Proceed with Caution:
Asking the Right Questions about Adoption on the Internet

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The Internet – and social media in particular – are having a profound, systemic and permanent effect on adoption in the United States and beyond. More and more families are being formed through the use of the Internet in a variety of unprecedented (and untested and unregulated) ways, while birth relatives separated by adoption are reconnecting in rapidly growing numbers.

The Internet offers ease, privacy and information. It provides resources that have never before existed, support that has been difficult to access in the past, and historic opportunities for waiting children – including those with special needs, in sibling groups and older youth – to find permanent, loving families. But adoption on the Internet is also largely unmonitored and unregulated, so the lure of financial gain is producing a surge of for-profit enterprises into the field; as a result, serious questions are being raised about ethical practices (such as counseling and support for pregnant women and pre-adoptive parents), consumer protections, potential exploitation and, most pointedly, whether children’s best interests remain foremost.

Those whose responsibility it is to protect the vulnerable are beginning to take notice, partly as a consequence of the Donaldson Adoption Institute’s recent groundbreaking report, “Untangling the Web: The Internet’s Transformative Impact on Adoption.” In Illinois, for example, the Attorney General has issued a “cease and desist” order to Internet-based adoption providers who advertise to that state’s residents in violation of a requirement in state law that all adoption services in Illinois be licensed.

The Adoption Institute is in its second year of studying the benefits and risks of adoption on the Internet, and of developing and promoting evidence-based policies and practices that best serve and protect all affected parties. As one part of this initiative, drawn from both the research and professional experience, the Institute has developed this “Proceed with Caution” report as a resource for anyone thinking about or using the Internet for the purposes of adoption, utilizing the questions below as a guide to help all parties find and receive services that are not just a business output for the providers, but are sound and ethical practices as well.

1. Is the provider a not-for-profit or a for-profit enterprise – that is, at the bottom line, is the provider most interested in offering important services that clients need, or in making money? Quality nonprofit agencies offer a range of services, including helping pregnant women decide if adoption is right for them. Ethical professionals also provide support to adoptive and birth/first parents (and eventually to adoptees) after the adoption has been completed. You can find out an internet provider’s status by asking if it is a designated 501(c)3 organization. You can also check with the IRS, including on this website.

2. What specific services are offered? Do the sites make this clear or do you have to talk to someone to find out what the providers actually do – i.e., are they trying to lure you into a conversation in which they can try to persuade you? The option of talking to someone should be available, but an initial review of their sites should also provide sufficient basic information about providers and what they offer. Chat room participants have described situations in which internet providers sounded more like salespeople (i.e., pressing users to sign up) rather than
counselors. Users can ask questions like this: Are you paid a commission for signing up pregnant women or prospective adoptive parents?

3. What are the titles and credentials of those offering services? You want to be sure that the people giving you advice are knowledgeable and professional. Terms like “advisor,” “counselor” or “consultant” are often not defined or explained. It’s important to find out if the people providing support or information have training, experience and education that are consistent with recognized standards in the helping professions. For instance, those offering counseling (unless clearly identified as volunteers or peer advocates) should have advanced degrees in fields like social work, psychology or counseling, and experience in the adoption field. Staff credentials, training and levels of experience should appear on the site and be readily provided in response to questions.

4. To whom is the site geared? Users should assess who the site is designed to reach, including who pays for the advertised services. For example, if the primary purpose is to represent those seeking to be adoptive parents, pregnant women and their partners might want to determine whether the information is unbiased. If the intent appears to promote only a single outcome (such as only offering adoption as an option to pregnant women) or to promise “too good to be true” outcomes, you should probably move on.

5. How long has the organization been in the adoption field? Many Internet sites are not-for-profit agencies with long histories of serving all parties; they use the Internet as an extension of the range of services they have long provided. More-recent entrants into the field are more likely to be for-profit businesses, some of which have only a virtual presence and no facilities where staff and clients can meet over time, with the caveat that meetings, counseling and the like are also increasingly common and accepted online as well. Another area you should explore: What are the internet provider’s ethical and professional standards, especially compared to a more-traditional counterpart?

6. Where is the organization based and where does it operate? The Internet allows adoption brokers as well as traditional agencies to have a long reach. But using any service far from you may reduce your ability to get consistent, continuous quality assistance. To do various aspects of their work, online sites often contract with others who are not clearly identified or who are harder to assess. So, for example, how is the important preparation for adoption handled when the expectant mother lives in one state, the pre-adoptive parents in another and site personnel are in a third?

7. Does the service have accreditation or other recognition from regulatory bodies or other appropriate groups? If the site assists with international adoption, it should be accredited by the U.S. State Department under the Hague Convention. Attorneys associated with sites that provide legal services should be members of the bar and licensed in the jurisdiction in which the adoption will take place; you can contact your state Bar Association to get this information. Recognition by state licensing bodies, the Council on Accreditation, membership in the Child Welfare League of America or other marks of the service’s ability to meet external standards may be indicators of its quality. Similarly, is the agency or service licensed? You can contact your state’s adoption agency licensing specialist to find this out and to see if there are complaints.
8. Is information about costs and about the agency’s financial operation clear and straightforward? Many adoption organizations, including not-for-profit agencies, charge prospective adoptive parents fees for their services in order to pay professional staff, provide options counseling to pregnant women, train and support pre-adoptive families and to provide services after adoption. It’s not the fees per se, but the size of the fees and their purpose that you should carefully consider. If such information is not readily available — including a written statement of costs — then users should be wary.

9. How credible are the claims on the site, especially if they convey some sort of superiority? For example, if a site says it is the most frequently used, the most successful at locating pregnant women, or the quickest at finding babies, a red flag should go up. If you proceed, ask for data that support the claims (and ask yourself if you’re comfortable with the claims themselves). One should reasonably wonder: How can the provider accomplish these things so rapidly? Speed and volume are not the best metrics when the lives of children and vulnerable adults (particularly pregnant women with unplanned pregnancies and infertile people wanting to adopt) are involved.

10. What services are provided after placement and beyond? For instance, if a post-adoption contact agreement is made, can the adoptive or first/birth parents receive help from the site’s owners if problems arise? If a child develops medical issues and more information is needed from the family of origin, or if a birthparent needs to tell the adoptive family about a recently discovered genetic problem, will the site facilitate communication? When adopted individuals get older and seek information about their origins, will they be able to receive information and support through the site’s services?

11. What do others say about the site? Chat rooms, online reviews and ratings by the Better Business Bureau can provide insights – good and bad. Google searches for complaints also can yield valuable information, but sites sometimes use “reputation management” services that reduce negative comments or make them more difficult to find. Consumers should check with their state Attorney General’s office or review complaints lodged with the BBB. Consider, but be skeptical of, testimonials on the site. A website is not likely to include comments from people who feel they were poorly served or who asked for their money back. You can ask to talk directly to others who have used the site, but remember that those to whom you are referred are likely to be chosen for a reason.

12. What is the site’s privacy policy? What information is collected and is it secure? Is information shared or sold, and to whom is it made available? Agencies with professional staff are bound by laws and codes related to client confidentiality. It is crucial to ensure that any provider will keep your information confidential and will not disclose the private facts that are disclosed in adoption unless you give your permission.

The bottom line is that the questions above can and should be asked of any adoption service provider or facilitator, whether Internet-based or not. But the ones that are web-based can be particularly difficult to assess, and everyone can look professional on a website, complete with testimonials and pictures of adorable children, smiling adoptive families and satisfied birthparents. Most pointedly, the Internet allows a site’s content to reach far more eyes than was ever possible before. So it is imperative that users of all kinds thoughtfully evaluate the services being offered, rather than be drawn in by compelling marketing alone.