



## Dear Ellen: Navigating Teens' Online Search and Reunion Process

*I am worried about my 16 year old son's activity on social media. I feel uninformed about what he is doing, and worry about his safety. I can't help but wonder if he is communicating with members of his birth family, and if so, what is he learning from them? I don't know what to do.*

The need to find answers to questions like “Where did I come from?” and “Who am I connected to beyond my adoptive family?” is drawing increasing numbers of preteens and teenagers to utilize the internet as their virtual search engine. They are creating accounts on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for the purpose of connecting with birth families and/or adoptee networks.

In our experience, the use of social media for this purpose is even greater for those teens whose parents avoid the mounting questions teenagers have as to their origins and reasons surrounding their adoption. “There were so many opportunities for my parents to help me sift through my questions,” said Terrie now 19. “Each time I would bring up wanting to know more, my parents would deflect the conversation. I just eventually gave up and went online to gather information.

When it comes to technology and social media, as a parent, your teen may likely have more savvy online skills than you do, potentially putting you at a disadvantage. Parents often report feeling a great deal of anxiety around what their kids are “doing online.” They hear stories about sexual predators and cyber bullying, and hope that their children are not engaged in activities that threaten their safety – emotional or physical. They certainly do not want their children to either be revealing personal identifying information to strangers, or engaging in inappropriate conversations, even anonymously.

Of particular concern to adoptive parents is the fact that unbeknownst to them, their teens may be connecting with birth family members via social media. Parents often feel blindsided to know that their teen has used what little information they have or the acquisition of hidden adoption papers with identifying information, and used social media to find and communicate with their birth family. Similarly birth family members, including birth parents, siblings, and extended family members who have been yearning to have contact with the lost child are also accessing social media as a way to make a connection.

Lisa was adopted domestically in a private adoption when she was an infant. When she was 17, she found papers in a drawer, and having a last name, friended her birth mother, Susan, on Facebook. Susan asked to be able to talk to Lisa's adoptive mother, but Lisa insisted that her mother would be hurt if she knew Lisa was in communication with her birth mother. She told Susan that she was certain that her adoptive mother would try to stop the communication between them. Believing her, Susan waited until Lisa turned 18 and then agreed to a meeting without the adoptive parents' knowledge. While the reunion went well, keeping it a secret was so stressful for Lisa that she began to fail at school.

Matthew, 15, was removed from his birth mother because of severe neglect when he was five years old. He was then adopted by his first and only foster mother, Diane. Through FACEBOOK, Matthew was contacted by his older birth half-sister, Kendra, age 18. Kendra had also been removed from the birth mother, and was adopted by her birth father's brother and his wife (paternal uncle and aunt). Kendra shared with Matthew her serious resentment toward Diane because Diane had not allowed the siblings to remain connected. Confused and upset, Matthew began to pick fights with his mother. During an argument, Matthew finally revealed his communication with his sister.

As these two examples suggest, connections with birth family can be wonderful and healing, but certainly may also trigger strong, complex emotions that your teen should not have to handle on his or her own. Adoptive parents need to anticipate the possibility of their teens using social media to connect with the birth family. They must be proactive in sharing their expectations, wishes and concerns with their son or daughter before their teen is likely to pursue connections without parental involvement, much like talking with children about alcohol and drugs long before their teen may be ready to experiment.

### **3 guidelines for maintaining open communication with your teen:**

1. Establish an open atmosphere in which adoption information is shared in an age-appropriate manner beginning in the earliest years
2. Express empathy, interest and respect for the birth family to dispel your teen's propensity to feel disloyal around his desire for connection
3. Clearly let your teen know that you will support his need for information or contact with his birth family and that he should come to you with those wishes. Clearly communicate to your teen that while you respect his desire for privacy and independence, you need to be involved in the search and reunion process and that he should not make contact without your knowledge and awareness.

Teens need reassurance that you are comfortable and equipped emotionally to be alongside of them during this journey, which is such an important step in their lives.

Online forums for members of the adoption community to chat with each other have proven useful in providing emotional support and validation for adoption-related (or other) feelings that your teen may be struggling with. The danger, of course, is that your teen may share things that leave him vulnerable to responses that are potentially hurtful and destructive. Carol, a young adult adopted person, offers this advice, "Teach your teen that online life is just like real life. They should use the same behavior and courtesy that they would use when talking with someone face-to-face."

Many kids feel a false sense of security when communicating online because being shielded by a computer screen feels less real. Your teen therefore may need help in recognizing that the impact and consequences of their online actions are in fact real. Stay engaged with your teen and stay one step ahead by making sure that you are reviewing his browsing history of sites he's visited online, setting up parental controls if possible, and keeping the discussion flow between you two open and consistent.

**The best way to protect your kids online? Talk to them.**

<http://www.onguardonline.gov/articles/0006-talk-your-kids>