

Practice Guidance

Internet Safety and Social Media Guidance

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 It is the responsibility of ACE to establish that applicants wishing to adopt a child will be suitable and safe adoptive parents. Children are now born into a society in which the influence of the internet and social media is immense and concerns about its regulation, or lack of, abound. Social networking sites (such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Tumblr, LinkedIn, internet forums and message boards etc.) are a hugely popular way for adults and children to communicate and they provide an opportunity for users to share information with existing friends as well as to find new friends with shared interests. Similarly, YouTube and TikTok are easily accessible to millions of users, with the opportunity to upload video content. There is much support for prospective and approved adopters on the internet, with reputable sites (such as Adoption UK, CoramBAAF and indeed ACE's own website) offering valuable information, resources, message boards and support groups.
- 1.2 ACE understands that many applicants to the agency and existing adopters will have a profile on social media, with some posting and sharing regularly in the public domain. Similarly, it acknowledges that children and young people become confident users of the internet and social media platforms from ever younger ages. There are clear implications for the privacy and security of any adoption placement of adopter and adoptee behaviours in these areas, and ACE is committed to providing information and advice to adopters about managing their internet and social media use as part of its preparation for adoption and ongoing adoption support role.

2. Rationale for internet checks at the application stage

- 2.1 Given that an internet check may reveal important information about an applicant's suitability to care for children, it can be argued that agencies and

services have a responsibility to undertake such checks as a matter of routine. Here the principles established by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) in 2011 apply:

- (i) It is reasonable, proportionate, and lawful for internet checks to be completed as part of an adoption or fostering assessment.
- (ii) Internet checks should only be carried out in a spirit of openness and with the full understanding of the person being assessed.
- (iii) Undertaking a social media and internet check is necessary to comply with best practice around safeguarding.

2.2 While the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 [as amended] do not require social media and internet checks to be undertaken, Regulations 25[5] and 30[f] permit the agency to include '*any other information which the agency considers to be relevant*'.

2.3 ACE considers social media and internet checks to be relevant to an application to adopt, and therefore, as a *courtesy*, consent is sought for these alongside all the other checks (e.g. police, employment, references, local authority) at the point applicants make their formal Registration of Interest to adopt. ACE would advise applicants however that they are not able to withhold consent for an internet check, given that the information is already in the public domain.

3. Process

3.1 With technology constantly changing, definitive guidance and prescriptive guidance on what exactly constitutes an internet search is difficult to provide but applicants are assured that the agency will take a *proportionate* approach. At the time of writing, the search will involve the adoption social worker entering



the applicant's name into a search engine during the assessment process; staff will not search using their personal accounts, nor become *friends* with applicants.

- 3.2 Checks will only reveal profiles, photos, videos, and comments that are in the public domain, applicants will not be requested to provide any personal passwords. Information available within the public domain may evidence insufficient security settings and where this is the case applicants should understand that they need to maintain their own confidentiality and that of any child who may be placed with them and as such this may generate discussion that informs the assessment process. For example, if an assessing social worker can gain access to an applicant's Facebook profile, then advice will be given as part of the assessment process in terms of the associated risks and how these might be addressed e.g. using pseudonyms or nicknames. Internet safety is an issue that is discussed in Stage 2 of the adoption assessment process.
- 3.3 Any information revealed in such a check which is a cause for concern will be discussed with the applicant at the first available opportunity by their assessing social worker and in itself will not be used as a basis for decision making without the applicant having had an opportunity to comment. Causes for concern might include any inappropriate material whether in video, photo, or written form, and including views and opinions, whether implicit or explicit or posted by the applicant or a third party, that could call into question the applicant's suitability to adopt. This would include any expression of views or opinions or sharing of material deemed to be discriminatory in terms of protected characteristics (race, age, gender, disability etc). In all cases the assessing social worker will have to consider the source of the material whether it is personally authored or shared and will make a judgement on how it should be interrogated and acted upon. If concerns remain, the social worker will consult their manager.

3.4 It will be noted in the confidential section of the Adopter Assessment Report the dates that internet and social media searches have been undertaken and how the agency has managed any arising contra-indications.

4. Potential risks involved in the use of social media by applicants and adopters

4.1 Whilst most adults, children and young people recognise the need to keep safe and use the internet responsibly, there are a number of potential risks that ACE requests are considered.

4.2 These are that information posted on the internet is accessible everywhere: in the virtual world very little is completely private. Information might be disclosed whether inadvertently or intentionally, which could reveal information about a child in your care. Searching for your child's birth family members through social media channels is not encouraged and may inadvertently reveal your identity and/or location. ACE would always encourage links to be made and maintained through the Family Connexions Service with the support of ACE social workers. Social media sites can also provide opportunities for the sexual exploitation and grooming of children and young people where gifts or rewards may lead to meeting a potential abuser offline. A young adopted person may find and/or pass information to either family members or strangers through social media sites which might lead to them coming to harm.

5. Good practice for prospective adopters at the application stage and post placement

5.1 Confidentiality: Matters relating to ACE's operations and the children it places – case studies, profiles of children, reports, photographs - should never be discussed or referred to on social networks. The local authority shares parental responsibility for children until an adoption order is granted and it is crucial not

to share information regarding and/or pictures of children you may be matched with or indeed are placed in your care for reasons of safety and confidentiality.

- 5.2 Following the making of an adoption order, you will be aware that content on social media may inadvertently serve to compromise the confidentiality of a placement which can have significant and long-term consequences for a child and their family.
- 5.3 Consider the consequences before posting anything on social networking sites about your adoption journey and the impression it may give of you to those who access the information.
- 5.4 You should be mindful to make clear that any views posted are your own and not those of ACE.
- 5.5 Go online and check your security and confidentiality settings. Reset them if necessary.
- 5.6 ACE encourages adopters to make contact with other adopters it meets through the agency but strongly advises closed groups only.

6. Helpful links

<https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/foster-carers-and-adoptive-parents>

<https://www.adoptionuk.org/faqs/internet-safety>

<https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk>

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/online-safety>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/social-media>

<https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/social-media-guides>

