

Safety Planning for Birth Parent Contact

Things are more complicated for adoptive families who are raising children who have experienced life in the child welfare system than they have ever been. No longer can you have an expectation of privacy from the birth family of your children. We live in the age of instant information. Want to know something? Google it! Want to find your birth family? Go to social media. We are living in a time when teens and preteens can simply go to social media and find birth family members. Adoptive parents may or not be aware that contact has been made.

There are many very good articles on how to think about and deal with the use of social media by adopted children. Two excellent articles are: *Top Ten Adoptive Parenting Tips for Facebook and the Internet* by the Creating a Family website: <http://www.creatingafamily.org/adoption-resources/top-ten-adoptive-parenting-tips-for-facebook-and-the-internet> and *Common Sense Internet Rules for Kids (adopted or otherwise)* also by the Creating a Family website: <http://www.creatingafamily.org/adoption-resources/common-sense-internet-rules-for-kids-adopted-or-otherwise>. Both of these articles will offer you good information about how to help protect your child in the age of social media.

This article is designed to help you think about planning for contact with your child's birth parent which is not solicited by you. It has to do with having a plan that you can operationalize if or when you need to do so. This plan begins with a conversation between the adults in the family about what they will do should their child make contact with his/her birth family through the child's efforts or those of the birth family. All of the adults have to understand that a plan is needed and participate in putting the plan together. If you are married your husband or wife needs to be part of the plan development. If you are a single parent, you may want to include grandparents, or aunts and uncles or a best friend in the creation of the plan. The important thing is that all the adults are on the same page and know what the plan is should a crisis arise with your child's birth family.

We often call these plans, safety plans. They are written agreements between the family members about how they are going to proceed should a crisis arise. Good safety plans:

- Are family specific and addresses the entire family group
- Must be implemented and remain active as long as a potential crisis exists
- Establish the family's immediate response to a potential danger and clearly describe the specific safety actions and other responsibilities of all family members

Putting together a safety plan requires the following steps:

- ***Before an incident or crisis occurs, talk to your child.*** Let your preteen/teen know what your expectations are regarding contact with birth parents and include:
 - What type of contact is acceptable and what is not
 - Whether or not you expect that your child will let you know if he/she is contacted by the birth parent

- That you as the parent are responsible for the well-being of the child and that you have his/her best interest in mind
- **Specify what type of contact will be allowed.** If contact has been initiated it is vital to be clear with your child about the types of contact (if any) that are allowed:
 - Is your child allowed contact through telephone and social media?
 - Can your child have in-person contact with birth family – what type of contact and with whom specifically?
 - Does contact need to be supervised by you or someone you have designated?
 - Can contact be spontaneous or does it need to be scheduled in advance?
- **In the event of a crisis that arises around contact with birth family, specify who is to be notified and how,** Plans could include notification of any or all of the following:
 - Authorities - When calling police or other legal authorities, have a copy of your Adoption Finalization Court Order on hand. The police can initially consider this nothing more than a civil matter and will not want to get involved unless you can prove that the situation is really parental interference
 - The school - Notify your child's school in advance of parents that are allowed to pick up your child and ask them to notify you or the authorities if someone else tries to pick up your child
 - Other family members who can be called on to help
 - Birth family members that you are in contact with
 - Others – friends and neighbors

Good plans include the telephone numbers of everyone listed so that in the heat of the moment it is easy to follow through with the plan. Make sure to talk to everyone in advance who is listed on your safety plan so that they understand that they may be contacted should a crisis arise.

- **In the event of a crisis, spell out what steps are to be taken and in what order.** If your child has been in unauthorized contact with birth family, list what steps will be taken. Will you:
 - Use parental control setting if the contact is through social media?
 - Contact the birth parent directly to discuss the situation?
 - Notify your child that you are aware of the situation and have taken steps to bring him/her into compliance with the agreed upon plan?
 - Enact other steps that have not been discussed but seem appropriate for the situation?

Whatever steps you have agreed to need to be clearly stated in the plan.

- **Review your safety plan with your children so that everyone in the family understands the plan and can ask questions or offer suggestions.** Don't be afraid that broaching this topic with your child will plant seeds about birth family contact that they had not thought of. Most children think about making contact. Talking about the subject will not make it happen, but will allow for everyone to be on the same page regarding a topic that can be difficult to discuss. It will also allow you as the parent to know that you have anticipated and planned for contact with the birth parent which helps everyone to feel like they are more in control should a difficult situation arise.

There is an old adage that failing to plan is planning to fail. Despite how uncomfortable the thought of contact with birth family may be for some families, we definitely live in a global world and making

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contact is easier than it has ever been. Planning for birth parent contact is just smart parenting. Make sure you know how you will handle this situation before it actually happens.