



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## Our Child's Digital Legacy

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering support after a child dies.

# Our Child's Digital Legacy

## A Bereaved Parent's Guide

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The memories of our children are precious. We preserve physical mementoes of their lives – photographs, perhaps their favourite clothes, items from their sports or hobbies, pictures they painted, letters they wrote, and much more.

**Yet today we each also exist in a virtual world – in the electronic memory of a computer, mobile phone or other device, and on the internet, particularly through social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, or through our own blogs and websites. For those of us who lose a child in this era, and particularly if our child has reached their teens or older, it is very likely he or she will have left footprints in this digital world – what we call their 'digital legacy.' This is just as important to access and preserve as the material reminders of our children.**

### What is a Digital Legacy?

If our child was born in 1980 or later, they are considered 'digital natives' – that is, they have grown up familiar with technology, the internet, social media, and so on. Children aged five to sixteen now spend an average of more than six hours daily in front of a screen; young adults presumably even longer. It stands to reason that a quantity of 'digital footprints' are being created, both intentional and inadvertent.

A 'digital asset' refers to anything that exists or is accessed solely by digital or electronic means. Examples include an online bank account, a company website, PayPal account or an Ebay shop. Music and books that have been paid for and downloaded also have a monetary value. This type of digital legacy is beyond the scope of this leaflet; accessing these assets can be complex and we suggest that you take legal and professional technical advice if you are in this position.

On the other hand, our child's mobile phone may contain photographs they have taken, recorded messages and other material that do not exist anywhere else. Their Facebook, blog or website may include a host of happy memories and precious insights into our child. These all have sentimental value, and it is this type of digital legacy that we will explore in this leaflet.

We will provide an overview of the topic, ideas of what you might want to look for, and links to other useful websites for further information. It is not possible for us to be too detailed in this leaflet for several reasons. Firstly, policies and terms of service by providers of social media and other websites are in a constant state of development; if we were to be too precise, by the time you read this leaflet the advice may be out of date. Secondly, there are so many technical details, we would need to print a handbook, not simply a leaflet!

Note: If our child was married or in a civil partnership, we are most likely not their 'next of kin,' and we may not have the legal right to take possession of their devices or social media accounts. Hopefully we will be able to discuss our wishes with their surviving partner, but this is not guaranteed. Therefore, this leaflet is aimed primarily at those who do have a legal right to access their child's belongings and digital history.

# Privacy Concerns and Other Considerations

It is wise to pause before we step into our child's digital world. Once we enter, we may discover networks of their friends of whom we knew nothing earlier. We may discover interests and activities of which we were unaware. We may find ourselves reading their private correspondence, or discover very personal matters. Therefore, there are a few factors to consider before we go any further. (Naturally, this also depends on the age of our child. If he or she was an adult, it will be quite different from a younger child.)

Firstly, there are the intentions and wishes of our child. If he or she was anticipating their death, they may have made some arrangements for their digital legacy, or at least expressed their wishes. They might have asked a close friend to take care of it. We may want to ask his or her closest friends about this. If we cannot find specific guidance, we may also be guided by our knowledge of our child, and his or her views on privacy. We may have to balance our own desire to find as much as we can about our child with a consideration of their feelings.

Secondly, there is the privacy of those with whom our child communicated. Assuming we do manage to get access to their email and social media accounts, we will be looking at a flow of communication between them and their friends. Some might have been clearly intended for public viewing, such as a Facebook wall or blog, but others will have been one-to-one communication.

Finally, there is our own self-preservation. If we start exploring our child's digital footprints, we may discover they took part in activities, held opinions or had friends that we had known nothing about. These might be positive and make us proud; then again, there may be some aspects of their lives that

cause us additional grief and pain. Whatever has happened in the past cannot be changed; if we are not ready to face this knowledge, it might be better not to proceed.

Accessing our child's digital world is a very personal decision. Just as we may struggle knowing what to do with their belongings, their clothes and personal items, we must also make decisions regarding their digital legacy. However, at least an initial decision should not be delayed too long. Some internet accounts or services could be suspended if not accessed within a certain length of time. It may be a good idea to gain access early on, and then decide later how much to explore the account.

## A General Understanding of the Digital World

### Here are a few terms that are useful to understand:

- **Device:** This could be a desktop, laptop or tablet computer, or a smartphone.
- **Content:** Information of all types, including text, images (photographs or artwork), video and sound, that a person can store on devices or on the Web.
- **The Internet** is the digital world. It is a vast global system of interconnected computer networks. The Web (Worldwide Web: www) is a level of the Internet.
- **Social media** is a way of connecting people on the Internet. Think of it like a local community centre: people generally gather and chat, or perhaps chat in smaller groups of specific interest. Notices and pictures are posted on the board, but instead of this taking place in the 'real world,' it all happens electronically. There are a number of well-established social media services, such as Facebook and Twitter, yet there are others that are more specifically

popular with children and young adults, including: Tumblr, MySpace, WhatsApp, WeChat, and Bebo. New services are continuously being promoted.

- **Blogs:** These are websites where the blogger writes texts and displays pictures, rather like a diary or commentary. Some blogs are intensely personal; others are practical or for fun. Blogs may be hosted on a platform such as WordPress, Blogger, Google+, and others.
- **File storage services:** Digital information – text, pictures, sounds and music – may be stored on a device and/or it may be stored with an internet file storage service such as Dropbox, Google Drive, or Box.
- **Digital footprint:** Any website, social media, blog or other service where a person has written something or posted a picture.

## What Might You Find?

Any of the following content might be stored on a smartphone, tablet, computer and online.

In the physical world, content can be stored on any device, as well as cameras, memory cards, and/or on portable storage devices such as disks on a key or hard drive.

In the digital world, any content may be backed up or shared using designated sites such as Dropbox. This includes documents (text files), art and other creative work.

### **In addition, you may find:**

**Photographs:** In the online world, photos can be stored on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. They can also be kept in online photo albums or designated picture-sharing websites such as Picasa , Flickr or Pinterest, or a commercial site such as PhotoBox.

**Videos:** In the online world, videos can be stored on social networks such as Facebook, and/or on designated websites for video sharing and streaming such as YouTube or Vimeo.

**Audio recordings:** Sound files can be stored and uploaded in similar places as videos, as well as some sites specifically for audio, such as BandCamp. Your child may have also recorded a voicemail greeting on their phone.

## Practical Steps

These are brief points for quick reference. For more details, please see [www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-digital-legacy](http://www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-digital-legacy).

### Gaining access to your child's digital world

- If we ourselves are not technologically proficient, a trusted friend – our own or our child's – may be able to assist.
- If a device is locked with a password, we may be able to ask a professional for assistance with unlocking it. Some computer or phone repair shops may be willing to do this on production of proof that the previous owner is deceased.
- Alternatively, if we have no passwords to access a computer, a shop can probably take the disk drive out of it and attach it to a different machine. When handing it over for such work, we should always explain its value.
- Nearly all online services can be operated if we know the user ID and password. We may find that a mobile phone or computer logs in automatically. Other means of finding the logins include checking email accounts for 'welcome' emails, or using the 'reset password' function at the login screen.

- File-storage and sharing services such as Dropbox and Google Drive are often set up to 'synchronise' automatically, meaning our child's computer may already hold a copy of all the online content.

## **Accessing and backing up our own digital content**

- Depending on the age of our child, we may already have a fair amount of their digital legacy on our own devices or online, such as photographs we have taken. It is a good idea to arrange to back-up and store this precious content.

## **Online memorials**

- One of the great advantages of an online memorial for our child is that it can be visited by anybody at any time, no matter where they are in the world. Friends and family in other parts of the country or overseas will have immediate access.
- There are seemingly endless possibilities for online memorials. There are dedicated 'virtual memorial' sites, or the possibility of creating personalised websites or blogs; even local newspapers may have a digital memorial site.
- Virtual memorial sites may offer the opportunity to post photographs and text. Some offer their services free; others charge a fee. You should be aware that unless the site has privacy settings, any member of the public can both view the memorial and add comments.
- Facebook or other social media can become almost instant memorials. However, do not rush into formally memorialising your child's Facebook account, as there are some disadvantages to doing so.



## Other issues

- Bear in mind that web-based services do not always endure. Memorial sites can be closed down. Whatever content you upload online to create virtual memorials or support your child's digital legacy should also be downloaded and backed up onto one or more of your devices, so that you can reinstate the information on a different service if needed.
- It is a good idea to make a list of websites and services, and store the passwords. However, these should be stored on your own devices or possibly on paper. Beware of online 'legacy' services that offer to store passwords and other important data. These could be scams or simply will not last.
- If we have surviving children, we should try to stay aware of how much they are accessing and commenting on social media, and the impact this is having on them. Bullying and trolling (unwelcome comments that are intended to upset or anger) are unfortunately too common; this could be a particular concern if our child's death was sudden, by suicide, and/or featured in the media.
- We should also be aware of our own vulnerability concerning what others post online, including our child's friends. Even well-meaning comments could distress us or cause tension. It may help to remember that each one is trying to deal with the loss of their friend in their own way; this may not be the same as our way, but we should be tolerant and understanding. If we find ourselves upset by postings, for instance on our child's Facebook page, it might be better to have a break from visiting it, rather than entering into an online dispute.

- There may be situations when we feel that our child's social media account needs to be closed, perhaps due to attracting unwanted visitors and hurtful comments. This is a very personal decision and one that should not be taken in haste. If we decide this has become necessary, we may want to download the content of the account before taking steps for its deletion.

## Continuing bonds with our children

**Life can be a struggle as we miss our children daily. Many of us have experienced that finding ways of continuing bonds with our child helps us cope with their absence. Maintaining a digital relationship, through postings or pictures, through messages or blogs, can be an important part of this.**

**Let us also bear in mind that an online community can be just as real as a physical one. In today's world, where so many people move around, a digital memorial may be visited more frequently than a physical location, and might even last longer.**

## Where can I go from here?

For further advice, details, recommended links and much more, please go to **[www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-digital-legacy](http://www.tcf.org.uk/content/r-digital-legacy)**. Join the TCF Online Forum or closed Facebook pages for up-to-date discussions on this and many other topics.

*This leaflet has been written by the publications committee of The Compassionate Friends. Some information is taken from *Death In The Digital Era: A Useful Guide* (2/3/2015), with the kind permission of Vered Shavit: **[www.digitaldustblog.com](http://www.digitaldustblog.com)**.*

# Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) was founded in 1969 by a hospital chaplain and a group of bereaved parents who recognised the lack of support and understanding they were receiving from those who had not suffered in this way. This leaflet aims to share the experiences of all of us bereaved parents and most especially those aspects which came upon us so suddenly and, sometimes, with no warning.

The reading of this leaflet may be your first real contact with TCF. We hope it has given you a little comfort, perhaps showing you that your pain and worries are shared by others. TCF publishes over 30 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved parents and siblings (but a small donation is, of course, always welcome).

If you would like to hear more about our work and access further support, you could ring our Helpline, number on the back page of this leaflet, and you will be able to talk to one of our volunteers, all of them bereaved parents. He or she could give you the number of a Local Contact and details of any Local Group which may meet regularly in your area. You could also find out from them details of our occasional retreats, when a small number of bereaved parents meet and talk in peaceful surroundings. Most years there is a weekend gathering, to which all members are invited.

Our website at **[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)** has more information about our services, how to join TCF as a donating member, private Facebook groups, and support forum where bereaved parents can 'talk' online. We also publish a quarterly journal, *Compassion*, containing articles and poems written by our members about their own experiences. And, if you would also like further reading, please contact our Library for details and recommendations of books on all aspects of bereavement.



The  
**Compassionate  
Friends**

UK Helpline:

**0345 123 2304**

Northern Ireland Helpline:

0288 77 88 016

**General Enquiries**

0345 120 3785

E: [info@tcf.org.uk](mailto:info@tcf.org.uk)

**TCF Library**

0345 120 3785

E: [library@tcf.org.uk](mailto:library@tcf.org.uk)

**[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)**

Sponsored by the  
Catharine Pointer memorial library.

**Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE**

**President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma**