Alison Mitchell spends a lot of time at the playground, a place of social opportunity – and uncertainty – for herself as well as her kids. A gregarious mother of two daughters, Mitchell sees her fellow Somerville parents as potential friends and says the best icebreaker often isn’t the obvious commonalities, like bulky diaper bags or the line at the swings. Instead, it’s the preexisting relationship she has with other playgroundgoers, thanks to the Internet. A former political press secretary who is now home full time with her kids, Mitchell has spent the last three years coordinating a 1,600-member e-mail list known locally as “Somerville Moms.” The list – some version of which exists in dozens of Massachusetts communities – is an online forum for sharing pediatrician recommendations and debating hot-button topics like the chickenpox vaccine. Members (I am one) use their real names and share the names and ages of their children in every post. So when Mitchell hears a stranger call out that Henry and Ava need to get off the seesaw right now, she often knows quite a bit about Henry and Ava – and sometimes she also knows intimate details about their mom.

“That happens a lot: You’re at the playground and you hear the kids’ names and then realize, ‘Oh, you’re the one with the ear infection,’” says Mitchell, 38, with a laugh. She’s made friends with several women she met using the list and thinks it’s a great resource for building real community, not just the cyber kind. But there’s a downside: Looking for advice and support, members sometimes share details with a 1,600-person message list that they might not declare in front of a 1,600-person crowd, which can make for some awkward real-world encounters. If you meet another mom at the grocery store and realize she’s the list member dealing with, say, a painful clogged milk duct, do you mention it? Do you assiduously avoid the topic? Or do you just wait and see if she brings it up?

“It’s weird. I don’t even know what the right word for it is, the way you know intimate details about people without knowing them,” says Mitchell. “It’s a funny dynamic.”

It’s a dynamic that may become increasingly familiar as more and more of us encounter potential friends on the Internet before we meet them in person. Researchers who study the effects of technology on our social lives refer to this sort of relationship as a “migratory friendship.” According to the 2010 report “Social Connectivity in America” by researchers at the University of Southern California and the University of Toronto, 20 percent of adult Internet users in 2007 said they had at least one migratory friend, up from 15 percent in 2002. Online communities make it easier than ever to find people who share the same needs and interests, but turning a virtual friendship (one in which the parties don’t meet in person) into a real-world one is complicated. You can learn too much too fast in a way that makes flesh-and-blood encounters feel awkward. You can miscalculate the quality of the connection or the other person’s interest in friendship and then be disappointed. What’s more, the same technology that lets you forge new friendships may, paradoxically, also serve as a disincentive for doing so.

Though the Internet has been easily accessible to many Americans for a number of years, people are still figuring out the rules of this strange virtual “place” where, for example, looking for a date or a job makes perfect sense today, but a decade ago seemed like a long shot. That’s where online friendship is now. Lindsey Mead Russell, 36, of Cambridge is a blogger who says she’s formed close e-mail connections with many of her readers but that the connections don’t always translate into real life. A Harvard MBA and an executive headhunter, Russell also explores writing and literature, motherhood and relationships on her blog, adesignsovast.com, which she began in 2006. Although she’s made one very close friend and found a writing
mentor through her blog, she’s also been disappointed at times by some of her real-world encounters with virtual friends.

At a conference of female bloggers last summer, Russell met women with whom she’d developed close online connections but with whom, in person, she felt no intimacy. “It was the most awful experience,” Russell remembers. “All these bloggers in a hotel in New York City, and everyone was awkward and unfriendly and weird.” In retrospect, she thinks she was “naive” to assume an online friendship would automatically transfer into real life. “I think it has a lot to do with the fact that in blogging I share certain parts of my life but, by definition, not all,” says Russell, the married mother of two elementary school children. “Everybody who reads fills in the rest of me to their liking and according to their own assumptions.” And those assumptions don’t necessarily match up with reality.

Some shy away altogether from trying to form new friendships online. Heather Pruiksma of Ayer, who works for an environmental nonprofit, says she’s perfectly comfortable using the Internet to meet potential boyfriends, but not the new friends she’s craved at various points in her adult life. “It seems fine and even conventional to go online for dating,” says Pruiksma, 37. She thinks there’s a “double standard”: Because people accept that it’s difficult to find a mate, online dating quickly became both popular and socially acceptable. But Pruiksma thinks people don’t always acknowledge how difficult it can be to make new friends as an adult, and she feels less comfortable employing the Internet for that purpose. A regular Facebook user, Pruiksma sees it as a place to connect with the people she already knows. “Going on Facebook and just meeting people randomly to be my friend strikes me as odd,” she says.

Even as Facebook is subtly shifting the definition of “friend” from “person you know well” to “person with access to your digital vacation photos,” the site isn’t about fostering new friendships. “The major social media today are all about connecting preexisting friendships,” says Danah Boyd, a senior researcher at Microsoft Research New England and a research associate at Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society. But that represents a shift from the Internet’s early days, according to Boyd. The people going online in the ’80s and ’90s, she explains, were saying, “Please let me find people like me.” They were looking for a community that they couldn’t find in their own neighborhood. “As social media became mainstream, that faded, and the Internet became about [your existing] friends.” The reason for the change? A pervasive belief in “stranger danger” – the fear that people we don’t know want to harm us in some way, she says. “We’ve undone the social acceptance of meeting strangers.” One reason online dating has gained followers, despite stranger fears, is that participants know what they’re there for. “For the most part, everyone on an online dating site is looking to date, or at least to have sex – they have come with the same intentions,” says Boyd. Finding that alignment of intentions is key to making online connections that can move into the real world.

David Levy of Jamaica Plain is one of the pioneering folks who successfully made friends on the Internet during its early days – and who continues to do so today. His experience suggests the transition from online to offline friendship is most seamless when people connect around a specific interest, like parenting or literature, or in Levy’s case early on, the emerging Internet itself. Twenty years ago, Levy, now 33, used to dial into an electronic bulletin board called Argus, based in Burlington. As a kid in Stoughton, he went online because he liked the idea of tapping into a world outside his own middle school. “That age, it’s the time of your life when you’re trying to expand your social circle and you realize there are all these people out there that you might be better friends with than the ones fate has thrown at you,” says Levy, who is now the editor of the website JewishBoston.com. Levy and other kids with access to newfangled things known as “modems” met online and then arranged to meet for real in Harvard Square.

“I can’t believe my parents let me do it,” he says now. “But at the time, there was no context for it. My dad would sit at the Coop while I went and hung out with these friends.”

Early on, Levy discovered one of the most appealing aspects of online socializing: It can be much easier to find
like-minded people – or seemingly like-minded people – there than in the real world, especially when your real world feels as small and tightly closed as a middle school or an all-consuming office job. The virtual world is bigger, and you can search it incredibly easily. In high school, Levy made friends via a Stephen Sondheim listserv, and by his undergraduate days at Harvard, he had his own blog. There was, he says, a “kind of Venn diagram,” in that many of the people he calls his fellow “musical theater nerds” were blogging about both musical theater and about being gay. Levy and fellow bloggers commented on one another’s posts, and he often met up with a group of bloggers when he visited New York.

In some cases, Levy says he has to work to recall the moment a virtual friendship migrated into the face-to-face variety. For example, Levy “met” his current roommate online, about 10 years ago, when they commented on each other’s blogs, but he has to stop and think to remember the trajectory of the relationship. At the time, Levy was “writing about being gay and being Jewish and moving to California,” and can’t remember the topic on which he first connected with his now roommate, Benjamin. But six years later, he was at a friend’s wedding and recognized Benjamin – from online pictures – as a fellow guest. They discovered they knew each other from the blogging community, through the nuptial couple, and through other offline friends. “The combination cemented our friendship to the point where when he needed a place to live, it worked out,” says Levy.

James Cobalt’s closest friendships originated online through an area of interest even more focused than Levy’s: a lifelong fondness for pranks. Cobalt, a fast-talking, bearded online marketer who will give his age only as “late 20s,” went straight from high school into the workforce. He says he found it hard to make friends in his early 20s, when many of his peers were in college and he wasn’t. “For a number of years, I didn’t really have any friends, and the friends I did have I wasn’t very close to,” says Cobalt, who recently moved from southern New Hampshire to a nearby suburb of Boston.

But one day in 2007, Cobalt heard a story on National Public Radio about people who met online to plan large-scale pranks, then got together to execute them. “I thought it sounded like so much fun,” he says, so he decided to launch a similar site in Boston. Cobalt now runs a group called the Societies of Spontaneity (soscities.org), where members interact online and in person around events that are a cross between performance art and social gatherings. They’ve launched games of tag in Government Center by declaring unsuspecting commuters “it.” Near the Harvard Square T stop, a favorite spot for protesters and panhandlers alike, users of Cobalt’s site held a protest against protesting. “We also collected signatures to ban public signature-collecting,” says Cobalt, with a laugh.

Like Alison Mitchell, who sees the Somerville Moms list as an icebreaker for real-life conversation, Cobalt says forging online relationships first has helped him overcome shyness – and feel confident that he’ll have something in common with fellow participants when he actually meets them. At the first prank event he attended, in New York, members wore brightly colored T-shirts to identify one another. “I saw a girl wearing one and walked up and just started a conversation,” he remembers. “It was weird, because I’ve always been kind of shy, but for whatever reason, I felt comfortable.”

Indeed, as I researched this story, I found few examples of successful migratory friendships that didn’t begin around a very specific interest, whether parenting or cycling or Stephen Sondheim. If you have hobbies or particular needs, the Internet can be helpful in facilitating connections that could lead to new friendships. But if you don’t, the online world may be as hard or harder to navigate as the offline world. What’s more, social media may inhibit the development of new friendships by offering you electronic versions of old ones.

Once upon a time, if you moved to a new city, you might stay in touch with old friends by letter and phone call, but if you wanted daily social contact, you needed to get out and make new pals. Now, even as the Internet offers unparalleled opportunities for finding new like-minded friends, there’s a flip side: The same tools also let us stay in constant low-level touch with old friends in a way that can lower our motivation for forging new relationships. Kate Gustafson, 32, has moved six times since 2003, most recently from Philadelphia to Somerville in May of 2010. She’s a doctoral candidate in English literature at the University of Pennsylvania but moved here – a six-hour drive away from her classmates – for her husband’s job. Each day, Gustafson heads to a Harvard University library and works by herself on her dissertation. While she connected with a locally based
group of other literary scholars, and occasionally gets together with them, she says much of her social life now takes place over Facebook.

Between her dissertation and a toddler son, Gustafson says it’s hard to find time to get to know new people, and that Facebook offers some of what she needs in her social life. “It’s like being in a lunchroom or at a cocktail party where there are all these conversations going on,” says Gustafson. She frequently communicates with a small, private moms group, which, she says, is also easier to make time for than a phone conversation. “With friends, I find it’s the best way,” she says. “It’s hard to chat on the phone when you have a kid screaming at your feet.”

One great appeal of Facebook, of course, is that you can socialize entirely on your own schedule – it is to friendship what the DVR is to network TV. You and your friends don’t have to make time with one another; you just have to make time. Gustafson says she logs in when she needs a break from literature or while she’s waiting for the bus. That isn’t unusual. According to a study by the University of Southern California’s Center for a Digital Future, 54 percent of Internet users in 2008 said the Web is important for maintaining social ties, up from 45 percent in 2007. What’s harder to measure is the quality of the connection – and to what extent the ability to connect via Facebook with friends across the country stops us from, say, sharing a cup of coffee with the potential new friend next door. Gustafson says she would like more real-time, face-to-face interaction than she now has and hopes that when she finishes her dissertation, she’ll have an easier time meeting other moms and fellow scholars in person.

Stories like Gustafson’s concern Sherry Turkle, an MIT professor who explores the effect of technology on friendship in her new book, Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other. “The thing that makes me saddest is when people use the Internet in a way that deteriorates the friendships they already have,” says Turkle, who spent 15 years interviewing teens and adults about their relationships and technology. She believes that when people swap phone calls and visits for texts and Facebook, the “loss of voice” means friends slowly become less attuned to one another and are less likely to pick up on changes in one another’s emotional lives.

Researchers agree that it’s difficult to measure the quality of friendship in a scientific fashion. As Turkle puts it, “If someone says, ‘Well, if I text my friends and I’m happy,’ who am I as a researcher to say, ‘No, you’re not?’” Still, she thinks many of us have simply adapted to lower-quality interactions and reduced our expectations accordingly. Once everyone decides they don’t have time for phone calls, the occasional 140-character tweet becomes important to us because it’s all we have from our friends – even as all that tweeting also convinces us we’re too busy to pick up the phone.

For most of us, the answer may lie somewhere in the middle: Using the tools to enable real-world encounters, but also looking up from them often enough to see potential friends across the street. That’s what Andrea Morton, a Somerville architect, tries to do. Self-employed and single, she says she works hard to maintain an active social life and has used Meetup, a site for Interest-based groups to plan events, to meet fellow entrepreneurs. But she stresses that all of the actual friend-making happened once she was off her computer. She also uses Groupon, the online coupon service, as a way of staying close to people she already knows. “If I get a Groupon for a restaurant in the South End, I try to then see my friend who lives in the South End,” says Morton, 38. “I use Groupon really strategically to try to stay connected to people I might not run into as casually.”

While she welcomes the opportunities available on the Internet, Morton thinks it’s equally critical that Bostonians stay attuned to social opportunities in the real world. Morton, a Minnesotan who moved to the area in the mid-1990s, used to stand at the same bus stop for 15 minutes every morning with a woman about her own age, who was also partial to clogs and the Utne Reader. They eyed each other daily – this was before smartphones dominated the attention of so many T riders – and one morning, after a number of months, the other woman said Hi. “All it took was one person being brave enough to strike through that urban New England reserve we all have,” says Morton.

The pair began talking and never really stopped. Four years ago, Morton was maid of honor in her fellow commuter’s wedding.
Alison Lobron, a frequent contributor to the Globe Magazine, lives in Arlington and posts stories at alisonlobron.com. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

© Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.