

The Role of Social Media

Among the Adoption Triad



Adoptions
with Love, Inc.



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Introduction



The Internet is changing the adoption landscape as we know it. Social media is transforming the adoption search. Open adoption is evolving in the face of Facebook and other social networking websites. Online connections between birth parents, adoptive families, and adoptees are becoming more common.

In many ways, the transformative relationship between social media and adoption has in fact been very positive. Not only have social channels like Facebook made open relationships between the adoption triad more fluent, they have also helped to eliminate the stigma and secrecy that adoption once carried.

Just decades ago, the majority of adoption plans were closed. Birth parents did not have any say in where their child would be placed, who would raise their child, or what kind of life their child would live. They could not choose, let alone meet, the adoptive family. They could not keep in touch with their child over the years. Similarly, adoptive families did not have much (if any) knowledge regarding their child's birth parents. They could not contact their child's birth family with questions or updates.

Nowadays, open adoption is the norm. In fact, about 95 percent of domestic, infant adoptions have either open or semi-open plans for ongoing contact. This means that the majority of adoptive and birth families today have made arrangements to stay in touch, whether through letters and pictures, emails, phone conversations, Facebook exchanges, or in-person visits. Many adoptees have access to the answers they need; many birth parents can stay up to date with their child as he or she grows. Social media helps facilitate these kinds of open relationships.

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Introduction, continued

While social media has brought many great benefits to the adoption landscape, it has also stirred many negative implications. Privacy rights and adoption agreements between families are being broken. Adopted children are being contacted by birth family members without their parents' consent. Birth mothers who once wished to remain anonymous are being found by their biological children online. Adoptive families are posting photos, updates, and milestones of their child for the world to see. Many of these families are being cyber 'stalked'.

In this eBook, we will discuss how birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted children use social media as it relates to adoption. For those who have been touched by the act of adoption, we will also offer tips to help you navigate adoption relationships and searches made through social media.



Social Media & Adoption

Social media is transforming the adoption landscape. Online adoption searches and open communication on Facebook is becoming more common.



Who is Using Social Media?

The Internet – as a whole – is becoming too big to ignore. Over 3.5 billion people in the world have internet access. Day in and day out, people are searching for information, making online connections, and sharing their stories with the World Wide Web. Most teenagers and young adults account for these daily users.

Facebook – the most popular social network worldwide – plays a major role in Internet use among people both young and old. Currently, there are over one billion active users who log onto Facebook on a daily basis. Over 70 percent of teenagers in the United States are active Facebook users.

If you are a parent, you likely know firsthand the role that the Internet and social media plays in your child's life. You may see your child log onto his or her Facebook on a daily basis, or scroll through his or her Instagram feed on a smartphone during the lull hours of the day. You may be scrolling through your own account on a daily basis as well, to share photos with friends and family or keep up on old relationships.

Most people do. Today, the majority of people use websites like Facebook to stay in touch with their current friends and family. This social media platform allows individuals to reconnect or keep up on the lives of their distant relatives, their childhood friends, and even acquaintances without having to talk or meet in person. Every connection is behind-the-screen. Every connection feels seemingly easy and safe.

What we often forget, however, is that the Internet is not always a safe zone for our children. Once taken online, adoption relationships often lose their limitations. Adoption searches often go unmonitored and unendorsed. Unexpected, impulsive conversations are so often sparked. With everything that happens via the Internet, it is so important that we protect our children and their safety. It is so important that we educate them, and assist them, in their online endeavors.





Social Media Use Among Adopted Persons

Every month, the phrase “find birth parents” is searched approximately 1,600 times in Google. That is the sheer fact of it – thousands of adoptees of all ages are consistently searching for information about their past. Some are looking for their biological parents. Some are looking for answers or truth about their adoption story. Some are looking for information on their genealogy, ancestors, or any details to help them piece together their identity.

Three out of every four adoptees use the Internet or social media to search for their birth families. While these searches are not always successful, those with a little bit of information often go a long way. For example, if an adopted teen knows his birth date, the hospital he was born in, and his birth mother’s name, he can put together those fragments in attempts to search for his birth mother online.

The benefits of doing this through a social media platform are clear – billions of people are on Facebook. The chances of this teen’s birth mother having a Facebook profile are great. The reach of his search will also be great. His search will be more efficient, more immediate, and more effective than searching once was in the past.

In addition to searching for members of their birth families online, adoptees find great benefit in looking for adoption information or support through the Internet. Many will use the Internet to find information about adoption laws or obtaining their original birth certificate. Some use social media or online forums to connect with other adopted people for support. In addition, adoptees may use social media as a means to voice their opinions and their adoption experience on the web. Some will use the Internet for online advice and support from adoption professionals.

There is no doubt that many adopted children, young adults, adult adoptees are using social media as an online adoption tool: to search for or make contact with their birth families, to obtain information about their pasts, or to share their own adoption experience with others. In the following pages, one adoptee tells her story about searching for her birth parents on Facebook. Through her experience, she learned the importance of preparation for the search, as well as setting boundaries for her newfound adoption relationships.





Geneva's Story

My adoption story has never been a secret. As far back as I can remember, I have always known that I was adopted. I had been born to a seventeen-year-old girl who wanted nothing more than to be a mother, but unfortunately, was in no position to be taking care of a child. Left without a choice, she placed me for adoption. I know my story and I know that she made this decision with the utmost respect and love. Yet, I needed to know more.

At fifteen-years-old, I started searching Facebook with the minimal clues I had in finding my birth parents. I spent hours searching through people who had the same first name as my birth mother; obviously, that was unsuccessful. It was extremely discouraging, but day after day I logged back in and searched again. Eventually, I became successful in finding both my birth father and birth mother. I began to build a relationship with them through Facebook. We exchanged pictures, stories, exciting news, and I learned so many things that I had missed having not been in contact with them. We became closer, and unanimously decided we wanted to meet in person.

But this was not a single effort on my part; my adoptive parents were there by my side for the entire journey. They respected my desire to learn about and contact my birth parents, and supported me through every step of the way. They helped me to create limits for myself so I wouldn't become overwhelmed. Without their love and support, I wouldn't have been able to successfully fulfill my wish of being in contact with my birth parents.

A year passed and we had plans to meet my birth parents in Indiana, where I was born and where my birth mother still lived. Knowing that reunions can have unexpected outcomes, I hoped for the best but expected the worst. Fortunately, my reunion went well, and I felt a bond to my birth parents that I hadn't felt through social networking. I felt that this allowed me to get to know them; I finally heard their voices rather than imagining what they sounded like, and I was able to experience their presence. An internet relationship doesn't allow this, so even though it seems convenient and easy, Facebook can be a damaging "go-to."

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Geneva's Story, continued

Social media, specifically Facebook, seemed to slowly harm this relationship because it allowed for constant communication. My birth parents always expected more. They treated me as their daughter, but felt no closer than distant relatives. They always wanted to know how and what I was doing, as if they were my parents. In their minds, they were my parents; but having grown up with such loving adoptive parents, I couldn't feel the same way.

I needed time to think, but I also needed time to enjoy life. I couldn't be a sixteen-year girl old glued my computer in this constant communication. I had growing up to do. So I told them I needed time; I told them when I was comfortable contacting them, I would. They gave me the space I needed to grow up. Now, having graduated high school and having finished my first semester at college, I am in contact with my birth mother again.

This time, I've made some changes. I'm no longer using Facebook, but rather, a private email. I feel that through this short time emailing, I have built a better and stronger relationship with my birth mother than I ever could through Facebook. There is no pressure to immediately answer each email, rather we send long and meaningful messages. Our relationship means a lot more to me now that I have grown up and come to realize how thankful I truly am for the decision that my birth mother made almost nineteen years ago.

If there is anything that I can recommend to those planning to contact or meet their birth parents, construct boundaries and take your time. There is no reason to force yourself into the situation if you do not feel ready to do so. Do not be afraid to stick to these limits you have set, even if it is not what your birth parents had hoped for. Make sure you are ready to embark on this unknown journey; although no one can plan for the unexpected, you must be emotionally ready for what may or may not happen. In the end, all this will allow you security and comfort in having made the decision to contact or meet your birth parents.

This story was written by Geneva, who is now a college student. Originally published on adoptionswithlove.org.





Social Media Use Among Birth Parents

Adopted children, young adults, and adult adoptees are searching for their birth parents through social media. In turn, their birth family members may also be searching for them. Of those in closed adoption plans, approximately one-third of birth parents have searched for their biological children online.

This is not to say that all of these birth parents have contacted their biological children. Many birth parents note that, once found, they use social media as a way to simply stay up to date on their child's life. To them, the Internet offers this great advantage of being able to see things from afar, without being intrusive, and to gain peace of mind in knowing that their child is doing well. Of course, this also comes with some emotional implications, which we will discuss in detail later on in this guide.

Search and reunion is only one of the many reasons birth parents may use social media. For several birth parents and expectant parents, the Internet can play a larger role in their adoption experience. It is not typically used for search, but rather, to learn more about the adoption process. When considering this positive option for their child, more than half of expectant/birth parents use the Internet to obtain information about making an adoption plan. This type of immediacy was not available to expectant/birth parents years ago. In the past, many women facing unplanned pregnancies were not able to make fully educated choices for their children due to the lack of resources. Today, expectant and birth parents alike can use the Internet to research adoption agencies, to learn about openness and contact in adoption, and to read about the general adoption process.



Birth Parents Using Social

One-third of birth parents use social media to search for their biological child. Many use it to stay in touch with the adoptive family.

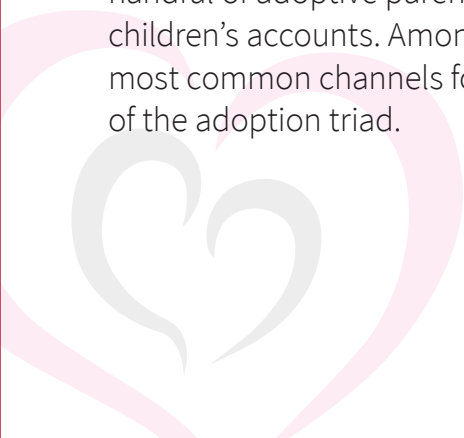


Social Media Use Among Adoptive Families

The phrase “adopt a baby” is searched over 12,000 times per month. It is no wonder why. The majority of prospective adoptive parents today use the Internet to explore and learn about the positive option of adoption as a means to grow their families. Through online searches, they can learn about waiting times, fees, adoption laws, and gather information about openness in adoption. They can also use it to discover reputable, licensed adoption agencies in their area and find the best one to fit their wants and needs.

In the preliminary stages of the adoption process, some searching adoptive families will use the Internet to find children in need of homes, or search for pregnant women looking to place their babies for adoption. However, most waiting families do not use the Internet as a primary resource to match with a child or expectant mother. Instead, most prospective parents will use the Internet in combination with an adoption agency to create Adoptive Family Profiles or share their Dear Birth Parent letters online, accompanying their long-term goals of raising a child.

Not only has the Internet dramatically increased the education and resources available to adoptive parents, it has also made it so adoptive families can more easily connect and maintain contact with their child’s birth parents. According to one study from the Donaldson Adoption Institute, about one in every four adoptive parents have used the Internet to search for and make contact with birth family members through their own website or social media account. A handful of adoptive parents monitored this sort of contact through their children’s accounts. Among adoptive parents, email and social media remain the most common channels for ongoing online communication with other members of the adoption triad.





Social Media & the Adoption Search

Adoption search has always been a process. Yet in the past, it was much more difficult for adoptees to find their birth family members. Before the Internet era, adoptees and adoptive families would need to approach the court to request birth records—their original birth certificates, medical records, family genealogy, and many other puzzle pieces they may have been seeking. Adoptees could also hire detectives or place information in an adoption registry in efforts to find their biological families.

Now, the possibilities for search and connection have grown, for both the good and the bad. To some, the ability to search for family members online is both scary and unsafe. To others, online searching is extremely beneficial in helping families reconnect with one another.

As a licensed adoption agency with over thirty years of professional experience, **Adoptions With Love** has encountered both the good and the bad of searching online. We have seen how social networking sites can help establish and grow long-lasting relationships between adoptive families and birth parents. We have seen how quickly, easily, and efficiently this all can take place.

We have also witnessed the downsides of the Internet adoption search. Because contact between families can take place more quickly online, many adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families do not have the opportunity for self-reflection, conversation, or counseling beforehand. At the beginning, most online searches take place without the support of the adoptive parents or without guidance from adoption professionals.

In nearly all cases of adoption search, the person being sought is not expecting to be found. This can mean that an adopted child – who just turned thirteen and made a Facebook account – could be contacted by his or her birth family without proper preparation. He or she may not be developmentally ready to make this sort of connection. If a child's adoptive parents find out about this contact after the fact, they may be particularly upset. They may even be fearful if their child is connecting with an adult they do not know or have not met.

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Social Media & the Adoption Search, continued

In other cases, it is the birth parents that are being sought after and found online. Because many children, teens, and young adults spend unsupervised time on the Internet and Facebook, their search efforts are often conducted without the consent or knowledge of their adoptive parents. They may do all they can to hide these efforts so that their parents are not offended or confused by this search.

Adoptions With Love recommends that all members of the adoption triad – adoptive parents, birth parents, and adopted children – are all emotionally prepared before the search and reunion process takes place. This means preparing for all potential reactions or outcomes, including rejection or denial. This also means knowing how to set and manage expectations, both yours and those of your child. A trained adoption counselor can help with this. We can also serve as an intermediary, to help you safely navigate the process and gradually make contact with your family members over time.



Searching on Social Media

As tempting as Facebook searching may be, online searches should not take place without parental and professional guidance.



Social Media & Open Adoption

The vast majority of adoptions today are open or semi-open plans. In some adoption plans, the birth mother may have contact with her child's adoptive family, keeping in touch via email or Facebook. In others, the adoptive family may send letters and pictures to the birth mother, while she remains anonymous. In fully open adoption plans, the adoptive family, including the child, may have regular contact with the birth parents.

No matter the extent of openness, social media has increasingly obtained a substantial role in the ongoing communication that takes place amongst the adoption triad. Websites like Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter now offer a means for families to bridge any distances and maintain relationships with convenience and ease.

Today, over 60 percent of adopted persons use the Internet or social media to maintain a connection with their birth family. After choosing to make an adoption plan, nearly half of all birth parents use social media as a way to keep in touch with their child's adoptive family. Similarly, about one-third of adoptive parents use social media for online contact with their child's birth parents.

For those in open adoption plans, the most common use of the Internet and social media is to share pictures and updates with one another. For adoptive parents, this may mean sharing photos of their child or updates on how he or she is growing. For adopted children, this may mean informing birth parents of any special achievements or milestones that have recently taken place.

Contact via social media also serves as a great way for birth parents to answer questions and communicate important information without having to meet in person. This may mean discussing health or medical information, or answering a child's questions about his or her history, such as culture or extended biological family.

Social media is also used to arrange the types of contact that will take place in open adoption plan. For example, the adoptive and birth families may work together to plan in-person visits, video chats, or phone conversations as they come up.





The Ground Rules: Setting Expectations Online



When a birth mother makes an adoption plan at **Adoptions With Love**, she has the option to choose an open, semi-open, or closed adoption plan. This choice is made with both her wishes and the child's best interest in mind. Depending on the type of adoption plan she chooses, certain boundaries and expectations are established. These are outlined in what is called a post-adoption agreement.

The boundaries set in a post-adoption agreement are meant to establish rules around contact and relationships within the adoption triad – rules that should be respected by the birth and adoptive families alike. They are set to protect the privacy, security, and overall well-being of the adopted child, as well as the birth parents and the adoptive family involved.

In a culture driven by social media, however, we are seeing more and more of these boundaries being broken. Through Facebook and internet searches, people are finding each other years after their adoptions have taken place. Many are attempting to connect via social media, disregarding boundaries that were once intentionally set:

Some birth parents wish to remain anonymous, but somehow their biological child finds them on Facebook. Some adoptive parents do not want their child to be in contact with their birth parents, but then their child's birth mother sends a message over Twitter. Some adopted children do not know that they are adopted until a birth relative reaches out. These situations are not uncommon.

Protecting the child is the utmost goal in any adoption, but that can be hard to do when social media is right at the fingertips. If you are in an open or semi-open adoption arrangement, it is important to establish rules for ongoing contact. These will help ensure that any boundaries are maintained, that everyone's wishes are respected, and help to prevent unplanned or unwanted contact. If you are an adoptive family or birth parent looking to begin an online search, it is also important to establish rules, limits, and expectations with your child and spouse in preparation for the process. For the most successful use of social media, contact an adoption professional for guidance.



Navigating Social: Advice for Adoptees

Making connections through social media can expose you to new, unexpected aspects of another person's life. You can learn a lot about an individual – what they like to do, who they have relationships with, what they look like – all from a single social profile. For adoptees, this can be a positive experience; you can get to know, relate to, and connect with your birth family. Sometimes, however, this new information can be overwhelming. Connecting with birth relatives via the Internet can show you things you did not intend to know, or did not want to know, about your biological family.

At **Adoptions With Love**, we would strongly discourage you from contacting birth family members (for the first time) on Facebook alone. In our thirty years of experience, we have found that the most lasting, successful relationships start with premeditated, mediated contact between all parties. As you begin your search, we highly recommend that you contact an adoption professional to help you navigate the process.

If you are hoping to establish contact with your birth family, here are some other considerations to keep in mind:

- **Preparation:** One of the most important considerations is your level of readiness. If you have not made contact with your biological family before, it is crucial that you emotionally prepare for any potential outcomes. While most birth parents are willing to connect, there is always the possibility that they will not agree to further contact with you. This may simply be because they are not ready to connect. Often, these relationships take time.
- **Parental Support:** As you consider searching, it is also important to involve your parents in the process. Your adoptive parents wish the best for you. Above all, they want you to be happy and safe. So as you start to learn more about who you are, they will want to be by your side. While you may think they will take offense to this search, they really can be your biggest and most encouraging support system.



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Navigating Social: Advice for Adoptees, continued

- **Setting Limitations:** Establishing boundaries for communication can help lead to a successful, open relationship with your birth family. If you are eager to begin a relationship with a birth parent or sibling, it is important to still respect their wants and needs. If you are uncomfortable with the amount of contact, it is okay to step back and set your own limits, to prevent you from getting overwhelmed.
- **Pacing Contact:** Time and patience are key to any relationship, and the connection between you and your birth family is no exception. If you have plans to make contact, start at a slow pace. There should be sufficient time between your initial contact with your birth family and the actual meeting, so that you both can get to know one another and get accustomed to the idea. In the meantime, you may choose to keep some contact with each other through letters, text messaging, or phone calls.



Navigating Online Search

Emotional preparation, professional counseling, and setting boundaries are crucial pre-requisites to the Search and Reunion process.



Using Social Media: Tips for Birth Parents



If you placed your child for adoption and are now looking to re-establish contact through social media, there are a number of considerations you should keep in mind, including your comfort level, the adoptive family's comfort level, as well as the privacy and protection of your child.

As a birth parent, you have made incredible, courageous choices for your child. From the beginning, every decision you have made regarding adoption has been in your child's best interest. If you desire to connect with your child or his or her adoptive family over the Internet, you will want to keep your child's wellbeing in mind. You will want to make sure everyone involved is comfortable at every step of the way. You can do so by creating an open plan.

As an open adoption agency, **Adoptions With Love** has helped birth parents nationwide maintain connections with their child and their child's adoptive family. We can also help you to create an open plan. First, we recommend the following tips:

- Before establishing a relationship with your child, discuss with your child's adoptive family the different ways you would like to stay connected. Would you like to receive letter updates, phone calls, emails, or be friends on social media? Create a post-adoption plan that incorporates a specific plan for future communication.
- Together with the adoptive parents, discuss what information can and cannot be shared over social networks. Decide which types of information should be reserved for more private conversations, and which are more fitting for a platform like Facebook.
- Share this post-adoption plan with the birth father, your immediate family, or other friends and family members who may be affected. Ensure that the people you trust are aware of your wishes and privacy within this post-adoption agreement.

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Using Social Media: Tips for Birth Parents, continued

- Consider your current privacy settings and decide if anything will need to change as your child grows older. Is there any personal information you would like to restrict? Any details you are not comfortable sharing? Re-evaluate the impact these will have if disclosed.
- Adoption is an emotional, complicated journey. As a birth parent, you may need to express your feelings of loss or grief with others. We recommend that you consider speaking about these issues with an adoption social worker, trusted friend or family member, or in a birth parent support group. Because everything posted on social media is public, it may not be the best avenue to voice sensitive information.
- If you receive a friend request from your child, contact your adoption counselor immediately. If you desire contact with your child, you will want to first ensure that the adoptive parents are comfortable with this change. An adoption counselor can help you get in touch with your child's adoptive family, as well as help you explore more traditional formats of open communication, such as private letters or emails.



Staying in Touch on Social

As an open adoption agency, Adoptions With Love has helped birth parents nationwide connect with their child's adoptive family online.



Sharing on Social: Information for Adoptive Parents



If you are an adoptive parent, we encourage you to educate yourself and make your child aware of the capabilities of the Internet. Talk to your child about his or her adoption story and be honest in any answers you give. For your child's utmost safety, be sure to set boundaries for social media contact and get involved with any adoption-related search or relationship that takes place online. Be supportive of your son or daughter throughout the process, as they will need you at each step of the way. Most of all, get an adoption professional involved to help ensure that everyone's privacy, safety, and identity is protected throughout the process.

If you are considering friending your child's birth family or hoping to share updates of your child on Facebook, here are some main considerations to keep in mind:

- Remember that any information shared and any communication that takes place on the web is public. Even if you have a private conversation with your child's birth family, or intend to share photos with only a select group of people, others may be able to see it, as well.
- Becoming "friends" with someone on Facebook also opens you up to a whole network of their Facebook friends. If you become friends with your child's birth mother, for example, be aware that you may end up sharing to other biological family members (such as the birth father, birth siblings, even grandparents) as well. Before you hit accept, we recommend that you consider who you want to share (or not share) with and evaluate your privacy settings based on that group.
- Do not post any revealing, pre-placement adoption information, such as ultrasound photos, without consent from the birth parents and until the adoption is finalized.
- Be careful about what you share and how you share it. If you want to share important news regarding your child with his or her birth parents, it may be best to contact them directly through phone, email, or letter, rather than posting it online.

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Sharing on Social: Information for Adoptive Parents, continued

- If you are wary about using social media as a means to communicate, keep in mind that you have more private, secure options. For example, if you need to communicate electronically, you may set up a separate email address or password-protected website to use only for adoption-related conversations.
- Be respectful of the birth parents by thinking about how they will read what you post. If you are frustrated with the lack of sleep you may be experiencing with a newborn, for example, social media is not the place to share it. It may end up being misinterpreted by the birth family.
- As your child grows up and starts to use the Internet or social media, assess his or her privacy settings to ensure that he or she is protected. In addition, be sure to prepare your child for both the pros and cons of developing a relationship with his or her birth family online.
- Recognize that your child may be interested in searching for his or her birth family members, and they too may also be contacted through social networking sites. Discuss all the possibilities ahead of time so that you have a plan if and when they occur.
- Set rules and expectations with the help of an adoption professional. Together, you can map out limits in the post-adoption agreement for communication between you, your child, and the birth family via social media.
- Most of all, remember that this is your child's adoption story. Once it is out on the World Wide Web, it is no longer private or confidential. Once out in the open, it is no longer your child's story to discover, explore, and tell when he or she is ready.



Setting Limits on Social

Set boundaries for social media to ensure everyone's wishes are respected. Get involved with any adoption search your child does online.



The Importance of Professional Guidance

The Internet has undoubtedly transformed the state of adoption today. Search engines such as Google have eased the adoption Search & Reunion process. Social media platforms such as Facebook have revolutionized the way open adoption communication takes place. Birth parents are finding their biological children. Adoptive families are finding birth family members. People are finding people. Adoption triad members are embarking into the exciting and intricate world that is the web. They are becoming interconnected in new, unknown, and often uncharted ways.

Adoption is a complicated, emotional journey that involves many sensitive and private relationships. For this reason, counseling, guidance, and self-reflection are crucial prerequisites to the Search & Reunion process. Unfortunately, these requisites are often lost amidst the excitement and possibility that the Internet now holds. Because contact between families can take place more quickly online, many adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families do not have the opportunity to think or prepare beforehand. Online contact via social media is typically unplanned.

Whether you are an adopted person, birth parent, or adoptive family member, you may have had this idea of online connection (or re-connection) in your head for some time now. You may have tossed around the thought of searching for a birth family member. You may have already found a distant family member and now are considering reaching out. In order to make the most of searching or connecting online, it is vital to seek the direction of an adoption counselor. This is where **Adoptions With Love** can help.

Adoptions With Love's Search and Reunion Committee is here to assist children, families, and birth parents as they seek more information about their adoption stories. To learn about our counseling and search services, please do not hesitate to reach out. You may call us toll-free at **1-800-722-7731** or **text us confidentially at 617-777-0072** to find out how we can help you navigate through this process.

At **Adoptions With Love**, we believe that adoption does not end at the time of placement. Rather, that is exactly where it starts. Adoption is the beginning of a lifelong journey, one that can bring about many beautiful and lasting relationships along the way. It is never too late to connect with your birth or adoptive family.