Untangling the Web: The Internet’s Transformative Impact on Adoption

The Donaldson Adoption Institute
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Council on Contemporary Families
Families as They Really Are: How Digital Technologies are Changing the Way Families Live and Love
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Our Mission

The Donaldson Adoption Institute’s mission is to better the lives of everyone touched by adoption by providing leadership that improves laws, policies and practices through sound research, education and advocacy.
A Sampling of Our Projects, Initiatives

- Untangling the Web I and II: Internet’s Transformative Impact on Adoption
- A Changing World: Shaping Best Practices for Intercountry Adoption
- A Need to Know: Enhancing Mental Health Professionals’ Adoption Competence
- Adoption Openness: From Secrecy & Stigma to Knowledge & Connections
- Never Too Old: Permanency and Connections for Older Youth in Care
- Keeping the Promise I and II: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services
- For the Records I and II: Restoring a Legal Right to Adopted Adults
- Expanding Resources for Children I, II and III: Gay and Lesbian Adoption
- Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Healthy Identity in Adoption
- Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of First/Birth Parents
- Old Lessons for a New World: Adoption’s Lessons for ART
- Adoptive Parent Preparation: Meeting Children’s Mental Health Needs
- Improving Policy and Practice in Transracial Adoptions from Foster Care
- Adoption in the Schools: A Lot to Learn
- Adoption in the News and Entertainment Media
And Working on These New Ones . . .

- The Lynn Franklin Fund will support: Safeguarding Birthparents II (Best Practices in Options Counseling) and more for years to come
- Keeping the Promise II: Two New Studies on Adoption Stability (from Foster Care) and State-Based Post-Adoption Services
- Compendium on Innovative and Effective Practices: Learning from Three Nations’ Experiences on Placing Children from Foster Care
- Adoption Clubhouse: Curriculum and Training Guide to Promote Positive Identity Development for Transracially Adopted Children
- Navigating the Web: A User’s Guide for Professionals, Individuals and Families on Using the Internet for Adoption-Related Activities
- Curriculum on Open Adoption for Parents and Professionals
- TRANSform: A Multi-Year Project Designed to Improve State Mental-Health Services So They Integrate Understanding and Treatment of Trauma
- Media Matters: Impact of Journalists, Entertainment Industry
- Conferences, Legislation, Advocacy, Trainings ... and More
A Few Books by Our Authors

Adoption Nation
By Adam Pertman

Adoption by Lesbians and Gay Men
By Adam Pertman

Siblings in Adoption and Foster Care
Edited by Deborah N. Silverstein and Susan Livingston Smith
“In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning; no matter what our attainments in life, there is the most disquieting loneliness.”

— Alex Haley in *Roots*
What We Know . . . About Adoption

- How many children are adopted in or into the United States each year?
  a). 85,000  b). 125,000  c). 175,000

- Of the three “categories” of adoption in the U.S., which one occurs most?
  a). International  b) Foster care  c). Domestic infants

- How many people in the United States have adoption in their immediate families?
  a). 45 million  b). 85 million  c). 100 million
Non-Stepparent U.S. Adoptions by Type

- Child welfare: 68%
- Infants < 6 mo.: 17%
- Intercountry: 15%
So . . . What Has Changed?
Where We Are Today

- Fewer than 1% of single women voluntarily place their children for adoption, and most become their parents.
- Stigma, secrets, embarrassment and shame are lifting; we’re not there yet, but move is to greater openness and honesty.
- Adoption still commonly understood as child placement – so most people still don’t know much about the people involved (especially first/birth mothers and fathers), their needs, etc.
- The adults adopting today are straight and gay, come in all colors, are married and cohabitating and single, young and old – and most children being adopted are not white infants; they also are straight and gay, come in all colors, usually are older and have special needs, and often face issues relating to racial/cultural and adoptive identity, stigma and discrimination.
Some Bottom Lines

- All types of adoption are changing, including with greater/growing openness and honesty.
- Adoption has contributed to historic changes in perceptions/understandings of what families are, how they are formed, what they look like, etc.
- The vast majority of adoptions are now of children who were abused, neglected or institutionalized before adoption (see the pie chart).
- Most laws, policies and practices still in place today were created for a world that no longer exists.
- The Internet is changing everything.
Caveats and Context

- The internet’s greatest impact to date is on infant adoption, where the most money is at stake.
- A lot of good, thoughtful, ethical practice occurring.
- Dubious/unethical/illegal activities have always gone on, but now the opportunities are far greater.
- Our goals: generate a national discussion on impact, regulation and protections – and instigate change.
Considerations to Shape Best Practice

- **The Process:** What’s the impact on ethical professionals when internet providers promise babies quickly and incentives to pregnant women?
- **Search and Reunion:** What should professionals tell clients? What should parents tell their kids? What guidance, support, resources does everyone need?
- **Law and Policy:** How do we address possibly unsafe or traumatizing contacts for children? Do legal obstacles to acquiring information make sense?
- **More and More:** How do we best utilize all the new opportunities, resources, research and supports?
So . . . How Profound Is the Internet’s Impact?

“This is a secret family recipe. Speaking of family secrets, you were adopted.”
Principal Findings over Two Years

- A growing “commodification,” especially in infant adoption
- Finding birth relatives becoming easier and more frequent, with significant institutional and personal implications
  - Likely end of the era of “closed” adoption
  - Growth in relationships between families
- Professionals get little or no training on Internet/social media
- Valuable resource for first parents (and others) to express feelings, receive support and lessen isolation
- Growing number of minors have contact/relationships with birth relatives, often without guidance or parents’ knowledge
- More sites that improve prospects of “waiting” children.
- More information, education, networking, services, resources.
- More affiliation, support, information-sharing, other benefits.
What is Happening with Infant Adoption on the Internet?

“What is Happening with Infant Adoption on the Internet?”

“Complete your domestic adoption, on average, within 3-12 months.”
“We connect with states where birth parents cannot revoke consent.”

* Learn more about the safe alternative to abortion... adoption.
* Financial assistance is available. * FREE housing is available.
Advertising and Recruitment

Agency A: “Most couples were selected in less than FOUR months [as a result of] marketing & extensive Nationwide Internet advertising specifically targeting suitable Birthparents knowing the Internet is the most widely used medium of this demographic. ... We spend millions yearly advertising to pregnant women using aggressive grassroots marketing and outreach programs.”

Agency B “aggressively reaches out to more Birthmothers. Unlike many state-regulated agencies B is not confined by state-mandated budget restrictions. B spends over $1m 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 B each year to realize their dreams.”
Nondirective Options?

Site X offers help to pregnant women in crisis, explaining that they have a range of options, then (accompanying photos of affluent, happy couples in their lovely homes) asks questions including:

* Can I provide financially for my child?
* Will my child have a father figure in his life?
* Will I have time to properly care for a child?

Another section of the site offers “Facts and Myths” about abortion, adoption and parenting.

* Fact on abortion: “Over 70% of women have negative feelings.”
* Fact on parenting: “You cannot rely on family members to help.”
Search and Reunion: How Hard is it To Find Someone?

Find Your Birth Family
Find Your Birth Parents or Adopted Child Today!

OmniTrace
The People Search Experts

Free Quote
by top search professionals

Search

-Search Type-

Find My Family
Reuniting Adoptees With Birth Family Members

www.FindMyFamily.org

Kinsolving Investigations
Specializing in Adoption Searches
Kinsolving Investigations is a “No Find-No Fee Agency” owned and operated by a reunited Birthmother and Private Investigator. We will provide you with the current name and address of the person you are seeking. All of our searches are guaranteed. Licensed-bonded-insured private investigators and member of the Better Business Bureau. Kinsolving continues to be the PREMIER search company. Please visit our website today at www.kinsolving.com to obtain a free quote.

Testimonial
I'm so glad for having made the contact. I think this will be one of the most amazing experiences of my life - and hers, too. Even though sometimes it has been painful to relive the past, it has also been very healing for her ... and that has been the ultimate reward!

Many, many thanks. MB/ MN
Story after Story Like These

“I read a story in Time in which Mr. Pertman talked about the phenomenon of [search] through social media. Last night, my 12-year-old daughter’s birth family contacted her through Facebook. We are devastated. She wants very much to meet them. ... What advice and literature can you provide us to deal with this? It is living hell.”

“I had been looking for my mother and siblings, if I had them, for years ... Finally, with Facebook, I found them and they have added immeasurable joy to my life. My adoptive family is still my `real’ family but now I have more.”
A Tiny Glimpse at the New World

I am looking for my birth parents, I was born in Akron Ohio on or around 4-14-1965 and adopted by two loving parents in Toledo Ohio. .... *I am searching for my niece and nephew. My nephew was born May 4, 1993 and my niece was born June 21, 1994. Their names were …* I am searching for my adopted brother, born 1/11/1960 at the Florence Crittenton home in Sioux city Iowa [and] adopted out at birth in Woodbury County/Sioux City Iowa … *I'm looking for my biological grandparents. My Mother, Angela was born December 30 1969. She says she was told she was adopted from Warren County N.C. She says she thinks her first name was "Gwendolyn" …*
I AM LOOKING FOR
MY DAUGHTER

Born Shirleen Ann

March 30, 1966

St. Mary's Hospital
Syracuse, NY
my name is latoya i was placed in foster care in missouri birth place is greene county i think springfield i have a brother named joe and james and cecil we were all placed in foster care and adopted i dont know my mother or fathers names but heard that i have a sister named tamika I was born jan 11th 1984
In a Nutshell, What’s Happening Out There . . .

- There are more reunions and more relationships, giving people what they’ve wanted and needed for too long. But some searchers are children without counseling, supervision or, sometimes, even parental knowledge.

- There are more resources, more opportunities for permanency for children with special needs and older youth. But there also are practices that are dubious at best, untrained practitioners, antiquated laws, etc.

- Some children’s safety – emotional, psychological and perhaps physical – may be put at risk.

- What else have you seen? What’s it mean for best practice?
How Big a Deal is Internet’s Impact?

- Traditional adoption practice is probably at risk.
- Era of secrecy/closure is probably near its end.
- Extended Family of Adoption is coming fast.

What Do We Need?

- Research for knowledge, tools, best practices.
- Info and training for professionals and parents.
- Updated laws, policies and practices.
Recommendations

- Policymakers, law-enforcement, Internet companies and adoption groups should collaborate to establish best practices, laws and regulations to protect and serve all parties to adoption.

- Education and training programs for and by professionals should be developed, then provided to all of their clients, both on use of Internet/social media and on openness in adoption.

- Laws that impede or prevent parties to adoption from gaining important information (such as OBC’s) should be repealed.

- An awareness campaign on the impact of the Internet/social media should be launched, including with:
  - training and educational materials
  - resources to help consumers understand differences among various types of web-based adoption providers.
Final Thoughts

- To truly “normalize,” need to understand adoption mainly as a way of forming a family, not a means of solving a problem.
- Best practices should entail not only forming families, but also helping them succeed.
- Professionals/policymakers need to re-conceptualize goals to include a continuum of education, services and supports.
- Education/ training must incorporate realities of internet.
- Everyone’s rights, needs must be respected and included.
- Parents should educated to understand that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.
- Policy-makers, media, public must be educated on today’s realities to facilitate ethical best practices, laws and policies.
Final Thoughts (Cont.)

- Words matter, so how about if we introduce “successful” into our descriptions?
- Mental-health professionals, teachers and others who deal with adoption’s participants need education and training.
- Further research needs to be conducted into meeting needs, what works and what doesn’t, etc.
- Pre- and post-adoption services should be developed and provided for all parents and families.
- A continuum of education, supports, services should be part of the adoption process from the start . . . because it’s not just about forming families.
- We can do this.