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ADVOCATE

The Role of Social Media in Adoption

BY TORY DORFMAN

Smartphones and social media are revolutionizing the ways in which social workers, clients, and prospective parents connect and communicate with one another. Texting, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and YouTube are just some of the outlets changing how expectant parents learn about the option of adoption and seek support. Adoption professionals, too, are striving to find ways to accommodate changes in technology, information exchange, and communication while maintaining high professional and ethical standards.

Constant communication and the rise of social media have many implications for those seeking information about adoption. Finding the right balance between online or phone contact and traditional face-to-face interactions is important for social workers and adoption service providers, who must maintain client confidentiality, ensure a professional relationship at all times, and utilize the new resources available in order to reach out to, educate, and support clients.

Media Outlets Used by Expectant Parents and Prospective Adoptive Families

Dr. Laura Daughtery, Associate Professor of Social Work at The Catholic University of America, notes: “Even if social workers are not thinking about the Internet, our clients are, because that’s the world in which they live. We have to be aware of that.”¹

¹ Interview with Dr. Laura Daughtery, Associate Professor of Social Work, The Catholic University of America. 17 April 2013. Note: All quotes from Dr. Daughtery in this article are from the same interview.



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A recent study found that 75% of teenagers and 93% of young adults (aged 18-29) now have a cell phone. Thirty-one percent of teens have looked online for health-related information about issues directly affecting them, and 17% report that they use the Internet to “gather information about health topics that are hard to discuss with others[,] such as drug use and sexual health topics.”²

Technology presents many options for those learning about adoption. If a pregnant woman wants to find more information about adoption, she can search online for adoption blogs and websites or for organizations or individuals that might be able to help. A simple Facebook search for “adoption counselor” yields results for a variety of services, organizations, and social workers that anyone can directly message from their phones or computers. Email, messaging, and texting have become the norm for contact.

The huge volume of information online allows expectant parents considering adoption and prospective adoptive families to search for answers to their questions about adoption and research potential agencies, counselors, or adoption attorneys in relative privacy, from their own homes or workplaces. Having the option to contact professionals online allows people to get the information they need without face-to-face contact.

There is, as yet, no clear and universally defined etiquette for contacting counselors and adoption professionals online. Whereas contact between clients and adoption service providers used to begin with a Yellow Pages search, a phone call, or a walk-in during business hours, these are no longer the norm.

Expectations of availability have increased. Clients have 24-hour access to information online, and can email or text at any hour. According to Daughtery: “People expect their emails to be answered in the same day or the following day. The younger generation assumes that if you have email, then you watch it like a hawk.”

In addition to other online resources, video chatting services such as Skype, Google Chat, and FaceTime allow people to get in contact with social workers anywhere in the world. Some people find the lack of in-person contact both more convenient and less intimidating, and it can be especially helpful for those who have physical disabilities or live in isolated areas. However, there are ethical risks for people using technology to gain education and seek counseling. Online resources can be inaccurate, and non-credible sources can mislead those seeking information. In addition, Skype and email make it impossible for social workers to absolutely guarantee confidentiality.

² Lenhart, A., Purcell, K., Smith, A., & Zickuhr, K. (February 2010). *Social Media & Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: http://web.pewinternet.org/-/media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Social_Media_and_Young_Adults_Report_Final_with_toplevels.pdf

Prospective adoptive parents have greater access to helpful resources than ever before. They can explore the process of domestic, intercountry, and foster care adoption privately, and can even view photos of children available for adoption.³ Prospective adoptive parents often create online profiles on Facebook, a personal blog, or their adoption agency's website. There are now online agencies that can match birthparents with adoptive parents privately.

Expectant parents considering adoption as well as prospective adoptive parents must recognize that online interactions also carry a degree of risk.⁴ Fraud, coercion, and the invasion of privacy are all potential risks of online contact in the adoption process.

How Adoption Professionals are Adapting

Social media can help social workers promote their services and make themselves accessible to clients all over the country. Many social workers, counselors, and adoption service providers are adjusting to new technology and the role of social media by establishing their own social media presence, creating blogs, and providing resources and information via numerous online outlets.

Adoption professionals should be aware that potential clients can also research their organizations online; *Social Work Today* noted that, today, "it goes with the territory."⁵ Consumer review sites now make it possible for clients to find an adoption professional online and see how past clients rated their services. Adoption professionals can advertise on their own personal websites and social media pages, and make themselves more accessible through email, messaging, and texting. Yet however convenient it might be, social workers need to realize that online interaction can never be a genuine substitute for in-person counseling. Facebook and blogs are only so private, and discussing clients online is a breach of confidentiality. Social workers and counselors must also learn how to warn and protect both their clients and themselves from scams and potential ethical conflicts.

Texting and emailing both have an effect on the boundaries between clients and social workers, blurring the lines and sometimes giving clients the impression that they can contact social workers any time they wish. Social workers need to inform clients that contact via social media is not 100% secure, and electronic messages can easily be found.

Fraud, coercion, and the invasion of privacy are all potential risks of online contact in the adoption process.

³ Howard, J. A. (December 2012). *Untangling the Web*. Evan B. Donaldson Institute. Retrieved from: www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/2012_12_UntanglingtheWeb.pdf

⁴ National Public Radio (December 19, 2012). *How The Internet Is Revolutionizing The Adoption Process*. Talk of the Nation. Retrieved from: www.npr.org/2012/12/19/167627011/-how-the-internet-is-revolutionizing-the-adoption-process

⁵ Robb, M. (January 2011). *Pause Before Posting – Using Social Media Responsibly*. Retrieved from: www.socialworktoday.com/archive/020911p8.shtml

There are many potential benefits for those utilizing social media and other technology in the field of adoption and foster care. For example, social workers can look up different geographic areas before making a new placement for a child in foster care, to ensure that the school system and community is conducive to the individual child's needs and wellbeing. Social media can also help social workers get in contact with people more easily than ever before, providing greater support for those experiencing emergencies or those in need of guidance to meet special needs.

Effects on Birthparents and Adoptive Parents

In light of new technology, maintaining a confidential adoption – for those who might wish for one – is increasingly difficult. Adopted individuals can Google or search on social media sites to find their birthparents, or vice-versa. Adoption professionals must prepare all of their clients for the possibility of contact on social media. *Social Work Today* suggests that the key element in helping adoptive parents anticipate online contact is through pre- and post-adoption support that educates them on managing their feelings and creating open communication throughout their family about their adoption. There is also a need for better guidelines to allow social workers to help and support those experiencing problems with online contact.⁶

The goal for social workers is to seek and find a balance between using new technology to reach and help clients while maintaining a supportive face-to-face relationship. Daughtery explains that social workers cannot sufficiently help a client through the Internet, texting, or email: “The way to get something done is through the relationship; the best way to establish and maintain a relationship is through ongoing face-to-face, in-person contact. There is something lost there when the relationship is online.”

Social media, emailing, and texting can be very impersonal, and body language cues do not translate through digital media. As Daughtery also notes, a social worker can miss certain signals or emotions that would have been clear in person, like tears or telling movements.

In addition, not everyone has the same access to the Internet or smartphones to contact social workers. Daughtery asserts that some clients can be slighted with the emphasis on online contact. Maintaining the ability to reach clients both digitally and face-to-face is important for social workers in order to ensure that all clients have equal and necessary access to services.

⁶ Siegel, D.H. (October 2012). Social Media and the Post-Adoption Experience. Retrieved from: www.socialworktoday.com/archive/091712p22.shtml

Observations about Social Media and Adoption Practices

“Through its own educational efforts, National Council For Adoption has recognized the importance of social media and online communication in conveying information to people about adoption,” says Chuck Johnson, president and CEO of NCFCA. “Birthparents, adoptive families, and those considering adoption have asked that information be made available on our website and social media sites, and our organization has tried to accommodate those requests.”

Online resources allow individuals and organizations to reach out in many different ways, as NCFCA does through its recently relaunched *iChooseAdoption* campaign. *iChooseAdoption* provides basic information to women beginning to research adoption through a website, PSA campaign, and multiple social media platforms. From there, expectant parents can seek out in-person counseling and support. As Lauren Koch, NCFCA’s Vice President for Communications and Development, explains: “The *iChooseAdoption* campaign reaches young women where they are today – on their smartphones, tablets, and computers – through social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest, making it easy for them to access accurate information about adoption and search for local resources.”

The Internet makes online training and outreach programs easy to deliver and access. New resources can empower expectant parents and birthparents, allowing them to more easily research and choose adoptive families and determine how open the adoption and ongoing contact will be. Expectant fathers are also getting more involved and having a greater say in this process.

Yet while social media and online contact plays an important, sometimes beneficial role, it cannot replace face-to-face contact and support. Websites and social media outlets aimed at parents considering adoption are highly subjective and often do not recognize the individualized nature of adoption, and therefore cannot possibly offer specific guidance and resources appropriate for each woman’s circumstances. Organizations and social workers cannot impart certain information online or via email.

In-person contact is still valuable and necessary to ensure that clients receive the information specific to them and that all their needs are met.

Recommendations for Adoption Professionals

- 1. Go where the client is.** It is important to respect and empower clients and meet them on their terms. However, establishing more personal contact and a future relationship based on trust and open communication is imperative to protect both clients and adoption professionals and serve the clients’ best interests.

Organizations and social workers cannot impart certain information online or via email. In-person contact is still valuable and necessary to ensure that clients receive the information specific to them and that all their needs are met.

2. **Create clear, ethical guidelines regarding when and how different technologies can be used, and be aware of their limitations.** Make sure clients understand that total confidentiality is not possible online. Keep all electronic messages stored: record keeping can help social workers maintain whatever confidentiality is possible online and retain important client information.
3. **Educate expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents about online information and communication.** Offer clear instructions on how and when to contact professionals, and what type of information is credible. Keeping clients informed about how to find correct and helpful resources about adoption can help prevent scams and promote safe contact online.
4. **Train social workers and professional staff on how to interact with clients online.** Training sessions on contact etiquette and ethical guidelines are helpful. Having set rules and regulations by which social workers and professionals must abide will make their communication with clients clearer and more concise.
5. **Know and influence laws and policies.** Although it is important to be as accessible as possible to clients and technology is a great resource for accomplishing this, it is essential to understand the state laws, professional codes of ethics, and other relevant governances that impact communications in the context of your services. If laws and policies are either unclear or have lagged behind technological advances, use your voice to advocate for the necessary clarity to serve your clients safely and well.

Conclusion

The influx of new technology has given rise to an increased demand for online resources and instant information. In order to be accessible to expectant parents and families considering adoption, it is imperative that social workers and adoption organizations create a presence online and offer options for digital contact. The challenges of finding a balance between online and in-person interaction can be addressed by the creation of personal and ethical guidelines for online contact and behavior, while maintaining and prioritizing traditional face-to-face contact. Keeping expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents informed and educated about the benefits and risks of utilizing online media and resources will help them gain the information they need and make the best possible decisions as they form their own plans.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tory Dorfman is a senior at the University of Maryland, where she is studying communication and leadership skills. Following her graduation in December 2013, she plans to pursue a Master's Degree in Social Work with a focus on mental health services. Her experience as an intern for NCFA has broadened her knowledge on current and past adoption policies and fueled her interest in social work.



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