for parties about openness in adoption, including the extent to which such agreements are enforceable;

⁵ http://www.state.il.us/dcf/adoption/agencies/PDFs/Birth_Parents_Rights.pdf;
<http://www.state.il.us/DCFS/docs/cfs403d.pdf>

⁶ <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfs/legacy/legacy/DHS-3206-ENG>

⁷ http://www.spence-chapin.org/downloads/BillORights-2008_English.pdf

⁸ Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County Michigan provides a clear and concise statement of its ethical standards – shown in Appendix I.

- Preparation of prospective adoptive parents to help them develop the knowledge, expectations and skills to understand and meet the unique needs of their children;
- Transparency regarding payments and services; limits on support to pregnant women to coverage of basic needs, so as to protect them from coercion or a sense of obligation, as well as to protect prospective adoptive parents from exploitation;
- Separate legal representation for the expectant/birth parents and the prospective adoptive parents in the adoption process;
- Recognition of the unequal positions of parties in many adoption arrangements and safeguards to assure that the rights and needs of vulnerable parties (particularly expectant women) are protected;
- Provision of or linkage to post-adoption resources for all parties;
- Preservation of information about the adoption and the original family that can be made available to adopted persons when they reach majority, to the extent allowed by law;
- Accountability, i.e., the means to assure that the parties' concerns can be addressed.

PART I

THE INTERNET'S PENETRATION OF ADOPTION

Adoption has had a presence on the Internet almost since the first commercial sites emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As early as 1994, the first photolisting of children available for adoption from the foster care system was posted on the web (Gerstenzang & Freundlich, 2003). In 1998, President Clinton urged expanded use of the Internet to facilitate the adoption of children from foster care and to shorten the time they wait for permanency. This led to the development of a national registry to expedite adoptions across state lines. Photolisting of children available for adoption from other countries has existed since the mid-1990s as well (Roby & White, 2010). The use of the Internet to connect prospective adoptive parents and pregnant women emerged fairly early too. For example, a headline in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1995 read: "Adoptions are Now Just a Click Away" (Colker, 1995).

The Internet has led to a proliferation of unmonitored and often-unregulated adoption services (Pertman, 2011; Chou, Bowne & Kirkaldy, 2007; Roby & White, 2010) – which means it is increasingly difficult to assure that competent, ethical practice occurs. In one of the few scholarly works on the Internet's impact on adoption, Roby & White (2010) conclude that the lack of regulation of Internet adoption practice is a significant problem, particularly in domestic infant adoption. They note that the Internet is a powerful force in adoption, but because current regulations stem from principles and laws that preceded the Internet and its impact, they are inadequate to protect the involved parties.

Social work has a long history of leadership in adoption, so Roby and White (2010) call for the profession to take the lead in assuring ethical practice and in advocating for a nationwide effort to regulate Internet-assisted adoption. One key goal of this report by the Adoption Institute is to stimulate a national discussion about the Internet's impact on adoption and how to regulate Internet-based adoption services to assure practices that are legal and ethical, and that the interests of all those affected – particularly children – are protected.

The Institute's examination of the Internet's impact on adoption found that it permeates virtually every aspect of the process and, invariably, many millions of lives. As part of its research, the Institute established an e-mail address (InternetProjectAI@gmail.com) and invited input from professionals, parents by birth and adoption, adopted persons and the public – an effort that is ongoing. The respondents' experiences demonstrate both the positive and negative effects, as well as the potential, of the Internet and, in particular, of social media. Some adoptive parent respondents used terms like “huge positive impact” and “a blessing.” For example, a couple who adopted from China described the value of ongoing e-mails between their family and the agency director in China long after the adoption, the Internet's value in finding their daughter's crib mate (who was adopted into another country) and maintaining a relationship with the crib mate's family. Others attested to the importance of online support and information groups.

A father and his partner were able to adopt a fourth child quickly by using the Internet – a child with prenatal substance exposure and other issues that may have given other prospective parents pause. He wrote: “I saw a situation that was of interest, sent an e-mail, and then basically adopted the baby in question after sending a check and some paperwork. The birth mother had let the agency choose the parents and the particular circumstances of the child weren't attractive . . . so we seemed to be the only ones inquiring.” A single mother described how the Internet helped her adopt a second child from China at a time when adoptions had been available only to married couples; through online contact, she was able to find and adopt a child with a disability (spina bifida). This mother also benefitted from online support with other families who had adopted children with disabilities from China.

Adoption professionals noted many benefits of the Internet, but also raised concerns. For instance, Ann Wrixon, CEO of the Independent Adoption Center, recognized the positive effects of increasing transparency and expanding birthparents' power and choices, writing that “the Internet makes anything except open adoption an unrealistic expectation,” a development she sees as positive. She also identified risks for first/birthparents and adoptive parents, such as sites that do not make their services or fees clear, asserting that best practice in adoption requires agencies and attorneys to post full information about their practices, including the number of adoptions achieved and how long families wait.

A common theme raised by e-mail respondents was the need to address social media's pervasive impact on adoption policy and practice. Professionals cited ethical questions about adoptive parents not receiving important information or counseling, and about their using the Internet to “advertise” for babies. They also raised concerns about the vulnerability of pregnant women who are “friended” on Facebook by prospective adoptive parents who want to adopt their children. In addition, respondents noted the mixed impact of the Internet on search and reunion, recognizing that it is an extremely efficient and low-cost way to facilitate searches, as well as a route to manipulation and deception.

Some respondents discussed the risk for fraud. One professional suggested that when hopeful couples reach out to pregnant women online, without agency or other professional support, they are in jeopardy of falling victim to scams. For example, there are instances of people posing as expectant parents interested in placing their babies for adoption and receiving payments of one sort or another – but there are no babies – and there are cases of pregnant women seeking financial support from multiple couples hoping to adopt their children.

Some agencies that sent emails to the Adoption Institute described their own efforts to prepare staff members, and then parents, about ways the Internet will influence their adoptions. Sally Shuey of Open Adoption and Family Services shared a video used to stimulate discussion among staff about the way adoption is portrayed in the media, including on many Internet sites. The many images (including a picture of a very pregnant belly wrapped in a giant bow) are powerful and thought-provoking.⁹ Adoption Star, another agency, e-mailed that it has developed internal office policies on adoption and Internet use, as well as producing a webinar and an e-document for parents, *Adoption and Social Media: Recommendations for Healthy Ongoing Communication*.¹⁰ [See Appendix II]

Comments like the ones above, as well as the Institute's own yearlong exploration of the many issues being discussed in various adoption communities, make clear that there is a great deal to learn about a wide range of topics relating to the Internet's transformative impact. This report is the first in a series by the Adoption Institute. It is intended as an overview of the impact of the Internet and social media on the realities of adoption, with particular emphasis on families with minor adopted children, with the intent of stimulating debate, education, additional research and advocacy. Subsequent papers by the Institute will report original research on professionals' perceptions of the changes in policy and practice that have (or should) result from the use of the Internet. Later work also will examine the Internet's specific impact on search and reunion and the effects of the ease of finding parties, even when contact is not planned.

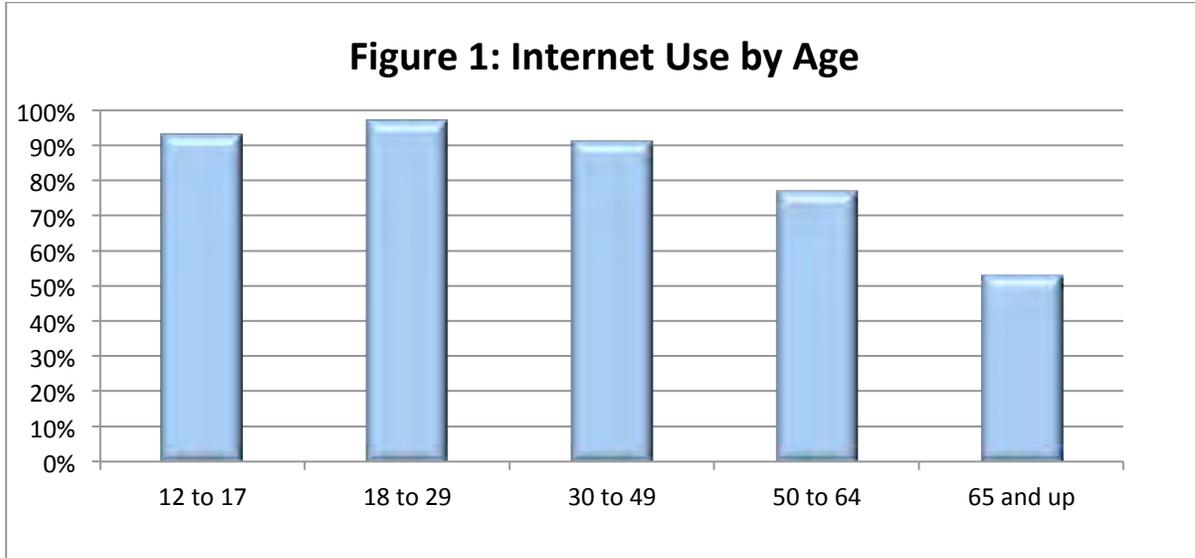
An Online Nation

It is clear that the Internet in general, and social media in particular, have become integral parts of American life. From late childhood through old age, most people go online to communicate with each other and to find or share information. While adults, particularly older adults, have been slower to embrace its use, a majority of all age groups in our country today utilize the Internet to some extent. (Figure 1 below shows the rate of Internet use by age groups.)

Teens are particularly avid users of social media. The Pew Research Center's 2009 survey of teen and young adult practices found 93 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds go online. Almost 2/3 (63%) do so daily and 36 percent do so many times a day. Seventy-three percent of teens who have access use social networking sites, up from 55 percent just three years earlier, and three-fourths have cell phones (including 58% of 12-year-olds). While the number of teens with Internet access through their phones is not known, 44 percent of mobile phone users overall have such connections (Board of Governors, 2012). The Pew survey's authors concluded, "Internet use is near ubiquitous among teens and young adults" (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2009, p. 2). It is also important to note that all these numbers probably have risen since Pew conducted its survey. Moreover, youth and teens have increasingly extensive access to information and opportunities for contact far beyond the confines of their families and homes.

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xQq3NMcq7w>

¹⁰ <http://www.adoptionstar.com/child-placement/adoption-and-social-media-recommendations-for-healthy-ongoing-communication/>



Source for ages 18 – 65 and up (Zickuhr, & Madden, 2012)

Source for ages 12-17 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010)

Note: Because data for 12-17 year olds is less recent, and because past surveys have found that use has grown significantly over time, the 93% figure for teens is likely low.

Not only is Internet use vast and growing, so too is the presence of adoption in cyberspace. A Google search using the term “child adoption” yields over 91 million results, encompassing every type and aspect of adoption. “Foster child adoption” yields over 10 million hits. “Adoptee support” gets more than 1.1 million and “child adoption fraud” over 11 million. “Birth mothers” yields 135 million, “birth mother support” over 58 million and “birth fathers” 36 million.

Some sites, including the Adoption Institute’s own, provide edited and professionally created information; others, such as Adopting.com¹¹, classify information and provide links in various categories. In any event, the amount of available information – some good, some bad and much of it unfiltered – can be overwhelming and difficult for any potential user to assess.

Examples of the types of Internet and social media sites that address adoption are far too numerous to cite. From postings by hopeful prospective adoptive parents seeking children, to outreach and advertisements by adoption agencies and adoption brokers, to information and blogs and listservs and advice and support for all participants in adoption, to sites that facilitate reunions of adopted people and their birth family members – adoption is everywhere.

¹¹ <http://www.adopting.com/mailling.html>

PART II

THE INTERNET'S BENEFITS FOR ADOPTION

The Internet's positive effects on adoption are covered in this section; the negative ones are addressed in Part III. The benefits include:

It is immediate. As in so many other realms, the Internet makes the latest information relating to adoption available as soon as it emerges, and updates and corrections are easy and quick to make. For example, changes in international adoption practice, by our own country and others, can be announced as soon as they occur and can be amended anytime. Online documents – for education, training, applications, court proceedings and a broad array of other uses – can also be made more current, more easily than printed materials. In addition, people who want to find each other can do so more easily and more quickly than at any time in history.

It is efficient. Users can find a great deal of information with little investment of time or energy. Agencies and other purveyors of adoption information can reach broad audiences at little cost. Those seeking information about a particular area, such as adopting children with special needs, can literally view photos and read descriptions of hundreds of children who are legally free for adoption and are awaiting families, all during one sitting. Furthermore, getting this information is more convenient since it can be accessed any time of day, any day of the week. Users can visit adoption sites without interrupting anyone or requiring anyone's attention.

It is private. Gaining information and even reaching out to others on the Internet has an element of distance and can be less personal. Users can share what they choose, when they want to do so. The Internet allows users to “dip their toes” into aspects of adoption without commitment. A pregnant woman, for example, can explore information about adoption and other options. She can learn about multiple services and possibilities while remaining anonymous. The Internet can also empower the parties to adoption by letting them do things only practitioners could before.

The Internet has positively affected others interested in adoption as well. For instance, conducting research on members of the extended family of adoption has always been complicated because there were so few ways to reach out to adopted persons, birthparents, adoptive parents or other relevant parties. Outreach today can be accomplished through sites utilized by those parties, enabling identification of those who are otherwise hard to locate but whose views and experiences are vital to capture. Further, through online survey sites like Survey Monkey and others, information can be obtained anonymously and in a cost-effective way, benefitting participants and researchers alike.

Because the number of adoption-related sites is vast, this section provides specific examples to illustrate the ways they can benefit the various parties. Sites were chosen because they are widely used and recognized in the field and demonstrate the practice ethics articulated earlier in this paper. Several of them are the websites of partners of the Institute or of organizations with which it has collaborated on various research, education or advocacy initiatives – The Cradle, Adoption Learning Partners, Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children, *Adoptive Families Today* and the North American Council on Adoptable Children.

General Information and Support

The wealth of scholarly and general information sites and postings can make learning about adoption and its related issues less time-consuming (though, as with so much of the Internet, it can sometimes be tricky to determine which information is legitimate and which is dubious). Hundreds of sites provide data, research, personal accounts and other opportunities to gain knowledge; the viewer can find information and resources from virtual and actual providers, ask questions and learn about a broad range of adoption-related issues.

One example is the Child Welfare Information Gateway,¹² a service of the U.S. Children's Bureau. It is a clearinghouse of information, including both print and electronic publications, websites, databases and online educational tools for child welfare professionals. The Gateway, with over 2,000 adoption-related resources, gathers information from a multiplicity of extant sources; it also develops publications itself. Information is organized in a way that is easy for users to search and access. The site contains resources for adopted people, expectant parents considering adoption and birthparents, adoptive parents, adoption program managers in state child welfare systems and administrators, caseworkers and other adoption professionals.

The Internet also facilitates education and training. While asking people to travel to a specific locale for a conference or other training opportunity often has benefits, it also can be expensive, time-consuming and inefficient. Online training can reach professionals and parents across the nation or the world. Users can participate at their own pace on their own schedules. Material can be easily updated and made quickly available on sites that provide training and education.

For example Adoption Learning Partners¹³, offers a range of courses for prospective and current adoptive parents, as well as professionals. Course offerings cover a range of topics including identity issues, loss and attachment. Participants can take training required by the Hague Convention for parents adopting internationally. Periodic webinars provide up-to-date information from experts. Through ALP, adoption professionals can also print materials to use with families they are serving and can receive continuing education credits for specific online courses. Another example is Foster Parent College¹⁴, a site that offers many courses to assist parents adopting from foster care, as well as courses for adoption professionals.

The Internet can be used in creative ways to assist the field in helping adopted persons. For instance, even when connections between adopted children and original parents are not possible (as is often the case in intercountry adoptions) or not desirable (sometimes in adoptions from foster care), the Internet can be a valuable resource. Lutheran Social Services of Illinois develops a Lifebook for every child in its care. For some children whose parents have had their rights terminated, it can be difficult to gain information about the child's early life, particularly if the parents' whereabouts are unknown. Lifebook workers have been able to download pictures that are very important to the children of their birthparents and sometimes of themselves when they were much younger through publicly available websites (Monica Johnson, September 13, 2012, personal communication).

¹² <http://www.childwelfare.gov/>

¹³ <http://www.adoptionlearningpartners.org/>

¹⁴ <http://www.fosterparentcollege.com/>

The Internet also facilitates the sharing of information among people with interests in specific issues – or general ones. Electronic journals and newsletters, in particular, can have broad reach. For example, the magazines *Adoptive Families Today* and *Adoptive Families* provide information to their subscribers nationwide, and the Adoption Institute distributes its e-newsletter – which encompasses law, policy, practice and research – to many thousands of readers each month. Producing a print version and mailing it to readers would be prohibitively expensive for many organizations, while the Internet allows rapid, inexpensive and efficient dissemination.

Information, Support and Affiliation: Birthparents

The Internet is a resource for expectant parents in crisis pregnancy situations who are exploring adoption, as well as for those whose children already have been adopted. As noted earlier, information-seeking on the Internet can be done privately, while making an appointment at a crisis pregnancy center or contacting an adoption agency requires visibility. Using the Internet, a woman can explore adoption without revealing to anyone that she is pregnant. She can gather information that enables her to make an informed choice and then proceed. For example, a woman who suspects she is pregnant and is unsure about what to do might review a site like Planned Parenthood's, which reviews the options of parenting, adoption and abortion in a straightforward and generally neutral manner.¹⁵

Cautions to Women Considering Adoption. Should a pregnant woman decide to learn more about adoption, an Internet search yields a range of information and opinion; for example, she may type “considering adoption” in a search engine – which would bring up more than 4 million results containing diverse viewpoints. One of the first to appear on a Google search is from Exiled Birthmothers,¹⁶ a site for birthmothers and for those considering adoption that challenges the idea that adoption is necessarily in the best interests of women experiencing unplanned pregnancies, which is the common theme on pro-adoption sites. There, under the headline *Things I Wish I Knew When I was Considering Adoption*, Heather Lowe suggests that women think long and hard before making an adoption decision and adds:

Adoption is often a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Consider how you will feel if you've relinquished due to money reasons, and six months down the road, you have a good job that pays well. Or how you'll feel if you relinquished due to lack of family support, and the same people who refused to help you raise your child are now saying, 'We wish you'd kept the baby. We could have helped you.' Try to separate which of your problems are time-limited and which seem here to stay. Some problems are insurmountable and will lead you to choose

REMEMBER:

The best adoption professionals educate you on all your options, so that you can make a fully informed decision.

Beware of agencies or professionals that are gung-ho to "match" you with one of their adoptive families without fully exploring all your options. Ethical professionals will want to help educate you on all your options, not just that of adoption.

Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support

¹⁵ <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/pregnancy/parenting-21521.htm>

¹⁶ http://www.exiledmothers.com/adoption_facts/wish.html [Lowe's booklet was originally published by CUB and has been featured on several adoption sites.]

adoption, while some problems can be fixed if you know where to turn.

Lowe's view, described more fully on her own website¹⁷, is that many of those who facilitate adoption do not have the birthmother's interests at heart. She urges women to seek independent support from experienced therapists, to take time to decide, and to realize that there are many complicated emotions after adoption.

Other sites are more positive about making adoption plans. A Child Welfare Information Gateway link called "Expectant Parents Considering Adoption"¹⁸ and Birth Parents" provides information on aspects of parenting and adoption. Another site, Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support¹⁹, promotes openness in adoption; it urges pregnant women and couples to find the right resources to help them make their decision and, if they choose adoption, to fully understand the benefits and limitations of open adoptions. Both Exiled Birthmothers and Insight provide links to other resources.

Information from Adoption Professionals. An advantage of the Internet is that pregnant women can find many sites offering sound information about adoption (although users must take care since there also are many sites with biased information). The Cradle is a licensed child welfare agency whose name often appears at the top of advertised lists on many adoption-related searches and offers basic information as well as the opportunity for instant messaging, calling and speaking to a counselor, or e-mailing questions.

While it is clear that The Cradle specializes in adoption services, the site does not promote adoption in the singularly focused way that many sites do. Under the title "Pregnant?" The Cradle uses language that recognizes pregnant women are often ambivalent. For example, "Perhaps you're not ready to be a parent. Maybe the idea of adoption worries you, too. At The Cradle, our caring professionals will help you explore all your options and support your decision with complete privacy and respect. ... We will never tell you what to do. Nor will we ever judge the choices you make. We are simply here to help you understand how adoption could work in your situation and support you as you make decisions."

The site adds, "At this time of your life, even 'the basics' aren't so basic. We are happy to help you with pregnancy-related expenses and living arrangements, as needed. Any assistance The Cradle provides is given as a gift, with no strings attached. It does not obligate you to place your child for adoption." The site tells women using the agency's services who choose to parent:

- "You will be treated with respect and dignity.
- Your decision will be supported.
- You will not be pressured nor coerced towards an adoption decision.
- If you have received financial support during your pregnancy, you are under no obligation to place your child or repay the agency."

The Cradle's site encourages women to take their time making a decision, noting they may use the agency's nursery to care for their child until they feel confident in their choice. It provides basic information about adoption and the mother's legal rights, and is one of the few sites to

¹⁷ <http://hslowe.tripod.com/wishihadknown.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/birth/for/>

¹⁹ http://www.openadoptioninsight.org/expectant_parents_considering_ad.htm

address birthfather rights as well.

These examples illustrate that an Internet search can provide a range of adoption information quickly, efficiently and privately. The sites described above, which appear at or near the top when the query “considering adoption” is entered, illustrate a range of views about adoption and parenting – views that pregnant women can factor into their decision-making process.

Giving Voice to Birthmothers’ Feelings and Experiences. One of the most powerful uses of the Internet is giving voice to people who previously were rendered silent. Historically, birthmothers have been the least acknowledged and most stigmatized members of the adoption world. The Internet has given them – and, to a lesser extent, their male counterparts – a forum. There are many blogs on which women share their thoughts, feelings and concerns, often including expressions of pain and sorrow.

There is scant research on the content and meaning of blogs written by women whose children were placed for adoption. In the one study (not yet published) found for this report, Cowie (2011) reviewed the communications of birthmothers on the Internet and classified them into three major themes: the expression of painful feelings, the belief that writing about their feelings and sharing them with peers is healing, and the process of settling into adoption. Several women said they needed to share their feelings, and that doing so was helpful to them; some also wrote to offer support to others. When women were explicit about their motivations for writing online, they listed reasons such as: a way to heal, to connect with other birthparents, to help others and to add a new perspective to adoption dialogue.

Because blogs are often public, they can serve as a way to help expectant parents more fully consider their decisions. Adoption therapist Leslie Pate Mackinnon, who is a member of the Adoption Institute Board of Directors, asks pregnant women to read blogs that express positive feelings about adoption as well as ones that describe regret or sorrow. She encourages them to see which messages resonate, and to use this information as part of the process for determining if adoption is the right course for them.

Affiliation and Support. The Internet also gives those who have been marginalized, for whom local support is absent or for whom privacy is a concern, the opportunity to affiliate and support one another. For example, a site like Birth Mom Buds²⁰ provides articles about adoption and being a birthmother, and invites pregnant women and women who have placed children for adoption to participate in forums and chat rooms. There appears to be little on the site that discusses alternatives to adoption – i.e., there is no information about parenting rather than placing a child for adoption. Further, all the birthmother stories (reviewed on 10/21/12) presented positive outcomes, although they did describe emotional challenges and the benefits of openness. The site does not appear to be affiliated with any adoption agency or service but, rather, focuses on providing support and information.

Other sites focus on adoption policy and practice. Two prominent examples are those of the American Adoption Congress and Concerned United Birthparents. The AAC²¹ and CUB²² both predate the Internet but like most organizations today have expanded onto the web. AAC is an

²⁰ <http://forum.birthmombuds.com/examine>

²¹ <http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org>

²² <http://www.cubirthparents.org>

advocacy group seeking to reform adoption policy and practice. AAC also links to recent news stories about adoption, provides updates on legislation – particularly related to restoring adult adoptees’ access to their original birth certificates, and offers a state-by-state breakdown of laws related to birth certificate access. CUB’s site provides position papers on adoption issues (for example, CUB believes all birth records should be open, that pre-birth matching of pregnant women and prospective adoptive parents can lead to coercion, and that adoption should occur only after family preservation efforts have been fully explored). “The Internet has proven to be a source for information and online support for those touched by adoption,” the site notes, but adds that CUB offers in-person support groups across the country because “the human contact experienced at a support group is invaluable.”

Information, Support and Affiliation: Pre-Adoptive and Adoptive Parents

Prospective and current adoptive parents can find resources today to an extent that was impossible in pre-Internet times. Many adults who are in the early stages of considering adoption as a way to form their families turn to the web to explore what is possible without making their intentions public. Prospective adopters can learn about the process, consider the pros and cons of agency versus independent adoption, and even learn about individual children available for adoption.

Individuals and couples also can explore information relevant to their specific circumstances. For example, parents interested in adopting from abroad can quickly find multiple sites specific to the country in which they’re most interested. A click on the Joint Council for International Children’s Services²³ site, for example, allows users to search by country and locate agencies that can assist in the adoption of children. Elsewhere, gay men and lesbians seeking to adopt can search for states that allow *both* prospective parents in a couple to adopt simultaneously; the Human Rights Campaign²⁴ site offers a link to a nationwide map describing where joint adoption is allowed statewide, where it has been allowed in some jurisdictions, where it is not permitted and where the status is unclear. For those who decide to proceed with adoption, the HRC site lists agencies that participate in its All Children, All Families project – i.e., agencies that are welcoming and knowledgeable about serving gay or lesbian clients. An Internet search focusing on gay/lesbian adoption also leads to sites that provide information, for instance, about issues such families may face and resources to help children cope with prejudice.

Prospective parents considering international adoption can quickly learn which countries are “open” to them. The U.S. Department of State’s (2012a) website²⁵ offers a guide called *Intercountry Adoption from A-Z*. It provides a comprehensive list of accredited agencies, as well as a list of nations that have ratified the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, an international treaty. Users can use a drop-down menu to select specific countries to determine:

- Hague status;
- Who can adopt (including requirements related to age, income, health, marital status, mental health and criminal background);
- Who can be adopted;
- Information about travelling to the country;
- What is required after the child is placed for adoption;

²³ <http://www.jointcouncil.org/what-we-do/our-partners/country-listing/>

²⁴ http://www.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/parenting_laws_maps.pdf

²⁵ <http://adoption.state.gov/>

- Resources available after adoption;
- Recent statistics on numbers of children adopted in the U.S. from that country;
- Country-specific information. For example, the China site notes that most adoptions are restricted to heterosexual married couples, but a March 2011 alert reports that China is accepting applications from single females ages 30-50 (who certify they are not lesbians and meet other health and income requirements) to adopt children with special needs.

After Adoption. Many sites offer information and support. The organization Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption²⁶, for instance, offers an online community that includes responses to questions through e-mail, lists local chapters, and supports parents through a listserv and a members-only chat room. FRUA's Facebook page²⁷ allows parents to post questions answered by other parents. For example, posts in October 2012 asked about families with children experiencing learning problems (63 parents responded), requested information on reasonably priced hotels in Moscow, offered a link to a source for possible financial support for Ukrainian adoption, and showed recently received pictures of a child's birthparents (followed by a string of posts asking how such pictures can be obtained).

The Internet has made connecting, learning and finding support after adoption far easier. Sites explore issues such as talking to children about being adopted, books and other resources about adoption, coping with discrimination in adoptions across racial or ethnic lines, finding experienced therapists, locating support groups, managing relationships in open adoptions, and taking "Motherland tours" with adopted children. And, of course, they offer unprecedented opportunities for parents – and children – to communicate with each other.

The large majority of adoptions in the U.S. each year are of children from foster care, but fewer blogs and chat rooms appear in searches on these families than for those adopting in other ways. One organization that provides extensive online information and resources in this realm is the North American Council on Adoptable Children, which offers help on a wide variety of topics ranging from adoption subsidies to post-adoption services and support groups; it also publishes a quarterly e-newsletter, *Adoptalk*. Additional sites that focus on foster families, or families who adopt from the child welfare system, include: the Child Welfare Information Gateway and Wendy's Wonderful Kids²⁸ as well as state-specific sites such as New Jersey's Adoption Resource Clearinghouse (NJARCH).²⁹

Information, Support and Affiliation: Adopted Persons

Because they are by definition the youngest members of the adoption community, children, youth and young adults who were adopted are the most proficient and prolific users of the Internet. They often begin to explore the world of adoption (and of their adoptive identities and backgrounds) slowly and then delve more deeply as they get older, with more resources to do so than any of their predecessors ever dreamed of.

One way that plays out – and it illustrates one of the Internet's most important benefits – is the presence of sites that allow for affiliation. While adoption touches millions of lives, those who are adopted are still a small minority of people in any given community. The Internet, and social

²⁶ <http://www.frua.org/>

²⁷ http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_83837030440

²⁸ <http://www.davethomasfoundation.org/what-we-do/wendys-wonderful-kids/>

²⁹ <http://www.njarch.org>

media in particular, provide adopted persons ways to connect that were impossible before. For example, those adopted from Korea represent a large percentage of international adoptees. From the 1950s through 2011, over 124,000 Korean children were adopted into the U.S. (Overseas Adopted Koreans, 2008). There are a number of sites that provide online community for Korean adoptees, such as “Also-Known-As”³⁰ (AKA). This organization’s mission is to “empower the voice of adult international adoptees, build cultural bridges, transform perceptions of race, and acknowledge the loss of the birth country, culture, language and biological family experienced by international adoptees.”

AKA was an early online presence, establishing its first website in 1996, and is affiliated with the International Korean Adoptee Associations Network, which links Korea- born adoptees worldwide. On its site, users can learn about many programs, read the organization’s newsletter, find websites for adopted people, get information on culture camps and Korean language classes, explore child and teen mentorship possibilities to help youth with race and identity, link to conferences and forums and more.

“This forum is based on the ideal that adoptees need a place of their own: to support one another and to learn from one another without having to balance our feelings against other members of the triad. That can be done elsewhere, but here, adoptees are at the center. There is no triad here.

This forum is the inside of adoption looking out. It starts with US, the children of adoption, now adults, with voices that need to be heard and words that we need to speak.”

Adult Adoptees Advocating for Change

There are websites for other categories of adopted people as well, though there appear to be fewer for domestic adoptees, particularly for those adopted from foster care. FosterClub³¹ is a site for youth in care and those who have left the system. As it states on its site, FosterClub’s mission is to provide encouragement, motivation, information, education and benefits for foster youth. At FosterClub.com, youth can review articles written by their peers, participate in message boards and interact with others in care or who have left it, including through adoption. Message boards list questions, comments and responses about adoption, suggesting this may be one resource for those adopted from foster care to connect and share their experiences.

Adult Adoptees Advocating for Change³², a general site, identifies itself as being “by adoptees for adoptees.” An online forum that describes itself as “adoptee-centric,” the site invites adopted individuals who are interested in searching to ask questions of other searchers. It also supports adoptee rights, including access to original, unaltered birth certificates. The site asks participants to respect one another and to accept that they will have a variety of political and personal views relating to adoption. It underscores that it is a forum for support, not persuasion, and that it hopes to avoid a toxic environment. Site administrators moderate the exchanges. A review of postings in early September 2012 revealed that most recent posts were about searching for birth relatives.

³⁰ <http://www.alsoknownas.org>

³¹ <http://www.fosterclub.com/>

³² <http://adultadoptees.org/index.html>

While Adult Adoptees Advocating for Change is primarily a support site, others focus more on social and political change. One example, Bastard Nation³³, begun online in 1996, challenges the “happily ever after” narrative of some adoption sites and campaigns against stereotypes of adoption and adopted people. Bastard Nation advocates for restoration of the right of adopted adults to access their original birth certificates. Its site posts alerts about legislation related to that topic and opposes conditional access legislation that allows birthparent disclosure vetoes, contact vetoes or mandatory intermediary systems.

Achieving Adoption

One of the Internet’s most valuable benefits for adoption is as a tool for finding families for waiting children, particularly those in U.S. foster care. For decades, states published newsletters and catalogues containing pictures and descriptions of boys and girls in care who were legally free for adoption; today, the Internet fills that role by providing information to prospective parents far more extensively, efficiently and privately than has ever been possible before (Gerstenzang & Freundlich, 2003). Experts in the field report that the technique is effective, resulting in loving, permanent families for far more children.

State photolisting sites offer important home-finding techniques when traditional routes – such as encouraging adoption or guardianship by the child’s foster parents and relatives – have not been successful. For example, in Illinois, one of the states with historically high numbers of children awaiting adoption, the State contracts with the Adoption Information Center of Illinois (AICI) to feature children. The site allows users to browse a list of all waiting children in the state and to make inquiries about individual ones. The site has a link to the national waiting child site – AdoptUSKids.³⁴

Since 2002, AdoptUSKids has managed the national waiting child site as part of its responsibility to promote the adoption of children from care. The site provides numerous resources, such as videos of youth describing the challenges of foster care and their hopes and fears about finding a permanent family; introductions to waiting children; and tools and strategies for professionals. It also maintains a database of prospective parents who have completed home studies and been approved to adopt – typically over 5,000. It reports that over 19,000 previously listed children now live with permanent families (AdoptUSKids, 2012).

AdoptUSKids also has a Facebook page where interested people can post and answer questions, and it sends Twitter feeds to families and professionals, offers videos on its own site and on YouTube, and provides considerable resources for prospective adoptive parents. For example, its homepage

Who Can Foster and Adopt

In most instances, your marital status, age, income, and sexual orientation will not automatically disqualify you from adopting a child from U.S. foster care. You don’t need to own your own home, to have children already, to be young, wealthy, or be a stay-at-home parent to become an adoptive or foster parent.

Rather, the needed characteristics include:

- ❖ Being stable, mature, dependable, and flexible
- ❖ Having the ability to advocate for children
- ❖ Being a team player with your family or child welfare worker

AdoptUSKids

³³ <http://www.bastards.org>

³⁴ <http://www.adoptuskids.org>

menu links to information about adoption law and resources for military, minority and LGBT parents. AdoptUSKids, a federally funded site, has more protections for children and the families seeking to adopt them, such as requiring viewers to register and sharing limited information about the listed children's whereabouts. Roby and White (2010) note that such oversight is lacking on most online adoption sites.

Among the advantages of national websites and social media is that they can feature children nationwide, with the goal of improving their prospects for achieving permanency with a family somewhere. Interjurisdictional placements can be complex, however, so sites such as AdoptUSKids include references such as applicable federal laws, as well as resources and supports parents and professionals can use to achieve placements across jurisdictional lines.

The Internet also strengthens and speeds the capacity of agencies to find families for specific children. Agencies that specialize in child-specific recruitment use a range of techniques to find family members and others who may be "adoption resources," meaning potential parents.

As noted in this report's introduction, the Internet expands information on the range of potential parents for consideration by pregnant women and their partners who are considering adoption. Adoptive parents can cast a wider net when they make their profiles available online. Agencies as well as other adoption facilitators increasingly feature pictures of couples and individuals seeking to adopt, often including personal profiles that inform women considering adoption about what particular families have to offer. For example, Spence-Chapin³⁵, an agency which began operating in 1908, features waiting prospective adoptive parents on its site. Prospective parents write letters introducing themselves – their road to seeking adoption, extended family life, work, interests and talents, and often their thoughts about open relationships with birthparents. Letters are available in English and Spanish. Those hoping to adopt featured in late October were a diverse group, including ones who are single and married or partnered, straight and gay, already parents or childless. Pregnant women viewing the profiles are encouraged to contact a named adoption worker to learn more about particular parents.

For pre-adoptive parents who are seeking to reduce the waiting time that is typically part of the process, Facebook has become a tool for building families. For example, a February 16, 2012 ABC news report featured two couples who had successfully adopted children by posting information on their Facebook pages (Wild, 2012). A family in Tennessee started a website as well as a Facebook page (*Jay and Staci Want a Baby*) and regularly posts its progress toward completing the home study and moving toward adoption (Spuhler, 2012). Efforts like these, by prospective adoptive parents hoping to more directly connect with expectant parents, are growing online. Their goal is invariably to adopt more quickly by dealing directly with prospective parents without the "interference" or cumbersomeness of an adoption professional. This may seem a singularly good thing to someone yearning to become a parent, but adoptions that occur without the support and guidance of an experienced practitioner can miss red flags, deprive the participants of important information, counseling or guidance, and can expose both adults and children to risks, some of which are described in the next section of this report.

³⁵ http://www.spence-chapin.org/unplanned-pregnancy/a3_waiting_families.php

PART III

THE INTERNET'S RISKS FOR ADOPTION

While the Internet brings considerable benefits to adoption, it simultaneously poses numerous risks. One of the clearest is a problem that exists in many realms that are being transformed by this new technology: a lack of “vetting.” Anyone with basic skills and a few dollars can develop and maintain a website. The legitimacy of the provider, the quality of services offered, the veracity of the materials it contains, the safety of the links it provides, and the limited remedies available to those who may be defrauded or ill-served make its use a concern. This is particularly the case in adoption because so many vulnerable people can be involved: women struggling with their unanticipated pregnancies, adopted persons seeking information about their origins, infertile or single adults longing to become parents through adoption as well as the children whose adoptions help shape the course of their lives.

In this section, the Institute examines online practices that contradict elements of ethical adoption practice presented in the Introduction. The names of specific providers are not used so that it does not appear that any individuals or businesses are being singled out; rather, the examples used below are intended to illustrate widespread problems and questionable practices being utilized by many internet-based adoption providers and services.

Practices that Compromise Integrity of the Process or Cause Harm

It should be stressed that Internet-based providers can and frequently do offer helpful services to their clients; indeed, many adoptive and birthparents, as well as adopted people and others searching for relatives, report that they were treated ethically, thoughtfully and compassionately. Other online businesses, however, have engaged in illegal activities such as outright fraud, collecting money for children who were not available for adoption or providing children to the highest bidder (Wallace, 2009; Associated Press, 2001). Additional questionable activities that have been reported include practitioners charging prospective parents exorbitant fees or charging for services but not placing children with them, and people posing as expectant parents and promising their baby to several pre-adoptive couples simultaneously in order to get money from all of them (U.S. Department of State, 2012, *CBS News*, 2011). Fraud also can involve deliberately withholding important information about children’s health, psychological challenges, or genetic/ prenatal risk factors.

Such transgressions have been around for a very long time, of course, but the Internet makes them far easier to execute – and provides the wherewithal to target far more victims. Unethical practitioners can at once reach hundreds of would-be adoptive parents, women grappling with unintended pregnancies, or adult adoptees who want to contact their original families. Because the communications take place in cyberspace, often across state lines and without the involvement of experienced professionals, there is less prospect of assessing the credibility of those involved or of identifying red flags signaling trouble ahead. While some people use the Internet to commit outright fraud, many others utilize it in ways that are legal but may circumvent ethical practice standards or otherwise create harm. Their language may make clear that commerce – rather than support, guidance or children’s well-being – is their primary concern.

(This ad appeared when the author of this report was buying face cream online):

Buy Kinerase® 25% Off

Shop All Kinerase Skincare Products

25% Off All Kinerase this week!

Adopt A Baby in 3-12 Mos.

Personalized Information & Guidance

Adopt Quickly, Safely and Legally!

www.adoption1.com

The integrity of an adoption is built upon the foundation of respecting the human and legal rights of all parties, pointedly including those of the parents who decide to relinquish a child for adoption. Any practices that employ manipulation, deception or coercion undermine the decision, the process and, in the end, the integrity of the adoption itself. Taking short-cuts or emphasizing expediency above thoroughness can do the same.

The influence of the Internet on adoption is magnified by issues related to supply and demand. Contemporary adoption is vastly different from the practice that existed just a few decades ago. Today, most adoptions in the U.S. each year are of children from foster care (about 52,000), and only small numbers are of children from other nations (under 10,000) or of babies voluntarily placed by their mothers (10,000 to 14,000) (Smith, 2010; USDHHS, 2012; U.S. Department of State, 2012b; Jones, 2009). The need to reach out to women who might become part of this latter group is an essential reality for every enterprise that relies heavily on infant adoption, whether it is ethical or not, agency or attorney, in cyberspace or on the ground. The Internet exponentially increases the number of potential recipients of that outreach.

A review of adoption sites commonly appearing online found areas where the ethical principles described earlier in this report were challenged, although the review of Internet content alone is insufficient to fully judge the extent to which provided services are ethically sound. Particular concerns based on online presentations are:

- Commodification of the adoption process, with an emphasis on marketing prospective parents and generating babies for adoption rather than focusing on the child's interests.
- Emphasis on completing the adoption quickly rather than on assuring that prospective parents are well educated and that birth parents make fully informed decisions.
- Offering considerable financial supports for expectant parents, without acknowledging their vulnerable positions, thereby perhaps unduly influencing them to relinquish.
- Failure to provide pregnant women with complete or accurate information, as well as counseling or other services, relating to options other than adoption.
- Absence of information about post-adoption support or services.

Commodification. One of the most disquieting aspects of adoption on the Internet (as well as through other venues) is the way services are sometimes marketed. In reviewing sites for this report, the Institute's researchers came upon many that were troubling. Some commodify children and/or women, essentially describing them as products to be marketed; others provide only partial or questionable information.

This section examines the content of several sites, selected because they came up at or near the top of lists on search engines when the words adoption, pregnancy and search/reunion were

entered – or because they appeared in ads on the pages being reviewed, often alongside other adoption information. Advertisements for adoption-related services, particularly those geared to prospective adoptive parents, are omnipresent. They pop up not only when people are seeking such materials, but just as a matter of doing business on the Internet. When an ad appears on an unrelated site and/or when it makes hyperbolic-sounding claims, such as “Adopt a baby quickly” it should raise questions. How can the site’s owner make good on the claim when adopting through a legitimate, ethical practitioner takes far longer? What is being paid or promised to achieve the adoption so quickly? And should babies be advertised alongside face cream, as though they were both products?

Such combined advertisements, incorporating both consumer products and adoption in a single “hit,” appear without warning. Clicking on the link to the adoption site that popped up in the ad featured above brings up the following:

- “We help most of our clients to adopt within **3-12 months** [emphasis in original] following home study approval regardless of age, family size, religious affiliation or income.
- We connect you with adoption agencies and attorneys in states **where birth parents cannot revoke their consent** [emphasis added].
- We guide you through the creation of your Personal Profile. We make this overwhelming process simple so you end up with a profile that can’t help but attract the right birth mother.”

This provider is not an adoption agency but, rather, a support and information service for prospective adoptive parents. The site offers various packages, ranging from a \$950 to \$2,750 for the service’s full support program. The services are intended to increase the likelihood of adoption, separate from any costs incurred in adopting.

Among the services in the Full Support program are:

“**A customized plan**, developed just for you, that provides access to those agencies and attorneys in our nationwide network that will work with you most effectively. They will strive to place a baby with you as quickly as possible while working in the “safest” states and minimizing the risk of a birth mother changing her mind.

Risk assessment on every potential birth mother opportunity to help you avoid losing time and money in an unsuccessful match”

The site’s emphasis on the speed of adoption and limiting search to states where women cannot change their minds about their initial decisions illustrate the emphasis on adoption as a means of supplying a child rather than a commitment to the child’s dignity and well-being.

Another illustration is a site that notes it is near the top of most search engine responses to “adoption.” This site too, focuses on speed (“most couples . . . were selected in less than FOUR months”) and commercialization (adoptive couples are “marketed”). It reports that it “places extensive Nationwide Internet advertising specifically targeting suitable Birthparents knowing that the Internet is the most widely used medium of this demographic” and spends millions of dollars yearly advertising to pregnant women, using “aggressive grassroots marketing and

outreach programs to reach other birthmothers who might not otherwise find us through more traditional forms of advertising and marketing.” Marketing venues listed on the site include:

- Maternity Homes
- Family Planning Clinics
- Crisis Pregnancy Clinics
- Hospitals and Medical Clinics
- Teen Pregnancy Programs
- Church Groups
- Chat Rooms
- Civic Organizations
- Abortion Clinics
- Bulletin Boards
- Pregnancy Hotlines
- Physicians
- Community Referrals
- Social Workers
- High Schools, Colleges and Universities

Achieving Adoptions Quickly. The emphasis of such sites – and there are many – on marketing parents to pregnant women and achieving quick adoptions raises concerns about what services are offered or not offered to everyone involved. But entities that focus exclusively or primarily on making matches expeditiously without providing good information or services, before and after adoption, can negatively affect expectant parents, adoptive parents and, ultimately, their children.

It is understandable why the emotional, psychological and financial investments of adoptive parents in the process would make some of them vulnerable to practices that are not always scrupulously ethical. As consumers of adoption services, many would-be parents – especially those who already have spent years receiving infertility treatments before deciding to adopt – focus intently on the question of when they can finally start a family, with as few detours as possible. Some have gotten very close to adopting only to have the parents decide, after their baby is born, to raise the child themselves. So it is clear why those who can afford the tens of thousands of dollars in fees associated with infant and international adoptions are often willing to spend additional money for services intended to make their road easier to travel. But best practices in adoption sometimes mean a slower process, for example because education and counseling for vulnerable people making life-altering choices can take time. They can also mean that states perceived at the moment as “safest” by one party (pre-adoptive parents) may feel like the most stressful for another (women in a crisis pregnancy trying to make an agonizingly difficult decision). At the bottom line, they mean that years later, when the adoptive parents tell their child how she entered their family, an easier and shorter road may seem less important than being able to explain that their primary concern was being deliberate and thoughtful about everyone’s needs.

In that context, a singular emphasis on achieving quick adoptions and marketing prospective parents – which can be done more easily and extensively than ever before because of the Internet – raises a significant question: Does such a service take all parties into account and, for their clients, does it provide a complete, accurate and long-term view to inform their decision-making? The answer is particularly important because many of the sites at issue not only focus solely on one party, which is understandable from a business perspective since they are paying the fee, but also engage in practices relating to the other party (often a single pregnant woman with few resources) that raise ethical and perhaps legal concerns.

Expectations of obligation. The complex question of providing assistance to pregnant women in difficult circumstances (housing, money for medical expenses, etc.) is another issue. In ethical

adoptions, such help is sometimes not offered because of concern that it can be coercive, or is given in careful ways to minimize the possibility of the expectant mother feeling she “owes” her child to those helping her. For this reason, many state statutes prohibit payments or compensation to birth parents for anything other than reasonable living expenses. See, e.g. Illinois’ Adoption Compensation Prohibition Act, 720 ILCS 525/0.01, *et seq.* Language on some sites raises concerns that some women may be unduly influenced to choose adoption. For



example, the “unplanned pregnancy help” page on one site states: “Free Housing – You deserve safe and secure housing as your ‘safe haven’ providing privacy and a place to avoid conflict. We offer **FREE housing** including community facilities such as a spacious living area, large swimming pool and an extensive exercise facility.” A photo on the site indicates a free cell phone is another possible benefit.

aggressive marketing, stating:

The site reports that its success in finding babies is a result of

Adoption Service X is results driven! [Adoption Service X] aggressively reaches out to more Birthmothers. Unlike many state-regulated agencies, [Service X] is not confined by stringent state-mandated budget restrictions. In fact, [Service X] spends over **\$1,000,000** in advertising for Birthmothers annually. As a result of these extensive **advertising** and outreach efforts, most matches are made in less than 9 months. With a track record like that, it is no wonder hundreds of families turn to [Service X] each year to help realize their adoption dreams.”

“Aggressive outreach” that achieves 9-month matches raises important questions, including whether expectant mothers are being well-informed about all their options, whether their longer-term psychological as well as their immediate physical needs are being addressed, and whether adoptive parents receive information and training that prepares them for the sometimes-complex issues they and their children will face in the decades ahead.

Misinformation or incomplete information. Some sites offer help to pregnant women in crisis, while stating that they will guide the women through the full range of options before them: parenting, abortion or adoption. But the way these alternatives are presented sometimes does not sound objective or “nondirective.” A section on one website titled “Unplanned Pregnancy Help” is a case in point. It starts by posing a list of questions that “can give you an indication of which is the right decision for you and your baby.”

- 1) Can I provide financially for my child?
- 2) Will my child have a father figure in his life?
- 3) Will I have time to properly care for a child?
- 4) Am I ready to be a parent?

A brief description of possible solutions to obstacles is presented under each question, but some of the answers appear to be leading the reader in one direction. For example, under the one about finances, the answer reads “Woman, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Medicaid can help relieve some of the financial strain for food and healthcare for mothers in need, but will this financial support be enough?” Yet there are many more resources available to women with limited means who want to parent, most notably the monthly cash benefit TANF as well as food stamps, subsidized housing and, for working parents, the Earned Income Tax Credit.

The “Am I Ready to Be a Parent?” section begins, “If you are not ready to be a mother, you risk negatively affecting your child’s life.” Then it reminds the reader that parenting can keep a pregnant woman from realizing her own dreams as well – attending college, pursuing a career or just maintaining her lifestyle. An alternative, the reply suggests, is that “another family is out there ready to adopt and give a child the greatest life imaginable.” Similar approaches are taken by practitioners of every kind across the country via their websites and social media, and the language used – including by sites that offer a wide range of support and education services – can be construed as serving the interests of one party over the other, with the best of intentions or advertently. For instance, on this site as on many others, even positive messages about women being able to overcome challenges in order to raise their own children are accompanied by pictures of smiling, affluent-looking couples hoping to become adoptive parents.

Another section on this site offers “Facts” and “Myths” about abortion, adoption and parenting. But a reader could feel as though, again, she is being steered in a specific direction rather than being offered objective information to enable a thoughtful decision. For instance, the site reports as a fact that “over 70% of the women who have abortions agree that abortion involves a baby and have negative feelings about the abortion”, quoting another online source. The section then quotes a magazine article where a woman describes her self-hatred after having an abortion: “I couldn’t get it out of my head that I had just killed my baby.”

The section about parenting raises similar concerns. For example, it lists as a “fact” that “you cannot rely on other family of friends who say they will help you. ... Many women who have chosen parenting over adoption due to their family’s influence have stated that their family and boyfriend are no longer around and don’t help as much as they promised. If you have family support that can help you with parenting, that is wonderful, but you cannot rely on it. You need to come up with a plan to raise your baby as if it will be just you and nobody else.”

The reality is that, while some women do face raising children alone, it is also the case that many pregnant women’s mothers, boyfriends, other relatives or friends do indeed enable them to parent their children. And, however one feels about abortion, the reality is that many women choose it as their informed decision. The fundamental point is that ethical practice calls for all options to be presented objectively, not in a way that leads a woman in any one direction. This is a particular concern when women are led to an option that benefits the provider financially.

What are the potential problems faced by women who rely on non-agency Internet-based sites that facilitate adoptions? The Adoption Institute’s 2006 publication *Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birthparents* presented this example:

Becca expressed her frustration at how her case was handled by a well-known Internet adoption provider. She had found this service through her online research and was

attracted to a profile of an adoptive family being advertised in her own state. While a woman from the adoption service phoned her weekly to see how she was doing and if she was still planning on adoption, Becca never received counseling; yet her child's adoptive parents were charged for birthmother counseling expenses. No one informed her of her right to independent legal counsel, she was never advised on the possibility of parenting, she did not know there was a revocation period in her state and she was not informed that open adoption was legally unenforceable. She signed relinquishment papers on the fourth day after her daughter's birth, but had to sign them again three months later because all legal stipulations for consent had not been followed. Becca had emotional struggles with her grief after the adoption and called the adoption service to ask for a counseling referral. She was told they could not help her. Although Becca was happy with her child's adoptive family, she felt her rights and needs in the process were unheeded. (Smith, p.22).

As noted earlier, unethical practice can occur within adoption agencies as well as outside of them, but licensed agencies are held to ethical standards and are bound by expectations of sound practice. The risk for inadequate or unscrupulous practice is magnified on the Internet.

Connecting Concerns with Consequences

The issues illustrated by the examples above have implications for all parties to adoption, including agencies. It is important to recognize the complexity of these issues before remedies can be developed and implemented.

Issues for Expectant Parents and Birthparents. The commercial aspects, reach and resources of some Internet providers raise concerns about their impact on those facing crisis or unplanned pregnancies. Given that most women considering adoption are young – generally in their late teens or 20s – it is no surprise that they turn to the Internet for information. At least one site even provides a smart phone app for women considering adoption. (“This free app lets you learn about making an adoption plan for your baby and provides the ability to view and select potential adoptive parents. Included are answers to the most frequently asked questions about adoption from other women who have been where you are”).

When a pregnant woman searches the Internet using the term “adoption” or “unplanned pregnancy,” she will immediately see paid ads before the general search results – ads that encourage her to contact an adoption facilitator. Buying such ads is beyond the financial means of many if not most non-profit organizations. The ads also are often for services outside the state where the pregnant woman lives. Further, online sites use resources to assure that they are at or near the top of non-ad search results. As a result, women who rely on the Internet can miss out on local supports unless they search for a specific agency near their homes. Further, many online providers may not provide true options counseling, where women and their partners are helped to fully explore the range of choices available to them; thus, they may be influenced to “choose” adoption because that it is the only option offered in a positive way (or, sometimes, at all).

Non-directive, client-focused counseling helps pregnant women and their families to make fully informed decisions and to explore issues and concerns over time. Julie Tye, CEO of The Cradle in Illinois, puts it this way: “We don’t stop asking questions when the woman first states adoption

is her choice” (Julie Tye, November 9, 2012, personal communication). It is part of ethical counseling to probe, offer alternative perspectives, and assure that women and their partners are aware of all the supports available to them if they decide to parent as well as if they place a child for adoption.

Through such careful and ongoing counseling, women may learn that their families will support them in parenting even if they had feared they would not. Tye described a case in which a Cradle counselor worked with a young woman who wouldn’t tell anyone about her pregnancy and adoption plan. The counselor suggested she talk to others, and finally urged her to find at least one person in her own network whom she could trust. The woman told her sister, who challenged her perception that their parents would reject her. The woman did confide in her parents and, with their support, ultimately decided to raise her child. “That child is now a pre-teen and everyone is celebrating the fact that this family was kept together,” said Tye.

Ongoing and thorough counseling also may result in an adoption when that was not the first inclination; that is, sometimes family members or others initially promise to help raise the child, but through counseling are helped to assess whether they are truly able to do so – and decide they cannot. The key is the relationship of trust and the provision of full information that enables those in crisis to consider the full, long-term import of their choices. This is illustrated by a case of a young woman who had placed a child for adoption through an Internet provider and later received services from the Barker Foundation for a subsequent pregnancy. A counselor visited the woman at her home and said she would be available throughout the pregnancy for support and information; the woman responded that she had no idea such assistance was even an option (Cecile Richards, November 8, 2012, personal communication).

Many professionals’ greatest concern about Internet adoption providers is the risk of exploitation or coercion of vulnerable women in difficult circumstances. Ethical practitioners strive to meet the financial and emotional needs of such women, whether or not their infants are ultimately placed. Executive Director Marilyn Regier of the Barker Foundation, a non-profit 501 (c) (3) agency, estimated that about one in six women with whom her counselors work with make a decision to place a child for adoption. Expectant mothers often vacillate between adoption and parenting over the course of their pregnancies and even after childbirth. The ability to reconsider is appropriate and important. While some online adoption providers will not work with expectant mothers until they are well along in their pregnancies, Regier said her agency’s counselors serve women at whatever point in their pregnancy they want support (Marilyn Regier, November 8, 2012, personal communication).

Pregnant women report that when they have expressed ambivalence to an online “counselor,” they have sometimes been told that services are available only for those who are certain about adoption. A further concern is that when a woman receives financial assistance during her pregnancy – something many online sites prominently feature – she may



feel indebted to the pre-adoptive parents or the facilitator. That does not mean reasonable expenses cannot be paid or that supportive services cannot be offered, but how those are provided and the ways in which they are linked to the child's ultimate placement (or not) is critically important.

Ethical adoption providers also recognize that even women who seem certain about adoption benefit greatly from revisiting that decision with a skilled, supportive counselor after the baby is born. Regier noted that making a plan for a child now in one's arms may be quite different from making the decision in the abstract. The goal of ethical counseling should be that the mother and her partner are as clear as possible that adoption is the right choice for them. When new parents are allowed to express doubts or even change their minds after the birth, all parties can feel secure that the decision was made deliberately and carefully.

An additional concern in Internet-facilitated adoptions is protection of birthfather rights. A hallmark of ethical practice is that the professional reaches out to the father-to-be to involve him in planning for the child's future to the extent possible. Helping the man make a careful decision not only benefits him, but further protects the adoption process by assuring that the termination of his rights is done in strict compliance with the law. This is an ongoing issue in adoption law and practice generally (Smith, 2006), and it is intensified when services are provided across state lines. Statutes in several states for example, require that if the father of a child whose mother is considering adoption is known, he must be contacted. When a child is born in a state that affords protections for birthfathers, but is adopted in another state – as is often the case in Internet assisted adoptions – the original state's safeguards no longer apply.

Issues for Prospective Adoptive Parents. The pressures on individuals and couples seeking to adopt also are real and significant. The effects of ongoing infertility, the hopes and expectations of extended family members and the stories – both true and apocryphal – of how it can take years to adopt make would-be adoptive parents emotionally vulnerable. So the Internet and its “Click Here” ads that promise or imply quick placement are understandably appealing.

Online adoption providers frequently charge more, and sometimes significantly more, than do traditional non-profit practitioners. Some agencies have begun educating prospective parents about the issues involved in using such sites, including the costs. A further concern is expense without outcome – the payment of large sums of money to be part of the adoption process and then not becoming a parent. Again, such concerns exist regardless of how one adopts, but because of the difficulties associated with enforcing licensing rules and other regulations, Internet-based providers generally operate without the governmental oversight experienced by other adoption agencies.

A concern for both expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents is the health of the child. The implicit (and sometimes explicit) promise of many online sites is to find healthy infants for waiting couples. In ethical adoption practice, every effort is made to identify issues in the child's or parents' health, development or background that may impact the child's well-being, but this may not be as high a priority – or even possible in some cases – if the provider has only a long-distance or virtual relationship with the expectant parents. As Tye and others noted, critical information like this is often obtained only if a trusting, supportive personal relationship is established. For example, one expectant woman with whom The Cradle worked was asked early on if she had any issues in her background that could affect her unborn child. At first she reported there were none. Over time, as the relationship with her counselor deepened and the

counselor continued to explore her past, the woman disclosed that she had used illegal substances in the past but had stopped immediately upon learning she was pregnant. Several sessions into the relationship, she shared that she had been using cocaine daily.

In ethical practice, such information does not mean that a baby is excluded from placement or that the pregnant woman is turned away. Rather, it is used to make the best match and to prepare the pre-adoptive parents to address the child's need. Prospective adoptive parents should receive full information and be assured that they, like the expectant mother, can alter their decisions in the light of new information. Practitioners interviewed for this report agreed that it is rare for pre-adoptive parents to change their minds; rather, they typically proceed equipped with valuable knowledge and support.

Adoptive parents also may need services after adoption. Those can range from clinical or medical assistance for their children, to counseling or education relating to lingering infertility issues or adoptive family life, to advice on answering children's questions about their backgrounds or desire to contact biological relatives. Not all professionals, including many agencies, can provide every such service themselves, but ethical practitioners understand there are post-adoption realities, so they offer referrals or resources when they cannot themselves provide some or all of the assistance needed by the families they help to form. The very nature of Internet-based providers – i.e., they are in cyberspace, not down the block – can make this role difficult to play and, given their emphasis on speed, it is reasonable to ask whether there is sufficient priority given to other elements of a successful adoption.

Issues for Adopted Persons. Adoptions achieved via Internet-based providers are so new that it is too early to fully assess their implications in many regards, notably including the impact on adopted children – i.e., minors. As these children move into adulthood, issues may include:

- The level of types of supports they and their families receive after the adoption.
- Whether they can gain access to knowledge about their origins and the circumstances of their adoption if there is no practitioner who retains such information. This is a particular risk for adoptions that are not open or which begin as open but where contact ceases.
- Complications arising in families where the adoptees learn that their birthmothers were coerced or unduly pressured to relinquish even though they were ambivalent or even preferred to parent, or when the adoptees feel they were once products in Internet ads.

Adopted persons benefit from knowing that the plan that led to their adoptions was a sound one, based on thoughtful, ethical practice. It will take time for the field to assess the impact on them of adoptions resulting from aggressive marketing to expectant parents, advertisements for quick adoptions, and practices that ignore or circumvent regulations of individual states.

Openness is an issue that can affect everyone in adoptive families and families of origin. So experienced, ethical adoption



services explore the nature and degree of openness that expectant and adoptive parents determine is best for the child and for themselves (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Many Internet-facilitated providers, especially those that perceive themselves mainly or exclusively as matching services, do not appear to educate parents about the value of openness or to help them work out issues related to contact and communication so that adopted individuals can have access to their original families. Nor do they appear to provide services to help families deal with issues that may emerge in relationships over time. It is also unclear to what extent they inform birthparents that openness agreements may not be legally enforceable.

Issues for Adoption Agencies. As noted above, when ethical practitioners enable pregnant women to fully explore their options and offer support and guidance, many will choose to parent their children. It is costly to staff agencies with trained and experienced social workers and other professionals, to provide financial help to women who ultimately decide to parent, to offer pre- and post-adoption counseling and education, and even to maintain a physical facility from which to provide services. The leaders of ethical agencies maintain that, while they utilize most of their resources to provide services to anyone who needs them, for-profit online operations use many of their resources for marketing to attract pregnant women and prospective adoptive parents.

When a business' priorities rest solely on one party, and when that party (pre-adoptive parents) provides the financial means to keep the business going, that reality can clearly shape its actions. One result is that a provider may emphasize speed over other considerations, making it more appealing to its clients, but neglecting other important aspects of service. It is difficult for ethical agencies that focus on children's needs, and those of pregnant women – including full exploration of women's decisions about parenting – to compete. Providers who do not have to or choose not to deal with all the realities discussed above are expanding in cyberspace, and they clearly hold a competitive advantage. The upshot is that a growing number of traditional agencies report that their financial viability is threatened.

PART IV

SEARCH AND REUNION ON THE INTERNET

Adoption has changed profoundly over the last several decades, taking a nearly 180-degree turn from a prevalent professional view that secrecy best served all parties to a near-universal consensus that greater openness and honesty constitute best practice (Pertman, 2011; Simmonds, 2010). The implications of this evolution are pervasive, including an understanding that adopted individuals' desire and need to know about their origins are vital and enduring; and that it is critically important for pregnant women considering adoption to make informed decisions and for those who relinquish their children to play an active role throughout the process and beyond. As a result of these changes and others, an estimated 90 percent of infant adoptions today begin with first mothers – and fathers when they are involved – meeting and selecting the adoptive parents and, increasingly often, continuing to have communications/relationships between the two families (Smith, 2006; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Evolution of Openness in Adoption

Contact between families by birth and adoption in international adoption is infrequent for numerous reasons, from geographic distance to the social norms in other countries to the reality

that child abandonment can make search extremely difficult. But even in intercountry adoption both search and open relationships are becoming more common (Roby, Wyatt & Pettys, 2005). A growing number of adult adoptees from South Korea, Latin America and elsewhere are indeed reuniting with their first/birthmothers and other family members, however; and some are doing so even in countries such as China, where it was widely thought until very recently that locating biological relatives would be prohibitively difficult. (An article in the *China Daily* describes one such case, when 15-year-old Christian Norris united with his original family, from whom he was separated at age 4, with the help of his American adoptive mother.)

The most common type of adoption in the U.S. is of children from foster care. Over the last 10 years, over half a million girls and boys have been adopted from the child welfare system, an average of 52,500 annually. Few of these children are infants, and many have memories of, emotional connections to or even contact with their families of origin. Some of their adoptions are open to a degree, especially when they are adopted by kin or by foster parents who have a trusting relationship with the children's birthparents (Howard & Smith, 2003). Of those that are closed – that is, with no contact – it is usually because of the severity of the child's maltreatment by the original parents; ongoing concerns about those parents' mental health or behavior; or, in some cases, simply because cutting off contact was a longtime routine procedure that is still sometimes followed even if there is no evident threat of harm to the child.

The result in all of these types of adoption is that communications and in-person interactions are growing, and most professionals – as well as the parties involved – view that as a positive development. And it is a trend that is certain to grow as the Internet, particularly social media, make it increasingly simple for everyone concerned to locate each other, friend each other, talk and chat and Skype with each other, and find out where each other lives so they can visit.

The accompanying shift in philosophy – away from secrecy and toward ongoing connections – has been enabled and abetted by the Internet. The ability to examine public documents (and sometimes ones not intended to be public) nationwide means that those who are looking for information or relationships can search easily and often quickly. When the name of the searched-for person is known, the results can be immediate. Adoptees and birth family find one another and connect on Facebook or MySpace, communicate via e-mail or locate one another through online newspaper articles, police logs, alumni sites, and on and on. Even when names are not known, an individual or a professional searcher can often find those who were placed for adoption as children, or the parents or siblings or other relatives of the adopted person.

The Donaldson Adoption Institute is regularly contacted by adult adoptees, birthparents and sometimes adoptive parents who want help or advice in their searches. A recent correspondent shared that with the help of an unpaid "search angel," she was able to learn a great deal about her family of origin even though she started out with almost no identifying information; she found the process itself empowering and eventually was successful. "I started without even a name," she explained. "Through various on-line genealogical websites, using the marriage dates and approximate ages of my birth parents, along with the composition of their birth families (researched from census information) I have found my biological family. ... It took only four days on line to get the confirmation." Her birth parents had passed away almost 30 years ago, but she learned that she has at least eight siblings and has made contact with three of them (Patricia Bahn, November 29, 2012, personal communication).

There are many sites that facilitate such connections. A Google search of “adoption search” yields over 13 million results. Many of the online search services and supports are free or low-cost, often staffed by people with personal connections to adoption. One of the oldest services (begun long before the advent of the Internet) is the International Soundex Reunion Registry (ISRR)³⁶. Now operating online, this non-profit operation maintains a “mutual consent registry,” where people can list their names as wanting to search or be found, but does not conduct active searches. Search Angels³⁷ is a free service operating in all states and many other countries. Even the popular genealogical site ancestry.com has an adoption message board where users can leave queries³⁸.

In effect, while networking increases affiliation, it also increases risk, especially to [...] vulnerable youth – who are learning how to deal with rejection and acceptance, affirmation and exploitation, beauty and truth.

LaMendola, 2011

Searches also are facilitated by numerous for-profit enterprises that advertise their services to adopted persons seeking birth family members. Such sites often acknowledge the complexity of search and some employ people with personal ties to adoption. However, many make clear that they are staffed by private investigators, and these are not necessarily people who have knowledge of the issues that adopted people, birthparents and their families may face.

Search and reunion will be a primary focus of the second Institute “Untangling the Web” report, on which research is currently being conducted and which is slated for publication in the second half of 2013. In the interim, we note that users of online search resources should do due diligence in determining whether a site offers protections for the user and if fees are reasonable and linked to finding the person being sought.

Adoptive and birth families have long had to consider how to shape and manage the relationships between them. Over several decades adoptions have become progressively more open, particularly in infant adoption. A recent survey by the Adoption Institute found that 100 infant adoption programs in the U.S. reported only 5% of their adoptions were completely closed, while 55% were fully open and 40% were mediated – where information was shared through the agency (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Other research finds that many mediated adoptions become open over time (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Given this evolution toward openness and the reality of information access afforded by the Internet secrecy in adoptions today is nearly impossible – a trend the field generally sees as having great benefit. It is no longer ethical for those who assist in adoption – even in intercounty adoption - to promise secrecy or anonymity to anyone. Preparation for all expectant and adoptive parents must include the idea that future contact is likely and thus that openness from the beginning is a logical plan.

The Internet and Adopted Minors

Every day, adults who were adopted are using the Internet to search, find and establish relationships with their families of origin – and vice-versa – and they do so despite an array of

³⁶ <http://www.adopteesearch.info/isrr.html>

³⁷ <http://www.the-seeker.com/angels.htm>

³⁸ <http://boards.ancestry.com/topics.adoption.adoption/mb.ashx>

institutional and legal barriers, including the sealing of their original birth certificates in most states. The people affected overwhelmingly report this as a positive development, and it clearly is accelerating. The picture is more complicated when the person seeking or being sought is still a minor. What are the implications when children and youth go online to locate birth relatives, often with no guidance, support or even the knowledge of their parents? Most adoptive families are not educated about the growing likelihood that their children and their children's original families could reconnect at any time. So it is imperative that additional, targeted research be conducted in this area in order to provide practitioners and families with training materials, guidelines, standards and suggested protections to serve children's best interests broadly and, most vitally, to keep them emotionally and physically safe.

Traditional Role of Adoption Professionals in Mediating Disclosure. Historically in agency-based infant adoptions, trained social workers played the major role in establishing any relationship between the parties, at least at the start. If identifying information was to be withheld, the agency was the gatekeeper; if information was to be exchanged, the agency was the intermediary. When openness agreements were developed, workers assisted in the process, and if changing circumstances led to more or less openness, then the agency recalibrated the arrangement (Simmonds, 2010). Further, the agency often provided feedback to adoptive parents struggling with how much information to share and how much connection to allow. It also counseled first/birthparents in their attempts to learn more about the children they had placed and sometimes was their representative in contacting an adoptive parent or adopted adult. Agencies also managed the requests of adopted adults seeking information or contact.

Today, while some adoptive families rely on their agency to mediate connections over time, a growing number agree to arrangements from the beginning (or sometimes later) for direct contact with birthparents and other family members after adoption. Typically, contact agreements, either formal or informal, guide the interaction; all the adults approve ground rules on information sharing and contact, and the adoptive parents are the gatekeepers for the child.

Some degree of openness in adoptions from foster care is often positive for children, so this is an area requiring further development in child welfare policy and practice (Silverstein & Roszia, 1999; Neil, 2002). There needs to be a formal assessment of the level of openness that is in the child's best interest – not only with birthparents but also with grandparents, siblings and other extended family members. In some such adoptions, the courts or a supervising agency may recommend no child–birthparent contact when there is a history of severe abuse. Particularly in these situations, adoptive families may have serious concerns about protecting their children.

Active Searching by Minors

Enter the Internet. Through a variety of means, but most pointedly and dramatically Facebook and other social media, the Internet enables an almost unimaginable ease for anyone of any age to present herself or himself to the world, to connect with others across town and across continents, to reconnect with old classmates or meet new friends, to find or be found. Privacy is becoming increasingly challenging to maintain, and to younger people in particular, it sometimes seems like an outmoded notion. In the world of adoption, all of this means that the gatekeeping and advisory roles that adoption professionals used to play are easily circumvented or obviated. It means guarantees of limited or no future contact among the involved parties will be exceedingly tough to keep – and therefore, ethically, should not be made.

How has the Internet changed search by adopted young people? An example: A participant in the author's doctoral dissertation research years ago was a young woman who had been adopted from foster care. Melissa's first mother's mental illness had led to very poor nurture in early life, including little medical attention as an infant. At 18 months of age, her teeth were rotten from sleeping with her bottle, she was malnourished, had poor muscle tone and coordination from spending far too many hours in her crib, and she had had little stimulation. She was placed in foster care and ultimately adopted at about age 4. Melissa thought often about being adopted and was determined to find her original family. At 13 she discovered documents that listed her mother's name – information her adoptive parents had told her they did not possess. She snuck the documents out of the house and made a copy. Because she was still a minor, she did not contact a confidential intermediary or private investigator. She did not have the money to pay someone to search and, she rightly guessed, her underage status meant legitimate searchers would not assist her.

At 18, Melissa found a confidential intermediary who located her mother within a few weeks. After considering the possibility of contact and after many excited, nervous, sleepless nights, Melissa decided to make contact. She shared this choice with her adoptive parents, who were both shocked and eventually anxiously supportive; her father drove her to the first visit and waited for her in the car. Melissa began a complicated relationship with her birthmother, whose mental illness had continued. But the search answered important questions for Melissa. The search occurred in 1994, just before the institutionalization of the Internet as a force in American life and long before the advent of Facebook, but it nevertheless provides important insights about what has changed and what has not. Melissa felt a deep desire to connect with her original family despite her negative early life experience, and she made efforts to locate that family and eventually did so. Her reconnection made her life with her adoptive family more complicated and required her to manage the emotional demands of two families while still an adolescent. All of those things remain true for many children adopted from foster care today. So how has the reality of a teen shifted between 1994 and 2012?

First, today some contacts with minors are initiated by birthparents – something that would have been far more difficult in the pre-Facebook age. Second, there necessarily had to be time between Melissa's initiation of search and its achievement. As a minor, she faced limits in her ability to search. Even when she searched at 18, the confidential intermediary had no access to the Internet and had to engage in traditional methods to locate her mother. There could be no instant contact. This gave Melissa time to think about the process and, ultimately, to decide to inform her adoptive parents. Finally, Melissa could set the terms of the relationship. Unless she shared contact information with her first mother, her mother could not initiate contact. Even if she did, it would have to be through mail or telephone, as Melissa's family did not have a personal computer and the reunion predated smart phones. While it would have been possible for a 13- year-old girl to seek out and have a relationship with her birthmother without her adoptive parents' knowledge, it was certainly far more difficult than it is today.

In essence, Internet-related issues are not entirely different in character from those that have always been present in adoption, but important aspects of them have changed. Search by adoptees is more likely to occur at younger ages, it is more likely that searching birthparents can find minors, and both of those things can more easily occur without professional guidance or parental knowledge. Perhaps the biggest difference is that contact can take place much more quickly – without the opportunity for self-reflection, conversation with friends or family,

counseling or processing. As adoption therapist Leslie Pate Mackinnon (2012) notes, this is not a change in attitude but a change in degree; that is, adopted children have forever been going through their parents' files, holding papers to the light to read through blacked-out sections, looking in phone books to try and locate birth relatives. But the Internet allows minors to search and, often in a matter of minutes, to find birth relatives across the country and beyond. And because youth are often impetuous and impatient, they may make contact quickly and/or without thinking through the consequences.

Protecting Adopted Minors on the Internet

The federal government has recognized the risks posed to children on the Internet. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) is the primary policy protecting a child's privacy online. COPPA was passed in 1998 and amended in 2000 with the aim of preventing websites from collecting personal, identifying information from children under 13 without their parents' consent (COPPA, 2000) and has proposed rules that further define what it means to collect information on children and how that information will be protected (Federal Trade Commission, 2012). The Act seeks to increase parental involvement in young children's online experiences and provide a means to monitor the amount of personal information that is collected and used (Theirer, 2012).

It is likely that adoptive parents, like most others, are unaware of the problems social media can cause. A working group studying policy questions relating to this issue found that there is no effective method to keep children under 13 (the age Facebook and some other sites set as the minimum for users) away from such sites. The social media firm acknowledges that it is difficult to enforce age restrictions, but states that it tries to remove underage users if they are identified by age verification technology or alerts from others using the site (Kang, 2012). However, a study of Internet sites finds that despite COPPA and the "Terms and Conditions" of many sites, minimum age rules are unenforced and there is no effective way to remove children once they sign up (Boyd, Gasser & Palfrey, 2010). Furthermore, Facebook is considering lowering its age requirements to bring more preteens to the site (Kang, 2012).

Most parents are unaware of the reasons for age limits and other restrictions. For example, a study of parents and youth in 17 states found that they believe age requirements are designed to protect safety, rather than privacy. Parents often want their children to have access to social tools to communicate with extended family members, and sometimes teach youth to lie about their age to circumvent age limitations. Some believe age restrictions take away their parental choice (Boyd, Gasser & Palfrey, 2009) and are often complicit in young children's falsifying age information. Further, they are generally unaware of the risks to privacy posed by social media.

Even when parents are worried, they do not necessarily understand the risks to children and the limitations of protections. A Federal Communication Commission publication illustrates some of the difficulties parents face when trying to protect children online. While some children do take measures to protect their privacy online, many do not. Default settings on Facebook and other social media sites are the least private. The FCC document recommends that such sites should have default settings that protect privacy, so children and youth do not inadvertently reveal information. The report finds that filters applied by parents to their children's social media sites often don't work very well and that children enjoy evading filters. Further, children prefer using adult search tools rather than those designed for young people (Boyd, Gasser & Palfrey, 2009).

Such studies raise general questions about minors and Internet safety. There are many publications and sites that provide parents with general information about protecting children online. (See, for example, The Federal Trade Commission's OnGuard Online.gov website³⁹ or the American Academy of Pediatrics' *7 Social Media Safety Tips for Kids*.⁴⁰ Sites like these offer guidance to parents about teaching children about the risks of the Internet and social media – for example that postings can be very difficult to completely remove.

Special Concerns for Adopted Minors

Like most young people, adopted youth value the Internet as a means to express their identities, to share aspects of themselves with the broader world, to “try on” various identities, and to develop and share personal stories. But because some adoptees have limited or no contact with members of their original families, and have unanswered questions about themselves, they may be particularly drawn to social media as a way to learn more about their histories and to connect with relatives. While to date there is no scholarship on adopted minors' use of the Internet and the benefits or complications of that use, adoption blogs and forums give many illustrations.

Online articles present a range of thinking about social media's ability to connect minors and families of origin. For example, *I Found My Mom Through Facebook* (Belkin, 2011) reports on a 16-year-old who delightedly announced to his mother that “he had just gotten a message on his Facebook wall that he'd been waiting for all his life” – from his birthmother. The post was indirect, asking the youth if his parents' names were Jamie and Jeff. The youth recognized the name of his mother, for whom he had been searching. In this case, she contacted the parents immediately afterward, telling them what she had posted and asking if they approved of further contact. In this case, Facebook led to renewed contact valued by the teen and in a way that was acceptable to the adoptive parents.

On the other hand, many sites contain stern warnings, particularly for parents who adopt from the child welfare system. A web article from the United Kingdom begins, “If you think adopted children are safe from an approach by the birth family they were removed from, think again. Social networking has blown that protection sky high” (Oakwater, 2011). The article presents examples of contact by two maltreating parents whose contact via Facebook re-traumatized children. One was a sexually abusive father who contacted his daughter via Facebook, reporting he had been searching for her ever since the social service system had “stolen” her. Another lengthy online article (also from the UK) is headlined, “Birth parents stalking adopted kids on Facebook” (Kendrick, 2012). It states:

Birth parents are using Facebook to track down their adopted children with emotionally disastrous consequences. Adoption agencies are reporting huge numbers of calls from 'deeply distressed' adoptive parents whose children have been contacted from out of the blue. Social networking sites make tracking down estranged offspring so easy that some birth parents find it impossible to resist their curiosity. But unsolicited contact flouts adoption guidelines and is throwing lives into chaos.

The article notes that many children were adopted after being abused or badly neglected, and gives examples of youth experiencing emotional turmoil or abandoning their adoptive families. A

³⁹ <http://www.onguardonline.gov/articles/0012-kids-and-socializing-online#remind>

⁴⁰ <http://www.parenting.com/article/social-media-safety?fb>

majority of the 37 comments posted in response to the article attacked its negative portrayal of birthparents, while some affirmed its message. This concern about birthparents being a danger to their children applies in a minority of cases, while for many children some level of ongoing connection is beneficial. The overall need in the field is for policies and practices that determine how much contact is in the child's best interest and implementing the means to support it.

Preparing Parents and Children for the Likelihood of Contact

An article in *Social Work Today* presents a balanced view, asserting that all parties need to be prepared for the reality that contact probably will occur. Siegel (2012) holds that adoptive parents today must anticipate and prepare for the likelihood that digital contact with birth family members will take place at some point. She notes that it can diminish the anguish caused by old adoption practices of secrecy and separation, but can also lead to complexities that challenge the wisdom and skill of parents and social workers. Siegel's central concern is about connections that occur without the adoptive parents' knowledge or assistance. Hidden contact denies children the emotional safety net that helps them come to terms with often overwhelming emotions. Further, such relationships mean the children make all the decisions about setting boundaries or otherwise managing the relationships; and when adoptive parents later learn about contact, they can feel fear, anger, vulnerability and betrayal.

Siegel and others argue that the profession of social work must take steps to prepare adoptive parents and birthparents for managing online relationships that are likely to occur. This goes beyond providing technical information about the Internet and the risks and opportunities it offers, to a fuller exploration of and support for managing the normal feelings of parties in adoption. Such support should not be relegated to pre-placement or pre-adoptive periods. Parents and youth will need continued guidance as the use of social media expands. Social workers should help birth and adoptive parents begin and maintain open, respectful and empathic communication before adoption, and to reconnect and "recalibrate" the relationship over time (Siegel, 2012). Further, adoptive parents must be prepared and supported in talking with their children often and openly about adoption, about the circumstances of their separation from their original families, about their questions and feelings about being adopted, and about their desire to learn more. This preparation and support has long been part of good adoption practice. The Internet and social media make such parenting all the more critical, because contact is likely to occur regardless of adoptive parents' plans or desires.

Parents need to be guided to discuss how to manage electronic communication long before their children are old enough to reach out or be found. When children become active online, parents can make it common knowledge that good parents check e-mail, text and Facebook messages from time to time, and that they will review conversations with birth relatives to set appropriate rules – especially when children came to adoption from backgrounds of risk or maltreatment. The advent of social media means that parents of every kind need to learn what kind of contacts will work best with their particular child.

Adoption therapist Leslie Pate Mackinnon (2012) has a less-threatening take on the impact of the Internet. In her practice, she has encountered the use of social media, especially Facebook, with all members of the adoption community. She has seen birthparents "find" children on Facebook when they are young and monitor them at a distance – relieved to learn that they are well and functioning. Most in her practice waited until the children reached majority before making contact. In the one case where Mackinnon dealt with a first parent who contacted a minor child, she coached the adoptive parents on how to deal with the birthfather and to set

limits. As soon as the parents approached him, he apologized. He told them he had gotten carried away with the relief of finding his child, but now understood why they wanted to go slowly and agreed to abide by their rules. Mackinnon also has known adoptive parents who find birthparents but do not make contact; rather, they monitor where they are and how their lives unfold – if they are “sane, sober, and functioning” – information they can later share with their children or use to make contact. And of course, minors as well as adult adoptees are identifying, locating and keeping track of family members. In short, everybody’s watching everybody.

In her experience, parents by birth and adoption are more likely to observe at a distance, while youth tend to be more impetuous. Whatever they do with the information the various parties gather, it clear that the process of search and reunion is becoming a reality of adoptive family life at an accelerating rate – and that has profound consequences on the institution of adoption, on its processes, and on everyone it encompasses.

Adoption agencies are seeing an increase in calls from adoptive parents unsure about how to manage unexpected contact between their children and birth family members. Mary Wake, Statewide Search and Records Coordinator for Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, believes that agencies must do more to prepare parents for such contact and that “we are foolish to think confidentiality exists in adoption anymore.” She shared a case where children had been adopted after removal from a home where they experienced maltreatment. Mediated, regular contact had been occurring through the agency for years. Despite this, the birthmother, who had significant mental health issues, used Facebook to directly contact the child, who struggled with the relationship. She made suggestions such as “you can come live with me now.” The agency – which routinely receives similar communications – sent a letter asking the birthmother to return to mediated contact at the adoptive parents’ request, but it has no enforcement authority.

Parenting a young person who is tech-savvy yet emotionally ill-quipped to predict or deal with the consequences of what they do online can make for a white-knuckle ride for parents.

Facing up to Facebook

Fursland (2010) suggests that the same reasons children and youth or their original families go beyond established protocols, or exclude adoptive parents from the process, apply today as they did in the pre-Internet age. Children are often understandably curious, and some yearn for more information or connection. However, they may sense that their parents are not comfortable with their desire to know more. Adoptive parents still may struggle with the importance of agreed-upon contact that was part of their adoption agreement, and therefore fail to follow it. They also may communicate, verbally or with their body language, that their child’s interest in learning about his or her background makes them uncomfortable. Searching for information, presenting a different persona, even establishing relationships beyond the family are all normal parts of adolescent development. After all, millions of non-adopted youth use the Internet for activities their parents may not

know about or condone.

Understanding the benefits of openness. While parents are often concerned about such contact, it is likely that they have to accept that it may be inevitable as a result of the Internet and the best course is therefore to prepare themselves and their families. The good news,

based on research and experience, is that relationships with their children's families of origin can be and usually are positive.

There are sites specifically for adoptive parents that list cautions, identify strategies for reducing risk, and offer suggestions for dealing positively with the Internet; among them are "Top Ten Safety Issues for Adoptive Parents"⁴¹ and Finding Birth Family Online.⁴² One of the most thorough resources found during research for this report is a publication of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering: Fursland's *Facing up to Facebook: A Survival Guide for Adoptive Families*.

These resources generally recommend a combination of parental preparation, oversight, teaching and openness. 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 families of origin; to establish rules; and to become a source of support and information (Creating a Family, 2009).

Preparation of Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents need to learn about the benefits and the risks the Internet poses for their children, particularly the possibility of unplanned contact. Adults over a certain age may be unaware of the ease by which people can be located using this life-altering technology.

Parents may expect that privacy provisions and age requirements restrict their children from contact that they have not approved or are unaware of. This is wishful thinking. Parents need to understand the significant limitations of social media sites. Facebook terms and conditions require that children be 13 to have an account, and those over 18 are not supposed to be able to contact minors. Nevertheless, there are many reports of underage adopted children being contacted by birth family members or other adults. It happens partly because no one verifies the age of those setting up pages, on social media or most other places in cyberspace. Providing false data is a violation of policy and grounds for being removed, but all minors have to do is list their birth year as one that indicates they are at least 18 and that they can be contacted by other adults. Adults can also falsify their ages or even use the sites of a minor to contact a young adoptee. Fursland (2010) concludes that parents cannot depend on social media sites to police themselves or to act on complaints.

Parents also need to understand the many ways that youth can be reached by or can reach out to original family members beyond the home computer. Many young people have smart phones or gaming systems (like Nintendo DS and Wii) that allow access to the Internet and, of course, they can and do use the phones or computers of friends, in libraries and at other public sites. So it is entirely possible for them to search, maintain communications or arrange in-person contacts with birth relatives without their parents' knowledge and even if their parents have taken steps to monitor the use of computers in their home.

There are resources for parent to educate themselves on the many issues involved, including *Facing up to Facebook*, and they can also learn from other families on blogs and forums. The

⁴¹ <http://www.creatingafamily.org/adoption-resources/top-ten-adoptive-parenting-tips-for-facebook-and-the-internet.html>

⁴² <http://www.adoptivemamilies.com/articles.php?aid=2067>

Adoption Star agency has produced a resource for both adoptive and birthparents to help plan for contact; this document is included in Appendix III.

Part of preparation entails reflection about one's feelings about contact, and they may not always be positive initially. Mackinnon (2012) sees adoptive parent discomfort with contact via the Internet as similar to fears of loyalty and family authenticity that have complicated adoption through time. Some of this sentiment is rooted in a desire to protect their children (Will my child be safe?) and some may stem from often unarticulated concerns about the retaining the child's loyalty (Will she choose them over us?). Parents may also fear that the original mother may not respect the boundaries they feel are in the child's best interests. Whatever their worries or fears – and birthparents have theirs, too, about possible rejection and other issues – all the parties need to be prepared and need to honestly address them beforehand. The reality is that contact is possible and, if the child seeks it, probable. One important factor to let them know about: Experience over the decades shows that their concerns are seldom realized.

Mackinnon talks with parents about coping 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 contact is complicated or distressing, there is some likelihood that youth will search or be found. Even when contact has negative elements, the child's doing it alone could be far worse. Furthermore, parents need to consider that such contact may benefit their child and, ultimately, their family.

It is important that those preparing individuals and couples to adopt, as well as those working with adoptive families, educate the parents whose children have not had contact with birth relatives about the benefits of openness. Studies consistently indicate both adoptive parents and adopted adolescents in open adoptions are more satisfied with the level of openness than those without contact. Adopted teens in open adoptions report many benefits of contact, including: 1) physical touchstones to identify where traits came from; 2) direct knowledge that helped them come to terms with the reasons for their adoption; 3) information that aided in their identity formation; 4) positive feelings toward their birthmothers; and 5) enjoying having an additional adult in their lives who was supportive of them (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2007; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Perhaps the most important preparation is to develop knowledge and skills to deal with the reality that communication and contact with their children's families of origin may well be coming their way. Preparation and support of adoptive families should help them to:

- Examine the benefits of contact and to consider being the ones to enable contact where it is not occurring. Many of the concerns parents have about unexpected, unmediated contact diminish when parents proactively seek information to provide to their children and set up the conditions of communication, based on understanding of its value.
- Learn how best to help children search if they choose to do so, and to support them emotionally in the journey if/when they deem it is appropriate and safe.
- Prepare themselves, including with outside supports like counseling if needed, for the emotional and familial effects of contact (for instance, it may mean communication with and visits by birth relatives including parents, grandparents and/or siblings).

- Prepare for the possibility of unanticipated contact from birth relatives and consider how the family will handle the emotional and relational consequences – which may be positive, negative or mixed, but in any case are likely to be complex.

Articles like *Top Ten Adoptive Parenting Tips for Facebook and the Internet* urge parents to talk about adoption and connection often, to pay particular attention to the child's interest in search and to provide available information. Parents should help youth who desire connections to determine if Facebook is the best way to achieve them. Some agencies provide counseling to families to help them consider the motivation for search and to imagine and plan for various outcomes that a search might yield (Susan Ogden, October 11, 2012, personal communication). At the very least, parents need to have considered their reactions and have a plan to guide their children through contact and ensuing relationships.

Parental Oversight

There are strategies parents can use to monitor their children's Internet use, sometimes without their knowledge (with the caveat that children can access social media and other sites away from home). For example, parents may view the web addresses of the sites their children access. Fursland (2010) and others caution, however, that oversight without openness in communication may well make a situation worse. Scrutiny and control may alienate youth and lead them to go elsewhere to conduct searches or maintain contacts. A later section of this report presents ideas for honest, open communication between parents and children as the best method for protecting children.

The general protective procedures recommended for all families are important first steps for adoptive parents: Computers can be placed in the home's common areas rather than in children's own rooms; the time they are allowed to spend online can be limited or restricted; and, if there are serious concerns, parents can ask that photos of their children not be tagged and ask family members and others never to use the child's picture on websites or blogs. Parents can also ask to be (or insist on being) friends with their children on Facebook. This allows monitoring of what is posted and who other friends are. Some parents make this a condition of their children having a Facebook page. Being a friend does not guarantee parents will know everything that's happening, however, since the owner of a page can determine which friends can see which content.

Adoptive parents can block access to specific websites and get e-mail or text alerts when a child tries to access a blocked website or when he/she posts confidential information. Parents can use filtering software that allows them to track activities. Fursland (2010) urges that parents carefully consider when such oversight is necessary. Invasions of the child's privacy by their parents can create difficult rifts. Further, she argues that surveillance, cutting off children's access to computer use and other mechanisms are largely beside the point because there are so many avenues outside the home where children have ready Internet access. In addition, there may be much to be gained when parents and youth together explore the child's interest in searching for birth family or expanding existing contact. Finally, the same reminder as ever: Whatever efforts the parents make, children can look and they can find or be found.

Teaching Children about Safe Internet Use

All children need to be well-versed in the potential risks of the Internet. Fursland notes that "[Adopted] Children who are vulnerable, feel isolated or have difficult issues in their lives may

well lack basic information and support” (p. 31). She asserts that even if they do have such information, their impulsivity or deep longing may lead to risk-taking. Parents need to help their children understand the importance of setting limits, of declining friend requests privately and, if needed, they need to block some people from making contact unless they are ready for it.

The British Association for Adoption and Fostering has produced a booklet for adopted teens and those in foster care intended to help them think about how to use social media in ways that benefit and protect them. *Social Networking and You* (2011) was written by Ellen Fursland, who also authored *Facing up to Facebook*. Guides like these can be starting points for parent/child discussions. Such resources examine why communication may be important to youth and their original families, suggest discussion topics such as the importance of changing privacy settings, and lay out information about what information appears in profiles and who should be permitted to view it. Fursland (2010) also suggests that parents prepare their children for the prospect of unexpected contact by birth family members, discuss their feelings about that possibility and talk about how they would handle it. Parents can talk to youth about their right to set limits on how they will be contacted and by whom, i.e., that they have a right to determine the nature of virtual or in-person relationships with members of their birth families and others. They can also talk to youth about the benefits of connections and how they can be incorporated into their lives.

Communicative openness. Open communication about the possibility of online contact can contribute to a positive parent-child relationship. Fursland (2010) begins *Facing Up to Facebook* with the assertion that children’s curiosity is natural, and Facebook is a central part of most young people’s lives. The best protection for them is a family environment where all aspects of adoption are freely discussed and where their desire for information, or even relationships, is supported and respected. Parents can foster an atmosphere of open communication by:

- honoring contact agreements, so no one feels the need for secretive interactions;
- talking openly about adoption and birth relatives;
- bringing up adoption and possible contact rather than waiting for children to do so;
- telling the truth about children’s history, appropriate to their age and development;
- assuring children that they are not causing feelings of hurt or rejection;
- honestly discussing any concerns they have about contact, particularly when there are issues of serious previous maltreatment or mental health concerns with birthparents;
- helping children to figure out what they want to know and to get up-to-date information;
- using professional services, such as agency counseling and support for all parties

Parents can help their children by engaging in “what if” conversations such as: What would you do if you want to know more about your birth relatives? What if you search and find something upsetting (for example, Mackinnon shares the story of a child whose first search result was discovering her mother’s police mug shot)? What might you do if your birthmother contacts you on Facebook? What if you ask her for contact and she says no? Why might unexpected contact be difficult for her (Fursland, 2010)? The author also advises parents to avoid language that paints contact in a judgmental way. Parents can talk about how to determine good times and methods for the child and the birth family to connect.

Beyond the fact that open dialogue is part of good parenting, oversight often just doesn’t work. Youth usually know more than their parents about how to circumvent restrictions. They can delete their search histories if they don’t want anyone to know where they have been online.

They may use a different browser than the one other family members do. Perhaps the easiest path is to go online away from home – on their own or a friend's smart phone, on a friend's computer or at school or the library. Children also can have other social media accounts that they don't reveal to their parents.

Responding to Unmediated Contact

There are many reasons adopted children and teens may not tell others, pointedly including their parents, about birth relatives they've found or are in touch with. One is developmental – that is, part of normal adolescence is about separating from parents, and young people often see themselves as invincible. Their movement toward independence and accompanying need for autonomy may embolden them to search. They may also feel that searching could hurt their parents' feelings or that their parents may try to prevent it (Fursland, 2010). And they, themselves, may have qualms or wonder if they are being disloyal or are somehow doing something wrong. Whatever the reason, in the age of the Internet, many adoptive families will have to come to terms with contact between their children and birth family members.

Adoption therapists advise parents who learn that their children are searching to begin sharing information they may have and to actively participate in the process. "You better be in charge of it or it will be in charge of you," says MacKinnon. She adds that her experience has taught her that youth will continue in secrecy if they don't get parental support, so the choice is whether the parents help or the child proceeds without them. In situations where children have been found by birth relatives, she urges parents to acknowledge the new reality: "Now we have an open adoption." Parents' energies are best spent deciding on parameters to try to assure that the relationships go forward in a positive way. They should also be encouraged by the agency or others supporting them to establish a relationship with the original family. Direct and open communication with the first parents can help the adults involved identify and agree on how contact should be conducted in ways that benefit the child. The goal is for parents to align with one another (Susan Ogden, personal communication, October 11, 2012).

This new and expanding modern reality has important implications for professional practice. If the field recognizes that connections between youth and birth family members will grow ever more likely, it may mean current practices about contact have to be rethought from the start. That means considering shaping open relations whenever possible from the beginning of the adoption process, both so that everyone can learn how best to navigate life in their extended families and to obviate the possibility of later surprise contact. Also, instead of determining in what cases ongoing contact and relationships are warranted or desired, it could well be more useful to assume that openness at some level is going to occur in many if not most cases, and proceed from there. Even if the adoption took place from another country or from foster care where significant maltreatment took place, the field needs to begin designing educational efforts, trainings, curricula and other initiatives that assume some level of contact between adoptive families and families of origin will be possible, and sometimes are even likely. As they rethink their roles and responsibilities in the big picture for the long term, ethical professionals also need to help parents to better communicate about, prepare for and manage contacts – because the Internet is enabling more and more of them to take place every day.

PART V

PRECAUTIONS FOR INTERNET USERS

So how can users benefit from the convenience and efficiency of the Internet while protecting themselves from misinformation, undue pressure or fraud? Because the adoption sites on the Internet are largely unregulated, it is critically important that everyone proceed with caution.

Based on its yearlong review for this report, the Institute suggests that parties to adoption ask the following questions as they consider using Internet sites.

1. Does the site end in .org? This is a basic, but beginning step in determining the nature of the site. Originally “.org” was meant for non-profit, non-governmental or non-commercial sites. Although there is now no restriction on its use, many charitable and non-profit sites use .org.

2. What are the specific services offered? Can a reader readily learn about their nature on the site or must there be contact with a staff member? Some chat rooms have described situations in which users tried to learn more about the service and felt they were talking with salespeople (i.e., they felt pressured to sign up for services) rather than counselors. On the other hand, users should have the option of speaking to someone identified on the site to get specific information and support, *if they choose*. Users might want to ask if the person to whom they are speaking is paid a commission for signing up pregnant women or prospective adoptive parents.

3. To whom is the site geared? Users should assess who the site is designed to reach, including who pays for the services. For example, if the primary purpose is to represent those seeking to be adoptive parents, pregnant women and their partners might be particularly cautious in viewing information as unbiased. If the intent appears to promote only a single outcome (such as only offering adoption as an option to pregnant women) or to promise “too good to be true” outcomes, the viewer should exercise caution.

4. What are the titles and credentials of those offering services? Are they consistent with commonly recognized training and experience in the field? For instance, those offering counseling (unless clearly identified as volunteers or peer advocates) should have advanced degrees in fields like social work, psychology or counseling, and experience in the adoption field. Some sites use terms like “counselor” or “specialist” but do not define them or explain how the workers are trained or their levels of experience. This information should appear on the site, as well as be readily available through discussion with representatives.

5. Where is the site’s physical location? Using an agency or service far from you may reduce your ability to get consistent, continuous quality services. Online sites often contract with others who are not clearly identified, or who are harder to assess, to do different aspects of the work. For example, how is the preparation of all parties handled when the expectant mother lives in one state, the pre-adoptive parents in another and site personnel are in a third? How will post-placement issues be managed when the parties and the provider are separated by distance?

6. How long has the site been in existence? Many include information on their home pages about their history and backgrounds. Most established adoption agencies of have websites in addition to a brick-and-mortar presence, while other providers only operate virtually. While a

web-only site may offer valuable services, it may be less likely to be available to answer questions or offer assistance for the long haul.

7. Does the service have accreditation or other recognition from regulatory bodies or from other appropriate groups? If the site assists with international adoption, it should have Hague accreditation. Sites that provide legal services should have attorneys that are members of the bar and licensed in the jurisdiction in which the adoption will take place. Recognition by state licensing bodies, the Council on Accreditation (a national accrediting body for child welfare agencies), membership in the Child Welfare League of America or other marks of the service's ability to meet external standards may be indicators of its quality.

8. Is the service non-profit (designated 501(c)3) or for-profit? While profit-making endeavors can provide quality services, a strong financial motive can compete with maintaining the client's best interests as the focus throughout the process. To be tax-exempt charities, organizations must receive IRS approval. The IRS maintains a website on which it lists the status of organizations.⁴³ Alternatively, users can simply ask a representative at a particular site if donations to the organization are eligible as charitable contributions for tax purposes. Only IRS-designated 501 (c) 3 agencies can do so.

9. Is information about costs and about the agency's financial operation clear and straightforward? If there are fees for services, are they clearly stated? When are they assessed? For example, on a search site are fees required upfront? When the searched for person is identified? What is the total amount that is charged for the service? If such information is not readily available - either on the site or through discussion with a site representative and followed by a written statement of costs, then users should be wary.

Users also can ask to see the provider's Audited Financial Statements or federal tax returns. Charitable organizations are required to provide these upon request. If an adoption resource refuses or is reluctant to provide such information, users should be wary.

10. To what other services or sources of information is the site linked? Do resources or referrals profit from referrals?

11. Is information current? Are posts and comments recent? For example, a search on states where gay and lesbian couples can adopt lists some publications that state that Florida bans gay persons from adopting. While this was true for over 30 years, it is no longer the case. Sites that are not regularly updated may not be reliable places from which to gather information or resources.

12. How credible are claims of superiority? If sites claim to be the most frequently used, the most successful at recruiting pregnant women, or the quickest at placing children for adoption, a red flag should go up. First, when agencies make claims without providing data, users should be skeptical. They should also reasonably wonder: how do providers accomplish these things so rapidly? Speed and volume are not the best metrics when the lives of children and vulnerable adults (pre-adoptive parents as well as women with unplanned pregnancies) are involved.

⁴³ <http://www.irs.gov/Charities-&-Non-Profits/Exempt-Organizations-Select-Check>

13. What services are provided after placement and beyond? If an online site is used to arrange an adoption, determine what services are provided afterward. For instance, if a post-adoption contract agreement is made, can the first/birthparents or adoptive parents receive help from those at the site if problems arise? If a child develops medical issues and the adoptive parents need to learn more from the original family, or if a birthparent who does not have contact needs to share information about a recently discovered genetic problem, will the site facilitate communication? When the adopted person reaches the age of majority and seeks information about origins, will he/she receive support or information through the site's services?

14. What do others say about the site? Chat rooms, reviews, even ratings by the Better Business Bureau may be indicators of quality or of problems.⁴⁴ Google searches for complaints also may yield information, but sites sometimes use "reputation management" services that reduce negative comments or make them more difficult to find. Consumers should check with their state's Attorney General's office or review complaints lodged with the Better Business Bureau. Consider, but be skeptical of, testimonials on the site. A website is not likely to include comments from people who feel they were poorly served or who asked for their money back. You may ask if you can talk directly to others who have used the site to get a first-hand view, but remember that those to whom you are referred are likely to be chosen for a reason.

15. Is the agency or service licensed? Users can call their state's adoption agency licensing specialist to find out if a license is valid and to determine if there are complaints. They can also contact their state's Bar Association to determine if an attorney is licensed and is a member of the bar in good standing.

16. What is the site's privacy policy? What information is collected and is it secure? Is information shared or sold and to whom is it made available? Appendix II of this report provides an example of a privacy policy and suggests other questions users might ask.

Of course, the questions above can and should be asked of any adoption service, provider or facilitator, whether Internet-based or not. But everyone can look professional on a website, complete with testimonials and pictures of adorable children, smiling adoptive families and satisfied birthparents. And the Internet allows the site's content to reach thousands of users. It is vital that users evaluate the service rather than be drawn in by compelling marketing alone.

PART VI

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that there is little guidance about and even less regulation of adoption services on the Internet. Nevertheless, its impact on adoption already has been profound, and it is growing. In some respects, it is transforming adoption in valuable ways, for instance by increasing connections between people who want or need to be connected; expanding the reach of those who are eager to become parents through adoption and those who are considering placing their

⁴⁴ BBB accreditation is not necessarily protective. The BBB site notes that "BBB accreditation does not mean that the business' products or services have been evaluated or endorsed by BBB, or that BBB has made a determination as to the business' product quality or competency in performing services." Consumers should check for complaints against a site.

children for adoption; and providing information, support and virtual communities for all the affected parties. As this report makes clear, however, the Internet poses serious risks as well.

There is much more to know and to consider as the field of adoption, and our broader society, grapples with how to best use this extraordinary technology as a tool for good in adoption. The Donaldson Adoption Institute will present a series of research-based publications over the next few years to inform the conversation. Even at this early point in the discussion, there are steps that can be taken to reign in the risks, promote the positive and instigate changes in response to the transformative impact that this very new technology is having on a very old institution:

Practice recommendations:

- Key organizations and experts in the fields of child welfare, foster care and adoption (Child Welfare League of America, National Association of Social Workers, American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, and representatives of major agencies and stakeholders) should convene for the purpose of devising best-practice standards and identifying other guidance/materials for use in the short-term while additional research is being conducted. The Adoption Institute plans to organize such a meeting in mid-2013.
- Education and training programs should be developed by and for adoption professionals so that they gain a better understanding of the positive and negative uses of the Internet and social media (including improved understanding of the technology itself), and they then need to develop comparable programs to pass on this knowledge to their clients.
- Adoption practitioners, social workers and others who deal with birth and adoptive families should revise their curricula and training regimens to reflect the reality that many if not most affected parties will be able to find each other at some point, if they wish, and should provide their clients with commensurate information, education, counseling and other supports that recognize most adoptions likely will be “open” to some extent.
- Adoption practitioners of all sorts need to receive training and devise materials that enable them to better assist the growing number of adopted individuals, first/birthparents and other members of families of origin, adoptive parents and others who are coming to them for assistance in search and reunion activities.
- Child welfare organizations, researchers and other professionals should devise and post information on the Internet for prospective parents (adoptive and birth) explaining how to assess the array of online services and thereby enable them to make informed decisions based on a clear understanding of the ethical, personal and legal issues involved.

Policy and law recommendations:

- Policy-makers at the state and federal level should commission research and hold hearings to determine whether changes in law or policy are needed to serve their constituents who are affected by adoption, and to ensure that everyone is protected from scams, exploitation or the risk of psychological and physical harm.
- Policy and law-enforcement officials at all levels should routinely examine adoption-related activity on the Internet to determine whether fraud, exploitation or other illegal or unethical practices are taking place, and should follow up, as warranted, by issuing warnings to violators, pressing charges and/or instigating statutory changes.
- Social media and Internet companies, particularly Google, Facebook and others that have a major impact on the issues discussed in this report, should conduct and enable research to inform their activities and should re-examine their policies and practices to determine if they need to be altered in light of the findings of this report.

- Laws that impede or prevent the parties to adoption from gaining important information, including statutes preventing adopted adults from accessing their original birth certificates, should be repealed since the Internet obviates their primary contemporary rationale (i.e., keeping the affected parties from learning about and finding each other.)

Conclusion

The list of positive, negative and complicated changes occurring in the world of adoption as a result of the Internet goes on and on, with many already in place and others still evolving. The common denominator among them is that they are not best practices derived from lessons learned from research and experience; rather, overwhelmingly, they are transformations that are happening simply because new technology enables them to happen. It is critical that those concerned about ethical adoption practice alter this reality by determining how to use the Internet to assure the rights and well-being of all parties, while improving adoption overall.

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APPENDIX I

SELECTED ONLINE RESOURCES

For those considering placing a child for adoption or who have done so

[American Adoption Congress](#): Information on news, legislation and policy, especially related to restoring adult adoptee access to original birth certificates

[Birth Mom Buds](#): Online articles about adoption and being a birthmother, invites pregnant women and women who placed children for adoption to participate in forums and chat rooms

[Concerned United Birthparents](#): Information and position papers on adoption issues

[Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support](#): Promotes openness in adoption and provides guidance about finding agencies that support it

[Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children](#): Birth Parents' Bill of Rights provides an example of the protections and guarantees birth parents should expect

For adoptive parents

[Adoption Learning Partners](#): Multiple online courses for pre-adoptive and adoptive parents on a range of adoption issues

[Adoption Today](#): Online magazine for parents (and others)

[Adoptive Families](#): Online magazine for parents (and others)

Creating a Family: [Facebook/Internet and the Adopted Child](#), summarizes Positive and Negative Influences of Facebook on Adoption and Adopted Children and provides resources and [Top Ten Adoptive Parenting Tips for Facebook and the Internet](#)

Deborah Siegel, [Social Media and the Post-Adoption Experience](#), *Social Work Today*: Explores how social networking sites are changing the post-adoption experience

[Foster Parent College](#): Courses to assist parents adopting from foster care

[Human Rights Campaign, All Children, All Families](#): Information on adoption by gays/lesbians

[Joint Council for International Children's Services](#): Information on intercountry adoption

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Child Welfare Information Gateway: [State Laws on Domestic Adoption](#), including Use of Advertising and Facilitators in Adoptive Placements, Collection of Family Information about Adopted Persons and Their Birth Families, Consent to Adoption and Regulation of Private Domestic Adoption Expenses

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Children's Bureau, AdoptUSKids and Child Welfare Information Gateway: [National Adoption Month—Virtually: Adoption in the Digital Age](#), with resources for social media use for professionals, adoptive parents and youth

Adoptions Together: [Consumer guide for families](#) considering domestic adoption

U.S. State Department: [Intercountry Adoption](#), including information on who can adopt and how

North American Council on Adoptable Children: [Post-Adoption Services](#)

American Academy of Adoption Attorneys: Information on [Retaining an Attorney](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics: [Clinical Report—The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families](#)

American Adoption Congress: [Education Resources](#), including information on Open Adoption, Best Practices, Search and Reunion

Family Online Safety Institute: [Internet Safety Tips for Parents and Kids](#)

Connect Safely: [Safety Tips](#) and [Resources](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics: [SafetyNet](#), links and resources to keep children and adolescents safer online

For adopted persons

[Adult Adoptees Advocating for Change](#): Online forum and information about search

[Also Known As](#): A site for those adopted from Korea

[American Adoption Congress](#): Information on news, legislation and policy, especially related to restoring adult adoptee access to original birth certificates

[Bastard Nation](#): Advocacy for change in adoption policy and practice, especially restoring adult adoptee access to original birth certificates

[Foster Club](#): Information for those adopted from foster care

For professionals

[U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Child Welfare Information Gateway](#): Social Media Use in Child Welfare

Child Welfare League of America: [Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services](#)

Council on Accreditation: [Adoption Services Standards for Private Organizations](#) and [Accredited Adoption Service Organizations](#)

AdoptUSKids: [Which social networks should your agency use to reach families?](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics: [Clinical Report—The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families](#)

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services: [Birth Parents' Rights and Responsibilities](#) and [Adoptive Parents' Rights and Responsibilities](#)

Children's Bureau's [Training and Technical Assistance \(T&TA\) Network](#): Social Media

Federal Trade Commission: [Children's Privacy Legal Resources](#), including Children's Online Privacy Protection Act

[Foster Parent College](#): Courses and information to adoption professionals who work with families adopting from foster care

Donaldson Adoption Institute: [Ethics and Adoption](#)

[Open Adoption and Family Services](#): Videos that explores the ways in which the media (including online media) represent adoption

APPENDIX II

Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County Michigan OUR PHILOSOPHY AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

THE BEST INTEREST OF THE ADOPTEE drives all decisions and practices of the Agency.

BIRTH PARENTS are people to be loved and respected. They are voluntarily choosing what they feel is in their best interest and that of their child. They love their children but can't parent at this time.

BIRTH FATHERS represent half of the child's heritage and are people who deserve to be involved in the process. Children deserve full social and medical information. In reality, there are very few "unknown" birth fathers.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS ARE OUR RESOURCES. Our primary mission is to find families for children needing homes. We look first to the family of origin but know that this isn't always a positive option. Adoptive families willing to keep a connection with the birth family are wonderful resources.

ADOPTION IS A LIFELONG PROCESS. We educate birth and adoptive families about the lifelong challenges of adoption. Adoption is much more than a legal formality and we're committed to offering counseling, support and educational services to anyone touched by adoption at anytime in their lives.

EDUCATION AND COUNSELING ARE THE KEYS to recognizing that adoption is a responsibility to a child - it is not a solution to a problem. We want adoptive parents to become the best adoptive parents they can be. We attempt to build an awareness of the "parenting-plus" of adoption, which includes the joys and sorrows of parenting by birth as well as the additional challenges when parenting a child from another genetic heritage. Pregnancy counseling is offered to birth mothers and birth fathers to help them explore the options available and assist with implementation of their plan. When adoption is the choice, we also educate about the lifelong impact and loss of the parenting role and offer support long after the birth of the child.

ADOPTION IS BUILT ON LOSS so we help all parties look at their losses to better prepare themselves and their children for dealing with present and future losses.

ADOPTIVE PARENTING IS DIFFERENT and, while often second choice, it is not second best. Adoptive parents need to come to feel comfortable that adoption is a way of building a family that isn't inferior to parenting by birth.

OPENNESS IS HEALTHY AND ENRICHING An open system recognizes the rights of all parties to speak for themselves and reduces the level of fantasy and anxiety about the other party.

ADOPTION IS A FAMILY AFFAIR. Losses felt by immediate members of the adoption circle may be felt by other family members as well. Infertility and untimely pregnancies can impact an entire extended family system. We encourage family members to be part of the counseling, education and relationship-building process.

HALLMARKS OF ETHICAL ADOPTION PRACTICE

We believe the following are important considerations when choosing a facilitator to assist with an adoption:

The GENERAL PHILOSOPHY espoused by the facilitator and prospective adoptive parents is that children, in general, should be raised within their birth families. Adoption is an option only when the birth parent feels that his/her family is not a resource.

ETHICAL PREGNANCY COUNSELING explores all options available to birth parents - not just adoption. Even birth parents who strongly present adoption as the only option to consider must be challenged to look at parenting and/or raising the child within the family. Only then can adoption become a free choice.

Diligent attempts are made by the birth mother and facilitator to **IDENTIFY,**

LOCATE AND INVOLVE ALL POSSIBLE BIRTH FATHERS in the counseling, decision making, planning, and legal process. Birth fathers and/or their families are a resource for the child whether the decision is parenting or adoption since they can provide social and medical information, which represents 50% of the child's heritage and identity.

COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION is made available to adoptive and birth families. Topics such as the dynamics of denial, grief, shame, trust, and loss as related to all members of the adoption circle are the core curriculum as well as education regarding the lifelong process, unique challenges of adoptive parenting, relatedness of birth and adoptive families and the legal process. Totally informed decisions about adoption cannot be made until birth parents have gone through the actual birth process.

A DECISION FOR ADOPTION IS ALWAYS MADE AT LEAST TWICE - once during counseling and once when the child is born. Legal steps should not be taken until the birth parent has seen, held and named the child; recovered from the birth process; experienced a separation from the child; and has made an informed post-birth decision. Legal papers should be signed in front of a Judge to ensure that the birth parents' rights are protected and that they have full understanding of the finality of their decision. Birth parents and adoptive parents should have independent counsel to avoid conflict of interest if attorneys are involved.

BIRTH PARENT EXPENSES should be reasonable, itemized and accompanied by receipts. The element of coercion should not be even remotely possible. In most instances, fees should be kept to a minimum to remove the feeling of obligation by either party. An adoption decision must be made voluntarily with no strings attached.

POST ADOPTION SERVICES beyond finalization of the adoption should be provided by the facilitator for any members of the adoption circle throughout their lifetime. Experiencing the joys and sorrows of an adoption plan are lifelong emotions for birth families, adoptive families and adoptees. If support services are not provided by the facilitator, referrals will be made to another service provider.

ADOPTION FEES

Fees charged for adoption services cover a portion of the expense to the Agency. We are grateful to the Diocese of Lansing, Washtenaw United Way and private contributors whose donations help subsidize the program. As required by law, our adoption fees are approved by the court having jurisdiction.

Fees are assessed for the services one receives - not for the buying of a baby. Presently, fees are not tax-deductible since they are payment for a service and not a donation to the Agency. In most instances, fees are not reimbursable by an insurance provider as they are primarily educational rather than therapeutic in nature. Some employers do have plans available to reimburse employees for adoption-related expenses. When counseling for infertility, grief and loss, marital communication or other unresolved issues is recommended, fees for these services may be tax-deductible or reimbursable as they are therapeutic.

In accordance with our philosophy that fees are for a service received, they are paid in full at the time the service is rendered rather than in lump sum payments at application and placement. Fees may be paid by cash, check, MasterCard or VISA.

The Agency reserves the right to charge families for extraordinary time or expense outside the norm. Whenever possible, families will be notified of these expenses in advance. Travel expenses will be assessed as a one time flat fee.

Fees for service are reviewed on a semi-annual basis and may be changed. When this happens, families involved in any part of the adoption process will be notified and placed on the new fee schedule.

See [fee schedule](#) for specific fees.

APPENDIX III

Adoption and Social Media: Recommendations For Healthy Ongoing Communication

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Today the use of social media is the “norm.” However it is a new forum for those who are touched by adoption... allowing us to “find” each other on social media sites and stay in touch can provide both positive and challenging experiences. Before using social media as part of your adoption journey it is important that you educate yourself on the pros and cons of such a venture. Contact your adoption agency to see if they have a policy on the use of social media.

The recommendations below are broken up into four sections. The first deals with things to consider before you decide to conduct your adoption search via the Internet and social media sites, the second focuses on developing a plan for post adoption contact that addresses whether or not all involved feel comfortable with social media as a way to connect. The third section provides recommendations for those parenting older adoptees and the fourth section shares general recommendations for all parties. This document was prepared to address both the adoptive family and the birth family.

The Internet and social media sites are definitely incredible ways for prospective adoptive parents and expectant birth parents to connect with each other. In addition these same venues enable all parties to keep in touch if you “mutually select to do so.” This is the key. Do all parties feel comfortable with staying connected by way of social media? Have all parties discussed this between themselves before the connection occurs?

I. Guidelines for Prospective Adoptive Parents and Expectant Birth Parents who wish to “find” each other online:

1. Before you begin searching for information online share your plans regarding making connections with an adoptive family or birth family on social networking sites with your partner, if applicable. It is important that he or she be as interested in selecting this as a viable way to make an adoption plan.
2. Discuss your plans with your adoption agency representative. The agency has both professional and personal experience with adoption journeys via the World Wide Web and is able to educate you and support you through the process as well as help you navigate through potentially risky situations.
3. If you are a current social media user, before delving into your adoption journey, you need to rethink the ways you use social media sites. Do you currently share your confidential information on your profile? What type of posts do you typically make during the week? What type of political or humorous statements or links do you tend to post? If someone searched for you, and they are not currently an online friend of yours, what might they see on your site? Recognize that you may wish to utilize these social media sites differently than you have been.
4. If you are not currently a social media user or not a frequent user, then become very

familiar with these sites and forums before you utilize them to begin your adoption journey. There are many features that should be understood regarding the different ways to communicate. Some communication is deemed private or public and often users become confused by which method they are using. Become very familiar with the privacy settings on each social media site and be aware that these sites often change setting options.

5. Social media sites allow for immediate communication between parties, sometimes such communication may be exciting at first but can also be misinterpreted or unwanted or overwhelming. To really get to know each other, it is recommended to rely on other forms of communication. Utilize the agency as a place to meet each other, or arrange a telephone call or restaurant meeting. It is important to still value personal contact.

6. E-mail communication while still an e-connection is a bit more private and personal. Email addresses can be set up just for this type of communication.

7. Consider the use of private websites and blogs before engaging in adoption searches via social media sites.

8. Once you are “matched” (whether it be via a social media connection or another more traditional way) be careful about sharing the news on a public forum because a match is not an adoption until after a placement occurs. Also the comments replying to your announcement are available for others to read and you may feel comfortable or uncomfortable with such comments.

9. Be careful to not share information about the adoptive/birth family particularly on public posts. This is important because this will ultimately become your child's story and once it is viral, it is no longer private and no longer your child's story to learn about from you as s/he grows.

10. Sharing photos and videos is a really neat part of the social networking platform. Be aware who will be privy to viewing these and perhaps revisit your privacy settings or share these items more selectively. Sharing photos is something for all parents to consider, not just adoptive parents and birth parents. If you are not comfortable sharing photos publically of your children than choose to send these via other online sites through private invitation only. Sites like Shutterfly, Snapfish, Kodak Gallery, etc., make it easy to upload and selectively share photos. Of course you can also email and mail photos as well. Hard copy photos are still an incredible gift to share with one another and may very well be a part of the requirement set up by your adoption agency and the parties involved in the adoption.

Many of the above suggestions will prepare you for next section relating to the creation of an open adoption plan, or Post Adoption Contact Agreement (PACA).

II. Guidelines for Adoptive Parents and Birth Families When Creating a PACA:

1. Before the placement of a child, it is important to begin discussing the type of communication you would like. These desires will then be placed into an agreement known as a PACA. PACA stands for Post Adoption Contact Adoption. Included within this document would be your desires regarding sharing and receiving letters and photos. It is also recommended that you list if you would like contact via email.

2. Your adoption agency can truly be helpful to you in setting up an understanding in your PACA related to the type of communication all parties hope to have after placement occurs. Social

networking may be something added to the PACA.

3. It is important to remember that communication via social media sites is public, and things we thought would be private may end up being viewed by other people. Inviting each other to be “friends” on such sites also opens you up to sharing more identifying information than you may previously have felt comfortable sharing. It is recommended to add this topic in your PACA.

4. If you receive an unexpected “friend request” from the birth/adoptive family or child or relative of the child, reach out to the agency first to ask for support and advice before responding. There are ways to have contact by redirecting that person to a private email, a phone number, a social worker at the agency, etc., to have more direct and more personal contact.

III. Guidelines for Parents of Older Adoptees:

1. If you have older children who utilize social networking they must be guided about how to use it if they wish to engage in searching for their birth family members as well as guided, should they be contacted this way by members of their birth family. Discussing such things before they occur will allow for a more meaningful dialogue and one that will better prepare your child and you should these things occur. Being prepared will help you deal with any challenges should they arise.

2. If an adoption took place some time ago and only now you have chosen to connect via social media, please connect with your adoption agency. If you no longer have this resource, seek out another adoption professional to discuss this form of contact before you engage in it. Prepare your child and your partner and other family members that may be affected by this type of communication.

IV. General Recommendations For All Parties Involved in an Adoption:

1. Connecting socially on networking sites exposes each party to the daily happenings of the other person’s life. This may be positive, overwhelming or difficult to learn so much about another person. You may learn things you didn’t intend or even want to know so evaluate whether it will be healthy to accept a friend request or send a friend request to one another. If you are uncomfortable, then do not be concerned about sending the wrong message. Setting boundaries from the beginning will help you to form a stronger and healthier long-term relationship. You are not saying you do not want to stay connected, but rather you are saying you do want to be connected, just not in this manner.

2. Communication via social networking is forever, so consider what you post before you post something especially if it relates to the adoption process, the adoptive/birth family, or your child.

In conclusion, connecting and maintaining adoption contact via social media sites is new and exciting but can also be overwhelming and challenging. It is “intense” to have this direct and immediate type of contact and if this is the route both birth and adoptive families choose to go, it is important to know you have support available to you through your adoption agency.

It is also imperative to remember two key points: Do all parties feel comfortable with staying connected by way of social media? Have all parties discussed this between themselves before the connection occurs?

APPENDIX IV

FACC PRIVACY STATEMENT

The www.foster-adopt.org website is a service of the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis, Inc., a Missouri non-profit corporation d/b/a Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition ("FACC") and d/b/a Little Wishes. At the Coalition, we value your privacy. We have implemented this Privacy Statement to explain to you how we use and protect information that we may gather from you by means of the this website.

WHAT INFORMATION IS COLLECTED?

Information you give us. We receive and store all information you enter on our website or give us in any other way. This information includes information you give us at registration such as your first name, your last name, your postal address including zip code and country, your e-mail address, and your telephone number. We collect this information from you for the purpose of enhancing your user experience on our site, to improve the content of our website and services, to alert you to our services, and to share special offers, service announcements and updated information, and other new services from FACC. We may use your telephone number to authenticate you after you have registered.

Automatic Information. We receive and store certain types of information whenever you interact with us. This includes software "cookies". Cookies are small chunks of data created by a web server and stored on your computer. They provide a means for websites that you visit to keep track of your online patterns and preferences. Among other things, cookies help us identify returning users, and they help us customize our service to a user's needs. By understanding which areas of the site a user visits, cookies allow us to present information, products and specials that are of personal interest. In addition to cookies, for each visitor to www.foster-adopt.org, our web server automatically recognizes the visitor's domain name and IP address (where possible). An IP address is a number assigned to your computer when you connect to the Internet. As part of the protocol of the Internet, web servers can identify your computer by its IP address. We collect IP addresses and related information for the purposes of system administration, to assess the traffic to our site and to maintain and improve our site.

HOW IS THE INFORMATION COLLECTED SHARED?

We are not in the business of selling the information we collect to others. We share personal information only as described in this Privacy Statement and with our affiliates that either are subject to this Privacy Statement or follow practices at least as protective as those described in this Privacy Statement. Aggregate information (without personally identifiable information) may be used for internal business purposes, marketing purposes or shared with third parties for our business purposes.

With Agents and Contractors. We may engage other companies and individuals to perform certain functions on our behalf. This includes, by way of example, businesses that sell our services. They may have access to personal information needed to perform their functions, but may not use it for other purposes.

Business Transfers. We might sell or buy assets. In such transactions, personal information

generally is one of the transferred business assets but remains subject to the promises made in any pre-existing Privacy Statement.

For FACC's Protection and for the Protection of Others. We may disclose personal information about you or your use of the www.foster-adopt.org site if we have a good faith belief that such action is necessary to (a) conform to legal requirements or comply with legal process, (b) protect and defend the rights or property of FACC or its affiliated companies, (c) enforce the Terms of USE www.foster-adopt.org, and/or (d) act to protect the interests of our users or others.

With Your Consent. Additionally, we have the right to transfer your personal information if we give you notice that such information might be transferred to a third party, and you do not choose not to have such information transferred in the manner specified in such notice.

IS THE INFORMATION COLLECTED SECURE?

We will take appropriate steps that we believe are reasonable to protect the security of the personal information you share with us. It is important for you to protect against unauthorized access to your user account including your password and to your computer. Accordingly, be sure to sign off when finished using a shared computer.

CAN I ACCESS THE INFORMATION COLLECTED?

We will provide you with the means to ensure that your personal information is correct and current. You may review, update and/or delete this information at any time when you log in to our site with your user name and password.

DO I HAVE ANY CHOICES REGARDING THE INFORMATION COLLECTED?

You can choose not to provide personal information. However, you will not be permitted to access the site.

CHANGES TO THIS PRIVACY STATEMENT

We reserve the right to revise this Privacy Statement at anytime. When we do, we will also revise the "last updated" date at the top of this Privacy Statement. You are responsible for regularly reviewing the current Privacy Statement. The most current version of the Privacy Statement can be reviewed by clicking on the "Privacy Statement" hypertext link located at the bottom of our home page at www.foster-adopt.org. Your continued use of the FACC website after we post any revisions constitutes your agreement to any such revisions. If any such revisions are unacceptable to you, do not access the FACC website.

CONTACT INFORMATION

We welcome your comments regarding this Privacy Statement. Please contact us by e-mail or postal mail. If you have questions or concerns regarding this Privacy Statement, please e-mail us at jessibrawley@foster-adopt.org