

Beware e-adoptions

Will clicking on a government Web site turn children into commodities? asks ethicist ARTHUR SCHAFFER

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For millions of Canadians, shopping on-line is nothing special. If you need a digital camera or a laptop computer, you can easily find thousands of Web sites promising to give you a great bargain. No need to shop till you drop. Your purchase can be made from the comfort of your home or office.

But, until recently, there were a few things you couldn't do on-line in Canada. Adopting a child was one of those things.

Now, however, the government of Alberta has made it possible for prospective parents to visit its Web site and gain access to profiles of children. With a few clicks of the mouse, you can watch video clips of 90 foster-care children who are hoping to be adopted. As a viewer (I almost wrote "consumer"), you are required to specify the gender and age range you prefer. When photos of the children pop up on the screen, you click to watch a video clip of them playing or performing.

Because this seems to turn kids into commodities, many people will find the idea of on-line adoption browsing to be distasteful at best, and degrading at worst. But it is common practice in the United States, and proponents of the idea ask: If it works in America, why wouldn't it work here?

Alberta's Minister of Children's Services, Iris Evans, expresses great enthusiasm for the project: "We are taking [adoption] to the next level with a hope we can start increasing the number of kids given 'forever' homes each year."

It's not surprising, perhaps, that such a scheme should be introduced to Canada by a provincial government whose devotion to the marketplace seemingly knows no limits. Still, even those who do not worship at the shrine of the marketplace must acknowledge that society is confronted by an urgent problem. The well-being of thousands of children in foster care depends on finding many more families willing to adopt children with problems. In Alberta alone, there are almost 5,000 children who are wards of the state. Only 116 were adopted last year.

That's the discouraging reality. So, if nothing else works, and if this Internet scheme will work, then perhaps the end justifies the means.

One of the most disquieting aspects of Alberta's Web site is that it publishes highly

personal information about the featured children. Does the whole world really need to know that this nine-year-old boy or that six-year-old girl has serious developmental problems, caused in utero by their mother's abuse of alcohol or drugs? What if the children's neighbours or, worse, their classmates log on to the Net and discover such intimate information about John or Jane? Reports, after only a few days of operation, suggest this is already happening.

Governments have a fiduciary duty to protect children-in-care from harm. Exposing them and part of their medical history to scrutiny by any curiosity-seeking Web surfer shows a willful disregard for the children's privacy. Access to the children's personal health information should always be carefully restricted to prospective parents who are seriously interested and carefully pre-screened. In response to criticisms from Alberta's privacy commissioner, the government now concedes it was "insensitive" to disclose such intimate information, and promises to redo parts of the Web site.

Even so, at least one equally troubling question still needs to be answered: Will Internet marketing attract the right sort of adoptive parents?

The Alberta scheme, like its American cousins, seems aimed at "impulse buyers," people who might not otherwise consider adopting a child in foster care. The hope is that, when potential parents can see charming photos of the children and watch video clips in which the children kibitz with their siblings or sing and dance, they will be stirred to action. This stirring will result in a boost to the number of adoptions. Amazingly, in only four days, the Web site has attracted more than 190,000 "hits," and adoption proceedings have already begun for four children.

Promising early results. But one still wants to ask: Are impulse adopters likely to make good parents to these needy children? Many readers will have seen bumper stickers with the message "A puppy is forever," the purpose of which is to remind parents that, when they buy a pet for their children after seeing the cuddly critter in a shop window, they are then stuck in caring for it long after the initial excitement has worn thin. The same applies, surely, but to an even greater degree, when one is deciding to adopt a child.

If the number of adopting families is increased by recruiting parents whose commitment is shallow and poorly thought out, the fate of the adoptees could approximate the fate of those unwanted pets who end up at the city pound a few months after Christmas.

One must wonder, therefore, whether the Alberta government has properly researched such important issues. Being shunted among foster parents may not be an attractive destiny for a child; but landing in the midst of an unprepared and heedless adoptive family might not necessarily count as a great improvement. Children deserve to be protected against such a fate.

If such doubts can be assuaged by the production of reasonable evidence, perhaps we may conclude that there is a place in Canadian society for the on-line advertising of foster children. Perhaps. Until then, we ought to reserve our applause.

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