



The  
Compassionate  
Friends

## **Our Child, Social Media and their Digital Legacy**

A Brief Guide for Bereaved Parents

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

# Our Child, Social Media and their Digital Legacy

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The memories we have of our children are precious. We preserve physical mementos of their lives – photographs, perhaps their favourite clothes, items from their sports activities 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, through social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and on blogs and websites. For those of us who lose a child in this era, and particularly if our child had been approaching their teens or was older, it is very likely they will have left footprints in this digital world – what we call their ‘digital legacy.’ It can be just as important to be able to access and preserve this content as to preserve 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 seven hours a day in front of a screen; young adults presumably even longer. It stands to reason that a quantity of ‘digital footprints’ are being created, both intentionally and inadvertently.

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, a subscription streaming service, 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. If we are in this position it is best to take professional legal and technical advice.

On the other hand, our child's mobile phone may contain photographs they have taken or received, voice or text messages and other material that do not exist anywhere else. Their Facebook page, Instagram, Skype or gaming accounts, Twitter feed, YouTube account, blog or website may include a host of happy memories and precious insights into our child. All of these 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 with guidance on how to proceed. It is not possible to provide detailed guidance in this leaflet for several reasons. Firstly, policies and terms of service by social media providers and other websites are in a constant state of development; any detail we provide may be out of date. Secondly, the volume of the technical details, could not be printed in this leaflet! We have also tried to keep this as simple as possible for those who are unfamiliar with the 'digital world'.

**Note:** If our adult 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 legacy.

## 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 different social media services in existence such as Facebook and Twitter, and new ones gain popularity over time.

**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 and Blogger.

**File storage services:** Digital information – text, pictures, sounds and music – may be stored on a device and/or may be stored with an Internet file storage service such as Dropbox, Google Drive, or Box.

**The Cloud:** In the simplest terms, the cloud refers to the act of storing and accessing data over the Internet instead of on a device or computer hard drive.

**Digital footprint:** Any website, social media, blog, game or other service where a person has written something or posted a picture, video or sound recording.

### Types of social media services:

- Some social media services, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram **keep the user's content** on the Internet almost indefinitely. Pictures, messages, music files and other material can only be deleted by the user. Of this type of service, TikTok and WhatsApp have been popular with children and young adults, although preferences often change. YouTube is often used to upload videos. Gamers may use Skype to communicate.
- Some social media services such as SnapChat allow users to send pictures and videos to one another, in the knowledge that such **content will disappear** after a set time. As the information is not saved, these services are not so relevant as far as digital legacy is concerned.

## What might we find?

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 a USB stick or an external hard drive.

In the **digital** world, any content may be backed up or shared using **designated** sites such as Box, Dropbox or Drive.

### Additional content may also be found as follows:

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

**Videos:** In the online world, videos can be stored on social networks such as Facebook, and/or 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 SoundCloud. Audio recordings may also be found on a mobile phone, such as a voicemail greeting.

## Privacy Concerns and Other Considerations

It is wise to pause before we step into our child's digital world and ask ourselves the same type of questions that we might consider before reading their diaries. Once we enter, we may discover networks of friends we knew nothing about. We may discover interests and activities which we were unaware of. We may find ourselves reading their private correspondence or discover very personal matters. Therefore, there are a few factors to consider before going any further. Naturally, this also depends on the age of our child. If they were an adult, it will be quite different from a younger child.

**Firstly**, there are the intentions and wishes of our child. If they were 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 their closest friends or siblings about this. If we cannot find specific guidance, we may also be steered by our knowledge of our child and their views on privacy. We may have to balance our own desire to find out as much as we can about our child with a consideration of how they have felt. If our child has surviving siblings, we may want to discuss the steps we intend to take with them, as it is important that they are comfortable with our plans, if possible.

**Secondly**, there is the privacy of those our child communicated with. Assuming we do manage to get access to their email, Skype, WhatsApp 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 would have been private communications.

**Finally**, there is our own self-preservation. If we start exploring our child's digital footprint, we may discover they took part in activities, held opinions or had friends that we knew 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 would be sensible to think carefully about whether or not to proceed.

Accessing our child's digital world is a very personal decision. Just as we may struggle with knowing what to do with their belongings, their clothes and personal items, we must also make decisions regarding their digital legacy. However, **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, preserve the content and decide later how much to explore the account. It is advisable to keep a record of any passwords for future reference.



## Practical Steps

The following are some brief points for easy reference. For more details, please see [www.tcf.org.uk/digitallegacyinfo](http://www.tcf.org.uk/digitallegacyinfo)

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

- There are two stages of access: access to a physical device and then access to the content of that device. Both can be password protected.
- If we ourselves are not technologically proficient, a sibling or a trusted friend – one of our own or perhaps 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, for a fee, on production of proof that the previous owner is deceased, however, some companies, such as Apple, refuse to do so.
- 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 and sites can be accessed if we know the user ID and password. We may find that a mobile phone or computer logs into services automatically. Other means of finding the logins include checking email accounts for 'welcome' emails, or using the 'reset password' function at the login screen, provided we have access to the email account to which the reset will be sent.
- If there is an automatic login, we still may not know the password for the account. For that reason, once we have gained access, it is a good idea to reset the password to something we will remember, so that we will be able to have access in the future.
- 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.

- If we want to keep our child's voicemail greeting from their phone, we could make a recording before the phone number is discontinued, after which we will have no access to it. This can be done manually by playing their greeting whilst recording on another device. Alternatively, we could continue paying to keep their mobile contract active.

## 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 this up and ensure that this precious content is safe.

## Online memorials

- An online memorial is a website, blog or page where we can post stories, comments and pictures of our child. One of the great advantages of an online memorial 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 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. We should be aware that unless the site has privacy settings, any member of the public can both view the memorial and add comments.
- Instagram, Facebook or other social media can become almost instant memorials. However, it is best not to be hasty to formally 'memorialise' our child's accounts, as there are some disadvantages in doing so, such as access being limited as a result. Some people prefer instead to keep their child's page active, although there is a risk that Facebook will go ahead and memorialise the account if they become aware that it belongs to someone who is deceased. Visit this link for more information: [www.tcf.org.uk/digitallegacyinfo](http://www.tcf.org.uk/digitallegacyinfo)



## Other issues

- We should bear in mind that web-based services do not always endure. Memorial sites can be closed down. Whatever content we upload online to create virtual memorials or support our child's digital legacy should also be preserved and backed up onto one or more of our devices. This will provide a reliable record for future use and we 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 our own devices or by some other safe method. Beware of online 'legacy' services that offer to store passwords and other important data. These could be scams or simply may not last.
- If we are concerned that people will be able to gain access to our child's online account, for example their Facebook page, we could consider changing the security settings so that posts and personal information are only visible to friends, and not accessible to the public. This is particularly important if the circumstances of our child's death are likely to lead to general media attention. For instance, journalists will be able to take and publish photographs from our child's page unless the settings are secure.

## Ongoing use of the digital world

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.

This website has some helpful information on this topic:

**[tiny.cc/online\\_abuse](https://tiny.cc/online_abuse)**

For advice on helping our child if they are a victim of cyberbullying, see:

**[tiny.cc/bullyingonline](https://tiny.cc/bullyingonline)**

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 they are all 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. One step we could take as a starting point is to change the settings so that only friends can visit the page. If we do eventually decide that it is necessary to close the account, we may want to download the contents before taking steps for its deletion. Guidance on closing an account can be found at:

- [tiny.cc/closeinstagram](https://tiny.cc/closeinstagram)
- [tiny.cc/closefacebook](https://tiny.cc/closefacebook)
- [tiny.cc/closetwitter](https://tiny.cc/closetwitter)

Although social media gets a lot of criticism – and there certainly can be ugly sides to it – it also allows families and friends to stay in touch with one another all around the world, as well as support information discovery and instant communication. If our child used social media then it can be wonderful to be able to 'hear' their voice through their posts, messages and photos. If we are a 'friend' of our child on Facebook, we will be able to read comments made by friends and family and this can be very comforting. Even with something recreational, such as gaming, we might learn more about our child's friends and personality.

## 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 better with their absence. Maintaining a digital relationship, through postings or pictures, through messages or blogs, can be an important part of this.

Let's 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 to Go from Here

For further advice, details, recommended links and much more, please visit [www.tcf.org.uk/digitallegacyinfo](http://www.tcf.org.uk/digitallegacyinfo).

Join the TCF Online Forum for up-to-date discussions on this and many other topics.

This is the second edition (2020) of this leaflet. Information is correct to the best of our knowledge. Please send suggestions and corrections for future updates to [info@tcf.org.uk](mailto:info@tcf.org.uk)

## 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. 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 40 leaflets, on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. All of them are available at no charge to bereaved families. For further support and to talk to one of our volunteers call our Helpline on **0345 123 2304**. Our website at [www.tcf.org.uk/support](http://www.tcf.org.uk/support) has more information about our services.



The  
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Friends**

UK Helpline:

**0345 123 2304**

**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**