New Technology in the Search for Our Roots

Under President Clinton, November became known as National Adoption Awareness Month. For those in the adoption community, it is a time to shine a light on the unique aspects of this approach to family building. Though the finalization of an adoption is a one-time occurrence, the experience of being adopted can spur a lifelong quest for answers. President Clinton also encouraged the use of the internet as a tool in helping to match children and families for adoption. The internet has since proven to be incredibly useful not only for those pursuing adoption, but additionally for those who want to locate possible birth relatives. As with any new technology, this powerful tool also has the potential for unforeseen and far-reaching consequences.

Unlike children placed for adoption through foster care where many have lived with birth parents, children placed in adoptive homes at birth may have especially limited information on their birth families. With the advance of genetic technology, many adoptees have turned to in-home testing kits to try to fill in the blanks or connect with lost birth parents or siblings. The frequently advertised Ancestry and 23andMe are the most recognizable when in fact, there are over 40 companies providing this service. This is an industry that is still in its infancy and faced with limitations. Currently there are no established standards for accuracy, companies do not share information regarding their databases which would enlarge their sample pools, and independent scientists have not validated the methods used by these companies. Reputable genetic labs may be behind the genetic sequencing offered, but the interpretation of the results is often performed by a third party using their own computer algorithms.

Research shows that genetic testing companies are only as good as their databases. As Genetic Digest points out, the most heavily represented demographic that use the genetic test kits are white, middle- and upper-class people whose ancestors came from Europe. If you are a person whose forebears were from Africa, South or East Asia, or of Hispanic descent, your genetic material has a much smaller database from which to compare samples. And this is where margins of errors come into play.

Researchers have submitted the same saliva samples to multiple companies and have received varying results. Even identical twins who share the same genetic material have received different results from the same company. Every company uses their own ancestry-informative markers (AIMs) that are derived from current populations in America, Asia, Europe, and Africa and are sorted using a machine called a genotyping array. Humans share 99.9% of genetic material, so small variations and locations in the genome are used to find similarities for matches. To claim that your forebears came from the Arabian Peninsula over 100,000 years ago is unsubstantiated. Migration of people over the millennia invariably changes the genetic pool in a region the farther back you go in time. Computer programs shoot for the best fit, not the perfect match.

Another drawback to using these genetic test kits is that someone now has your data and is often selling that information to other companies. Buyers for these databases are often pharmaceutical companies doing drug testing on specific genetic mutations. So much for privacy! In fairness, companies will often have privacy information deeply embedded into their website, so it would take significant searching to locate their practices and the consumer’s options regarding privacy. The important takeaway is: let the buyer beware and realize that this testing is fallible.

What may be even more disconcerting is the potential fallout from such tests if a person has opted to receive the names of people who share enough genes to be part of an extended family. This is where it can become a life-changing event. For some, finding long-lost siblings is exhilarating. Others face the fact that they have a sibling they never knew about, which could be devastating. Half-siblings can connect and realize that their mother had a child who was placed for adoption.
and no one ever knew about it. Confronting the birth mother in this instance could be detrimental to existing family relationships, opening old wounds or unearthing long-held secrets. To learn that your birth father had severe mental illness or that you were a product of rape could produce shame and guilt. Or a man could learn for the first time that he was a father to a daughter he never knew he had; the grief and loss over missed opportunities could be overwhelming.

For the general public, this genetic exploration can be entertaining and harmless, but this is not the case for all who utilize these services. Adoptees who have turned to genetic testing to find their roots will need to be intentional in how they approach discoveries. While they may be thrilled to know where they came from or find extended family members, the other people in the adoption triad may not share their enthusiasm. By peeling back the bark on the family tree, the adoptee could be opening the proverbial Pandora’s box, unleashing a load of problems that won’t disappear. Adoption is very complicated and needs to be treated with respect for all those involved.

Before navigating a search for birth family, it is recommended that the adoptee process their desires, hopes, dreams, and expectations with a professional who is highly informed about the ramifications of uncovering secrets or discovering family. Emotions run high for all, and it would be wrong for an adoptee to push their desire for a meeting onto a newly found relative. Individual outcomes of reunions vary tremendously. While one woman found great joy in meeting her son for the first time and comparing family traits, another man had his birth mother find him, only to be repeatedly hit up for money knowing he was a highly successful professional.

In her article “Search and Reunion Etiquette: The Guide Miss Manners Never Wrote” Monica Byrne makes a distinction between the search, reunion, and reconnection. It may take five to eight years after a reunion for a reconnection to form. Reconnections occur among family members when shared memories and familiar relationships are built up. If a reconnection is the objective, then the reunion must be made with “military precision.”

While searches are most often the domain of adult adoptees, it is important to honor your child’s desire to explore their roots and ultimately, identity. If you have expanded their knowledge and understanding of their adoption story in truthful and age-appropriate ways, then you must trust that you have done your best to prepare them for personal discoveries. As Ms. Byrne says, “Know that while the world may feel upside down and spinning right now, it REALLY will settle back to normal in a while. Promise!” Visit bit.ly/2Zkjnuh to read the full article on search etiquette.

Navigating Boundaries and Connections in Social Media

Relationships between birth families, adoptive families, foster families, and the children they share evolve constantly. These connections bring with them confusion, delight, everything in between, and will sometimes bombard us with information we were not fully prepared to receive. Social media has brought new opportunities for instant connection and for learning about background and culture. However, social media boundaries are difficult to define and because this is a relatively recent development, best practices are still being established.

Agreements are optimally made before placement or finalization about contact between birth parents and foster or adoptive family members. Ideally, this takes place with the help of a counselor or adoption specialist. However, this is not always the case. Overloaded and lacking sufficient time, foster and adoptive parents are often left to muddle through these decisions alone. Social media can be a wonderful way to stay in touch, but there are important things to consider.

Some positives to using social media are that it can be less intimidating and more efficient than meeting in person or talking by phone and there is easy access to photos and videos. By reviewing privacy settings, families can control what content is shared with whom. If privacy is left at default settings, there may be content shared that is uncomfortable for some, or better shared in person. Online contact is less personable than other forms of communication. The tone of comments on social media can be misinterpreted and lead to hurt feelings.

Sometimes contact comes unexpectedly in the form of a friend request from a birth family member. A wide range of emotions may follow: a sense of elation, shock, or confusion.

It is easy to feel pressured to respond quickly. Realize that the person reaching out for contact has probably had a lot longer
to think about the possibility of a relationship. It is best to step back and answer important questions before proceeding. First, are you prepared to have a relationship with this person? If you are ready, are you comfortable with using social media and making information readily available to the other person? Lastly, have you considered all of the potential outcomes including the possibility that the connection will not meet expectations or go smoothly? What about the potential for rejection from either side? All of these things should be thought through carefully. In the meantime, send a message to the person making the request letting them know you are taking some time to think things through. If you happen to be the one sending the request, realize that if it takes a while for the other person to respond, it simply could mean they are taking time to carefully consider your request.

As caregivers, our most important job is to keep our children safe. Many young people lack the insight to think through the long-term implications of their online relationships. Interactions on social media leave a permanent fingerprint. Most social media platforms don't allow minors to create their own accounts until they are at least 13 years old, though we also know that children with a history of trauma can be less emotionally and socially mature than their chronological age. They need our assistance with discernment in navigating this new online world.

It can be relatively easy for adoptees and foster children to locate members of their birth family through social media. If the child is approached by a birth family member, or desires to search for information about their birth family online, parents can help them prepare socially and emotionally for all possible outcomes. It is strongly recommended to seek the help of a professional with a background in trauma, and to think carefully about the maturity and inner strength of the child who is seeking connection.

If younger children feel they are ready to set up a social media account, there are some rules that can help you monitor their activity and assist them in maintaining healthy online boundaries. It is important for parents to be aware of what their children are doing on the internet. To help you know what is happening, an important rule may be that the child must be friends with you on all of their social media sites and that they cannot block you from viewing parts of their profiles. Additionally, you may require they provide you with the email and password for all of their social media accounts, allowing you to view private messages and ensure they have not blocked you from their profile. If rules are broken, loss of this privilege is a good natural consequence. Older children will likely want to negotiate the rules. As the parent, lead by example with what you choose to post or share.

In situations where an older child moves into the home and is already active on social media, having conversations about online safety is imperative. A youth’s right to privacy must be balanced with the job of factoring in the child’s maturity and ability to protect him or herself from online predators or emotionally harmful connections. Social media allows others to create online personas that may not represent reality, which is an important point of discussion. Getting help from the child's counselor in navigating this aspect of the relationship is definitely a good idea.

Should you decide to move forward in creating a connection with birth family through social media, it is wise to take a few steps before accepting a request. Review privacy settings and look through your timeline to decide if there are posts that are best hidden, removed, or edited. Another option is to create an alternate social media account that is used solely for communications with birth family. It is important to appreciate that once friends are added, removing them can be difficult and lead to unnecessary hurt. Keep in mind that birth families often have their own trauma and may not be prepared to receive so much information from you, even though they may believe otherwise. Some birth families find it difficult to have frequent reminders from your posts that their children are with another family. Also discuss boundaries about following one another's friends or family members on social media and whether or not you are comfortable commenting on each other's posts.

If a request comes from birth family through social media, you could offer other connection options. A good compromise is email since it allows for the convenience of sending messages and photographs. It also has the advantage of limiting sharing. You select to share what you know will be well-received and understood. Snail mail is always an option, too. Like social media, tone is not always available with written communication so phone calls may be better. Creating a special blog, email address, or telephone line that is used solely for these purposes can allow parents to carefully monitor and preview content.

Online communication is wonderful but should not replace in-person connections, if possible. All parties need to be prepared for the potential outcomes – positive and negative – regardless of how the connection is made.
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Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit familyforwardmo.org/publications to read LifeLines online.
Educational Opportunities for Adoptive and Foster Parents

Each session counts as training toward your licensure requirement. Sessions are provided at low or no cost to all adoptive and foster parents. Registration is required.

Please note that all classes are for adults only. Children are not permitted in the classroom as training content is often not appropriate for them. Please arrange for childcare in your home as children cannot be left unattended in the lobby or hallways of the building. Thank you for helping keep your children safe.

Sensory Processing and Integration
Mondays: October 21 and 28, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Difficulties with sensory processing are often confused with behavioral problems. Children who have been in foster care or adopted are at a heightened risk of experiencing these challenges. Learn about Sensory Processing Disorder; what it is, signs and symptoms, suggested ways parents and teachers can help, and resources in the area. This two-part training provides parents with a hands-on experience.

NEW The Amazing Brain
Wednesday: October 30, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

This training will provide parents with a deeper understanding of brain development from the moment of conception to maturation. The impact of early childhood trauma on the brain’s organization will be explored through a small group activity utilizing The Brain Architecture Game. Will your team be able to build a brain that stands up to toxic stress?

FamilyForward’s Parenting KIDS (Kids In Difficult Situations)
Tuesdays: November 5, 12, 19, 26 and December 3, 10, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Children with histories of abuse and neglect tend to exhibit very difficult behaviors such as chronic lying, stealing, aggression, difficulties with eating and/or sleeping. Trauma-focused parenting is discussed with an emphasis on the impact of trauma on brain development. Insuring a child’s physical, emotional, and psychological safety is paramount to decrease behavioral issues and “re-wire” the brain for appropriate behavioral responses. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network curriculum is utilized and supported with additional material/videos from professionals in the field of developmental trauma. 18 hours of class time is covered in six consecutive weeks.

Improving Executive Function in Children
Thursday: November 7, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm

Many children have difficulty with organizing, planning, goal setting, time management, and retaining things in their memory. What looks like defiance and laziness in a child may be a reflection of a deficiency in their executive skills. Parents will learn how to help their child function better in the home setting by utilizing common practices employed by classroom teachers. Building executive function takes lots of practice.
Creating Lifebooks
Monday: November 18, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Lifebooks are an important tool to help children who are in foster care or adopted connect the past, present, and future. Identity development and attachment can be facilitated using this tool. Class focuses on the demonstration of age-appropriate activities that will help children understand their life story from a strength-based perspective.

NEW Points Along the Adoption Circle
Monday: December 2, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
The experience of adoption creates a unique and lasting emotional and psychological impact on the lives of all who are touched by it. This class gives participants a chance to consider various perspectives of those linked to one another through adoption including birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees and their extended families. The focus will be on deepening insight, awareness, empathy, and learning practical ways to care for all members of the adoption circle. This class is designed for those who care for children at any point along the adoption journey.

NEW Mental Health Diagnosis in Traumatized Children
Thursday: December 5, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Many children and youth present with behavioral and mental health issues if they have experienced early trauma. Parents seeking answers to their child’s behaviors often are confused by the multiple diagnosis they receive from well-meaning professionals. This class will explore the varied diagnosis and labels that children are often tagged with, sometimes with detrimental effects.

Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption
Mondays: December 9 and 16, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
Parenting a child of another racial heritage brings additional challenges and opportunities. In this two-part class, activities include video-based training regarding ways to better prepare to meet the cultural needs of children. Learn why “not seeing color” can invalidate a child’s life experience in the face of our nation’s history and how the acknowledgment of white privilege is essential in parenting children who do not share the parent’s ethnicity and racial backgrounds.

Trauma 101
Thursday: December 19, 2019 | 6:00 pm – 9:00 pm
When a child is abused or neglected, it can affect every aspect of the child’s development: physical, emotional, social, psychological. A video will kick-start the discussion that focuses on the reasons for delays and challenges based on the neurobiology of brain development. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network Core Concepts of Traumatic Stress are presented. This course incorporates the required reading material that is mandatory for all resource parents and provides a solid introduction to the topic of trauma.

Register for Training
Contact Sarah Gamblin at 314.968.2350 ext. 5230 or sarah.gamblin@familyforwardmo.org

Our Location
1167 Corporate Lake Dr, Saint Louis, MO 63132-1716

Visit familyforwardmo.org/calendar to view training information online.

All classes are in-person and registration is required.