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Facebook Fuels Honesty, Unpredictability in Adoption As Adoption Becomes More Open, Social Media Present New Questions

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Sara Blomeling-DeRoo with her siblings, from the back left to right, Lori, John Jr. Sara, Jenny, Kristin; front, left to right, Kelly, Jesse, Nick, Jeff, (missing from the photo, Andrew, currently serving with the US Marines, in Japan)
(Courtesy Bethany Christian Services)

It was just on a whim that Sara Blomeling-DeRoo, 46, decided to turn to Facebook.

While working at an adoption agency in Holland, Mich., last year, Blomeling-DeRoo, who was herself [adopted](#), encountered a man who happened to ask her if she'd ever searched for biological family.

She said she'd worked through an adoptee search group about 20 years ago and found her mother and though they met, it was clear her mother did not want to pursue a relationship.

"She really did not want to be found," she said. "She had not told anybody I was born alive."

After she gave up her baby for [adoption](#), Blomeling-DeRoo's mother married the biological father and they went on to have several other children together. But she never told the other children about the [adoption](#) and wasn't ready to disclose her secret.

After grieving about the rejection, Blomeling-DeRoo said she moved on and stayed away, refraining from contacting any of the siblings she knew might still live in the area.

Until last April, when the man she calls her "angel" prodded her to seek them out.

She signed in to Facebook, found about 10 people in the Grand Rapids, Mich., area with her biological mother's last name and sent them all messages.

"Related?" she said she wrote. "Are you by any chance related to John or JoAnne Gleason of the Alta, Mich., area?"

Most responses came back with a "no," she said, but one woman wrote back saying that she was related to them and was, in fact, their daughter.

Reuniting With Estranged Family Can Come With Risks

From there, Blomeling-DeRoo said, things moved very fast. Within days of that initial exchange, she said she learned that she not only had several siblings, but was the oldest of nine.

By the end of the week, she had met all but one, as well as her biological father and mother (for the second time).

Her relationships with all of them have blossomed.

"I see a lot of them& we started celebrating holidays," she said. "They have really embraced my family and it's just really been great for me."

But despite her own happy ending, Blomeling-DeRoo doesn't think that Facebook is necessarily the best place for every [adoptive family](#) to re-connect.

"I think you really need to be educated and you need a lot of support going through a birth family search. It's a very emotional thing to do. &People need to know that there are always risks," she said. "If I hadn't done the work I had done 20 years ago and if my family hadn't been accepting it could have been extremely different."

Over the past few decades, adoption experts say state laws and the flow of information over the Internet have driven more openness into the adoption process in general. But Facebook and other social networking sites, they add, are pushing it to a new level.

Adoption Expert: Social Media Present Opportunity, Pitfalls

In private messages and on public pages, adopted children and parents of children of given up to adoption are seeking out _ and finding _ estranged relatives. But experts say that while the phenomenon is moving families toward more transparency about adoption, it is also raises new questions.

"It has the rich promise of opportunity, but also absolutely has potential pitfalls that we as a field have not thought through and figured out how to deal with," said Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute.

The Internet age has enabled more people than ever before to locate their birth parents or children once given up for adoption, he said, but social networking sites like Facebook allow reunions to take place without the support systems and third-party intermediaries traditionally available during that often vulnerable moment.

"One of the ways we see this manifesting is people are finding each other without any structures around them, without any guidance around them and often without any rules," he said.

British Social Workers Explore Facebook and Adoption

Social media has made it easier for adoptive families to find each other, share medical history and renew relationships, but Pertman said, "One has to imagine that it also has the potential to break people's hearts and undermine best practices."

In the United Kingdom., concern is so great that this week British social workers gathered at a conference organized by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering called "Facing Up to Facebook," intended to explore the implications of social networking on adoption.

"Today's adopted teenagers are the first to have grown up with Facebook _ and at the time of the adoptions, no one could have predicted it would be possible. By making it so easy to find people, social networking sites have blown apart all the carefully thought-out procedures for tracing, contact and reunion in adoption," Ellen Fursland, author of "Facing Up to Facebook" and a speaker at the conference which bears the same name, [wrote in the U.K.'s The Guardian this week](#).

Adoption Becoming More Open in the U.S., Expert Says

American experts say that while fewer adoptions in the U.S. are totally closed these days, Facebook is changing the landscape for those people seeking adoption who may want to keep a child's birth family neatly in the past.

"For the families who were hoping to not have a connection with birth families I think Facebook changed that because no family can adopt a child and say we're not going to ever have contact with a birth family with things like social media," said Kris Faasse, national director of adoption services for Bethany Christian Services, the country's largest adoption agency.

She said that traditionally, in the days before the Internet became popular, adopted children who wanted to find their biological family or birth families that wanted to locate their children, would contact the agency that handled the adoption.

Depending on the laws of the state and assuming the child was old enough (18-21 in most states), the agency would act as an intermediary.

Facebook Enables Reunions Without Intermediary, Preparation

The social worker would communicate with both parties to make sure that both were psychologically prepared for a reunion, she said. If one side wasn't ready, the reunion wouldn't take place.

With the Internet, she said more people have been able to use online information and directories to locate family members.

And with just a few clicks on Facebook, more are able to reach across the Internet to people who may or may not be prepared to revisit the past.

Hard numbers and details are scarce for both the number of adoptees and birth families who seek reunions and the number who attempt it online, Faasse said. But she added that, anecdotally, the outcomes of online reunion attempts tend to be negative when young people find birth parents on social media and don't tell their adoptive parents what they've discovered.

Adoption Expert: Facebook Pushing Families to Transparency

"Maybe the teen or young adult didn't feel comfortable telling their (adopted) parents. It was kept as a secret," she said. "Then the secret becomes the family issue."

"Another difficult situation is when someone has located a birth parent& and wasn't prepared for the possible reaction or response," she said.

If an adopted young adult or child is seeking a reunion but doing it without the supportive environment of family or a therapist, it can be hard to understand the context of the person they're hoping to reach, she said.

But regardless of the risks and questions Facebook and other social media present, experts say they also offer opportunities.

"What I would say to adopted parents is that they need to be aware of this, they need to be prepared for it and, frankly, my belief is that, psychologically, the desire to identify with your birth family is so high that you need to support _ not fight _ your kids reaching out," said Joe Kroll, executive director of the North American Council on Adoptable Children.

He said the pain he's seen in adult adoptees who attempted, but failed, to find birth families is "just immense." Any vehicle that helps their search is a positive force, he said.

But as more adoptees and birth parents use Facebook as a vehicle to connect, Adoption Institute's Pertman said the adoption services field needs to figure out how to give people counseling and educate parents about what their adopted kids might find on the Internet about themselves and relatives.

Faasse from Bethany Christian Services said not only do parents need to talk to their kids about who is on the Internet, they also need to be more transparent about adoption in general.

"Having the adoption be an open subject and understanding their need to ask questions and have information is so very important," she said. "Facebook is really increasing the need for families to make sure that they're honest with their kids."

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