

Online Adoption: does the end justify the means?

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For millions of Canadians, shopping online is nothing special. If you need a digital camera or a laptop computer, you can easily find thousands of websites 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 online in Canada, and adopting a child was one of those things.

Now, however, the Government of Alberta has made it possible for prospective parents to visit their website and gain access to profiles of children. With a few clicks of the mouse, you can watch video clips of ninety 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 online adoption browsing to be distasteful at best, and degrading at worst. However, 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?

The Alberta Government 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 upon finding many more families willing to adopt children with problems. In Alberta alone there are almost five thousand 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.

The most disquieting aspect of Alberta's website 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 have 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 onto the net and discover such intimate information about John or Jane? Reports, after only a few days of operation, suggest that 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.

Another troubling question 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 big boost to the number of adoptions.

Suppose this is true. 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 to care 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 to the fate of those unwanted pets who end up at the city pound a few months after Christmas, starving and abused.

One must wonder, therefore, whether the Alberta Government has properly researched these 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 online advertising of foster children. Perhaps. Until then, we ought to reserve our applause.

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