



BUBBLE WRAPPED CHILDREN

How social networking is transforming the face of 21st century adoption

HELEN OAKWATER

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CHAPTER ZERO

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.

Facebook allows you to search for anyone and email anyone. Anyone you know, anyone you want to know, anyone you once knew or complete strangers. Present, past and future connections can be made via the web. Relationships can be formed or rekindled. Identities can be faked, lies told, history rewritten.

Adopted children are being connected to their birth families via Facebook. Some children have actively searched for birth family members; others simply received an email in their Facebook inbox which explodes in their face.

Hello, I am your father. I have been searching for you ever since you were stolen by social services. You look beautiful. I love you so much.

darlin son i am so hapy coz iv found u ere I bin lokin for ages plse rit bak coz uv bin told lies bout me i always luvd u n nevr stopd thinkin bout u b gr8 2 c u.

Messages like these, some in normal English, some in 'text speak,' are retraumatising adopted children. Adoptive families are being blown apart. Several adopted children have left their adoptive parents and moved back in with their birth parents, sometimes within days of reconnecting. Other teenage adoptees have been completely thrown by the unwanted contact: their schooling, relationships and mental health have suffered. Some did not sit exams, others dropped out of college or university because they were so destabilised.

The two emails above might look innocuous. However the birth father in the first is a known paedophile. The second is a mother who had 6 children removed by social services due to her alcohol abuse, chaotic lifestyle and her lack of empathy. She simply could not see the pain she inflicted on a succession of children and the damage done to them. Her circumstances and attitude have hardly changed since the children were removed yet she still grieves for them. The Chapter "Still Screaming" considers the birth parent perspective in depth.



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In one case the birth parent reconnected easily because the child was a "Facebook friend" to a member of an old foster family. In the other example the birth parent simply typed in the child's first names and their date of birth then trawled through the photographs displayed on Facebook.

Children can legally register on Facebook at 13. Teenagers now access the internet via their mobile phones not just computers, so it is impossible for parents to monitor or control. You can have several Facebook accounts. Curiosity will motivate searching. It always has and always will.

So far many of the reconnections via Facebook have caused much confusion, pain and sorrow, because they have been built on lies, delusions and false hope. The participants, whether willing or shocked, have been unprepared and unsupported. Preparation and support are the keys to successful post adoption contact, whatever form it takes.

Instant connection

Until a few years ago post adoption reunions were initiated by an adult, sometimes using an intermediary service which offered counselling and approached all involved with sensitivity and respect. Now technology allows reconnection within hours of searching. There is no time to reflect, no mediation, no safeguards or supervision. Whoever makes the first move, the other person's circumstances and situation are completely unknown. Is this a good time? Do they have mental health issues, exams, drug problems? Have they just split from a long relationship? What support do they have? How will those around them feel about this contact? How fragile and vulnerable are each of the parties involved? How will the adoptive parents feel and react? Will they even know? What will happen afterwards?

Reasons for adoption: now and then

Celebrity adoptees share joyful reunion stories and promote adoption. Recently there has been a spate of TV programmes and articles where adult adoptees in their 40's, 50's and 60's have been reunited with their birth mothers, fathers or siblings. There is a public and media appetite for these 'feel good' adoption stories, where often an underlying message is that blood is thicker than water. The honeymoon period is public, but the long term outcomes undisclosed. This reinforces the public notion that adoption equals relinquished babies, whereas for the last few decades the adoption process has occurred because the state intervened and removed a maltreated child from his toxic parents. Subsequently a Judge, after examining copious evidence agrees with the Social Service's recommendation that the birth parents do not have the capability, or the future capacity to learn how to parent this child adequately. These parents did not "give up" their child, he was forcibly removed

because their parenting style was abusive, neglectful or deeply inadequate. Chapter Four details some measurable skills, characteristics and traits including empathy, emotional intelligence and executive functioning thinking skills whose absences inhibit their parenting capacity. These models also serve as useful analytical tools for professionals.

Maltreatment, wiring, trauma and bubble wrap

What is the consequence of infant maltreatment? What imprints do abuse, neglect and chaos leave on a child? Great technological leaps this century offer evidence which support older anecdotal findings.

Thanks to the advent of brain imaging, we know that neurons which fire together wire together. So a child raised in a calm, secure yet stimulating setting will have a brain wired differently to that of a child deprived of maternal care living in a chaotic, scary environment. An infant's brain forms thousands of new neural connections every second. More are formed in the first year of life than at any subsequent time. We also know the brain is 'plastic' and in the right circumstances parts can be 'rewired.'

Another scientific and technological leap within this century, is our knowledge of brain functioning which offers hope for healing trauma. Awareness of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder has grown, mainly due to affected soldiers returning from war zones receiving sympathetic media and movie coverage. The symptoms listed include flashbacks, sleep difficulties, anger outbursts and a general 'dysfunctionality'. The impact of trauma on the adult brain is recognised, however the impact of trauma on child's developing brain is not widely acknowledged, tricky to classify yet profound. The superb research, including brain scanning, undertaken by Dr Bruce Perry at the Child Trauma Academy unarguably proves that maltreatment inhibits normal infant brain development. In Chapter Eight the proposed DSM classification of Developmental Trauma Disorder is explained and by integrating this with Chapter Two, how children's needs change with time, readers can get a deeper understanding of the impact of early trauma on children and its disturbing legacy.

Many adopted children suffered terribly before placement. Their world was terrifying, chaotic, unpredictable; an unsafe place where adults could not be trusted or failed to shield you from harm. These children protected themselves by hiding their true feelings, shutting down emotionally, being compliant or aggressive or both. Their observable behaviour often seems to make no sense. Metaphorically they wrapped themselves in bubble wrap for safety, a fantastic protection strategy; but it warps their view of the world and it distorts our view of them. Gently removing the bubble wrap, layer by layer, is the complex task adoptive parent's face for many years, including during adolescence.



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Adolescence

Teenagers rebel; it's part of their job description. They experiment with their identity, habits, clothing and relationships. Secrecy is normal. They often reject many of their parent's values creating conflict and confrontation. Some behaviour is due to the changing brain chemistry and hormone fluctuations; adolescence is both a physical and psychological passage.

During adolescence the brain has a burst of activity and fresh growth, so the potential to rewire and prune existing circuits is huge. It is a fantastic healing opportunity for adopted children, particularly those who received appropriate therapy and support in middle childhood. Unexpected contact via Facebook can, and does, severely sabotage this healing opportunity, because the child becomes retraumatized.

All the family r lookin forward to seeing u at cousin veronicas wedding next week. We will meet you off the train and have a great party.

That message was posted publicly on the Facebook page of Ann an adopted teenager. All her virtual and real 'friends' read the comment, leading to difficult questions at school, forcing the disclosure that she had 'another family' and her squirming at the insensitive, yet common, question, 'why did they give you up?' Fortunately, she tearfully confessed to her adoptive parents about the wedding reunion plan, which involved a 250 mile train journey for a party with the entire birth family including those who had abused her. Her adoptive parents are picking up the pieces from that incident and now understand that the regular interactions with her birth parents and siblings caused Ann to be particularly uptight and aggressive. For several months Ann's healing was suspended because her birth family were 'in her face' and retraumatizing her.

Birth families offer an escape route for a vulnerable rebellious teenage adoptee who is frequently in conflict with his boundary holding adoptive parents. They encourage cooperative, considerate behaviour, schooling and responsible living. Birth families offer something different, which is far more alluring and also feel strangely familiar.

Processing the past: the body keeps score

Trauma is stored within the body; sensory memories are held at a cellular level. As trauma expert Bessel Van Der Kolk MD, Director of the Trauma Center in Boston nutshells "the body keeps score". Maltreated children have sensory triggers that reconnect them to unconscious memories from their brutal past. That's why for



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many adopted children linking to their birth family stirs up old, oddly recognizable, sensations plus a high voltage cocktail of positive and negative emotions.

By learning what happened to them in their early life, children can begin making sense of their inner world. Robust life story work which deals with the gruesome facts, not just the nice stuff is crucial and will protect them during adolescence and in later life. Appropriate therapy to process the trauma associated with maltreatment is essential. Ongoing, facilitated, direct contact may be the vaccine which protects them from future contamination via social networking.

Looking beyond now and towards the 2020s, we know adopted children will be able to reconnect to their birth family well before adulthood. These children will benefit hugely if they are more resilient, and knowledgeable about themselves. The adoption world must change some existing practices and introduces therapeutic work in mid childhood or earlier. Waiting until inevitable problems explode in adolescence is daft and not cost effective. Brain plasticity makes early intervention strategies a no brainer for both child protection and therapeutic interventions.

Contact

Contact in adoption has always been a complex issue. The reasons underlying searching and reconnection need addressing. Facebook is just the search engine, the root causes include grief, loss, identity issues, teenage rebellion, curiosity and to make sense of ourselves. Big, emotionally charged stuff. When is contact good? What circumstances make it 'bad'? How can it be most effective? Should it be face to face or via a third party letterbox? Should it change with time? One of the biggest and most difficult questions, "What does contact do?" has numerous answers, varied opinions and conflicting research. That question pervades the book with a dedicated chapter focusing on the purpose, structure and outcomes of high quality contact.

Even though direct face to face contact between a child and the birth parents is currently unusual; ongoing, indirect 'letterbox contact' via a third party is often set up. This may be an exchange of letters and photos once or twice a year. Sometimes it is just one way, the adoptive family share information and photos about the child with specified members of the birth family. It is monitored and safe. However some birth parents have scanned pictures and placed them on their Facebook pages; occasionally with a request to "help me find my little princess."

One feature worth noting is the viral nature of many of these reconnections. Within days of the first message, text or call, adopted children are linked to siblings, aunts, grandparents, uncles and birth parents and their new

partners, often inundated with messages, requests and guilt laden emotional outpourings. Anecdotal evidence is that teenagers tell their adoptive parents months after the metaphorical horse has bolted when the stable door is swinging sadly. However, by then, there's lots of manure around.

Things will never be the same again

Social networking and technological advances will fundamentally change the shape of adoption and particularly contact. Because the issues raised are unique to this decade and only surfaced in 2009, radical rethinking is required. Knowing that with just one click, unsupervised direct contact between adopted teenagers and their birth family could happen via Facebook, the adoption world must review its current and future practices to pre-empt the issue and implement damage limitation strategies.

Technology is galloping ahead; imagine combining face recognition software with a programme that predicts how a toddler will look at 17, throw in geographic location data and after a few hours on the web an individual is 'found'. The choice then is whether to connect honestly, stalk, monitor, ignore or link using an alias.

Facebook was only launched in 2004, yet now has a membership equivalent to the fourth largest country in the world. Most people, especially teenagers and young people, obtain their information via the internet. . The world has shrunk; hyperlinks, clever algorithms, instant connections and digital technology transform our behaviour. Adoption practices must adapt to accommodate the constant technological advances and the changing needs of adoptive families by tackling root causes not symptoms.

Adoption is being transformed by social networking and it's unstoppable. The new Timeline functionality on Facebook raised fresh issues, challenges and opportunities for adoption and fostering. Will the changes be healthy and positive or hurtful and destructive for those affected? This book seeks to address that dilemma and answer the 'why', 'what' 'how' and 'what if' questions. There are useful theoretical models offering new perspectives, plus fresh insights, solutions and practical ideas for parents and professionals.

Threat or opportunity?

If all those involved in adoption face up to the reality and ramifications of contact via social networking we can harness the learnings and transform the impact of Facebook on adoption from a threat to an opportunity. However without radical changes in adoption support and a massive increase in the availability of decent therapeutic interventions, social networking could destroy thousands of existing adoptive placements while current and future prospective adopters are being set up to fail.



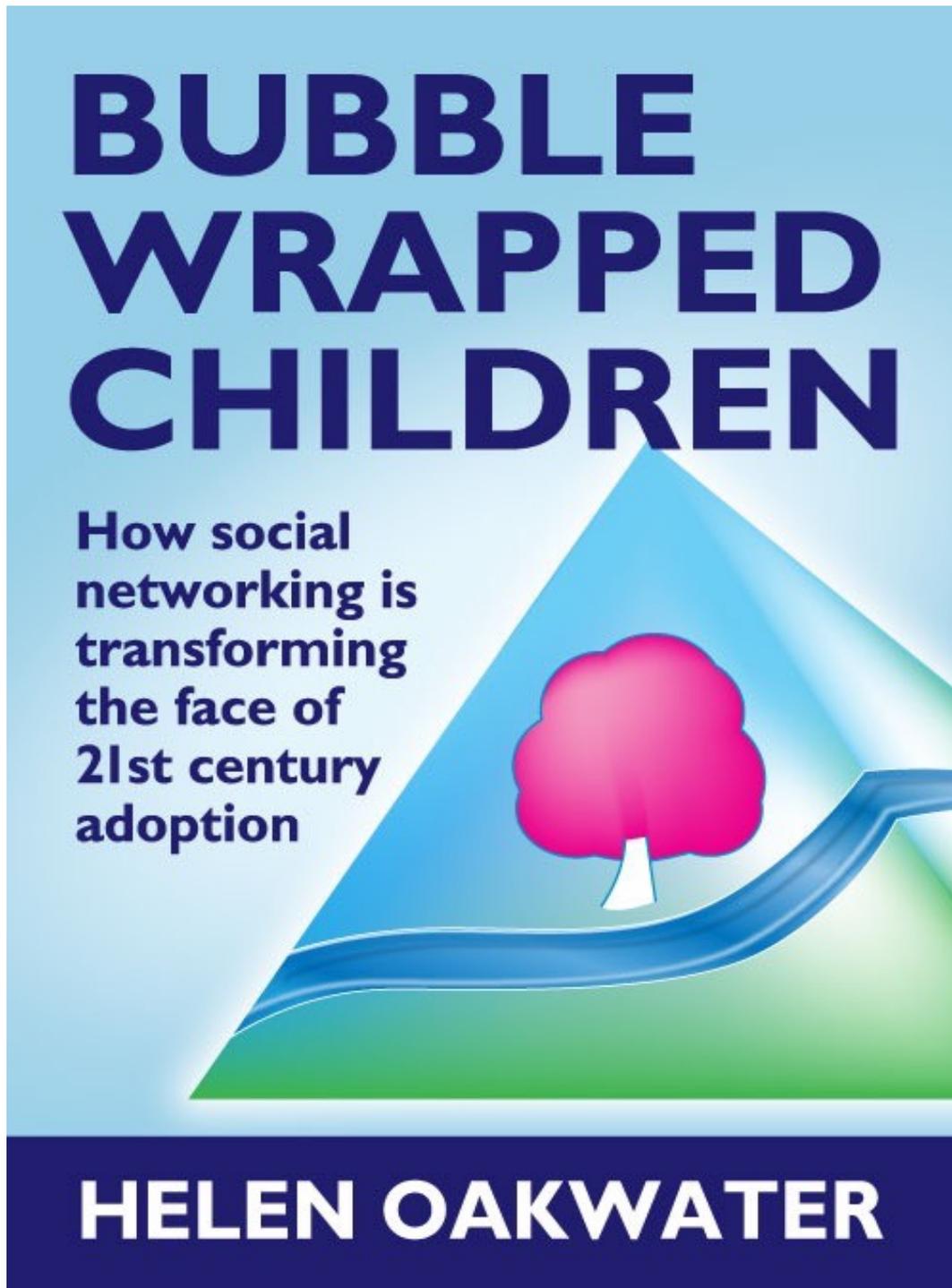
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Yes, it really is that dramatic. Yes, it really is a crisis. And, yes, in conjunction with other proposed changes in the adoption world it is a fantastic opportunity to transform adoption and heal maltreated children. But, only if we all have the courage to face up to what is beneath the bubble wrap.





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