



## **Don't "Like" My Children: The Ethics of "Sharenting" on Social Media**



Photo: Jessica To'oto'o / Unsplash / Modified

Sharing life's joys and documenting our lives online has become a social norm, but are we oversharing important details? This question becomes extremely urgent when it references parents and the posting of information about their children. "Sharenting" is the new word that has been coined to denote parents' use of social media or blogs to share too many details about their children's lives. More than half of mothers and one-third of fathers discuss parenting on their social media sites. Many children are

posted on social media within the first day of their lives and about 92% of 2-year-olds have an online presence. Children, unlike a parent's adult friends, have little ability to consent or object to their information being posted on social media. Even parents who want to control their children's online presence face daunting challenges, since well-intentioned family and friends can independently share photos of someone else's child.

Parents who discuss parenting on social media do so in order to feel less alone. Parents share photos of their children to keep their family and friends updated on their lives. Posting a photo is an easy way to share their children's achievements and milestones with those who couldn't be there. Another common use of social media is for seeking parenting advice. A study conducted by the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital found that almost 70% of parents "said they use social media to get advice from other more experienced parents and 62% said it helped them worry less." Commonly posted topics include how to get children to sleep (28%), nutrition and eating (26%), discipline (19%), daycare/preschool (17%) and behavior problems (13%) ("Parents on social media," 2015). Parents feel they can relate to and benefit from other users that have experience with the issues they are currently facing with their child.

While parents love sharing their children's joyous moments, some are concerned their posts may create privacy and safety risks. While it seems innocuous, the choice to share information about one's children online courts several sorts of risk. Some of these risks relate to future embarrassment, perhaps caused by parents posting embarrassing photos of their children being toilet trained, in the bath, covered in food while eating, or on video singing and dancing to a popular song. More worrisome, bullies could also find these posts and target these children through cyberbullying. These embarrassing posts could surface again when these children are adults and affect their chances in getting a job or affect their reputations if they are running for high power positions. Parents may be putting their children in danger by helping identity thieves gather important information of their children like their birth date, full name, where they go to school, and what activities they are involved in.



An even darker worry connected to sharenting includes the new activity of “digital kidnapping,” when an online stranger takes children’s photos from their real parent’s posts and shares them as the stranger’s own children. A case of digital kidnapping occurred in Dallas where a mother found a New York man had been posting photos on Facebook of her daughter claiming that she was his daughter. She was unable to remove the photos because they are someone else’s posts, so she reached out to Facebook. “They’re telling me to report the pictures specifically, which I can’t do because he blocked me,” she said. “The only way I can report anything is by reporting his whole profile.” Copying and posting the pictures that others publically share isn’t technically illegal, however, and when she reported the profile to Facebook their response was that the profile met community standards.

In the brave new social media world animated by daily sharing, how far should proud parents go in attempting to hide their children from the digital light of day?

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What are the ethical values and interests in conflict in the debate over “sharenting?”
2. Is there a way to share information about your children *and* avoid the risks associated with sharenting?
3. If many parents share such information about their children, does this lessen the ethical concerns with any given parent sharing such information about their children?
4. How can social media companies act ethically when it comes to protecting the privacy of minors on their platforms?

### **Further Information:**

Lucia, Andrea, “Child Digitally Kidnapped by Man Posing as Father.” *CBS Dallas/Fort Worth*, July 8, 2015. Available at: <https://dfw.cbslocal.com/2015/07/08/mothers-daughter-digitally-kidnapped-by-man-posing-as-father/>

Beeston, Ariane, “The pros and cons of ‘sharenting’: what parents need to consider when posting about their kids online.” *Essential Kids*, October 27, 2016. Available at: <http://www.essentialkids.com.au/life/technology/the-pros-and-cons-of-sharenting-what-parents-need-to-consider-when-posting-about-their-kids-online-20161027-gscplb>



Howard, Jacqueline, "The dos and don'ts of posting about your kid online." *CNN*, October 21, 2016. Available at:

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/21/health/posting-about-kids-on-social-media/index.html>

"Parents on social media: Likes and dislikes of sharenting." *National Poll on Children's Health*. Available at: <https://mottpoll.org/reports-surveys/parents-social-media-likes-and-dislikes-sharenting>

"Safe sharenting: Pediatricians encouraging privacy awareness for parents who 'sharent.'" *National Poll on Children's Health*. Available at:

<https://mottpoll.org/blog/2017-04-06/safe-sharenting-pediatricians-encouraging-privacy-awareness-parents-who-sharent>

"'Sharenting' trends: Do parents share too much about their kids on social media?" *CS Mott Children's Hospital | Michigan Medicine*, March 16, 2015.

Available at:

[https://www.mottchildren.org/news/archive/201503/"sharenting"-trends-do-parents-share-too-much-about-their](https://www.mottchildren.org/news/archive/201503/)

**Authors:**

Kaitlyn Pena & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.

Media Ethics Initiative

Center for Media Engagement

University of Texas at Austin

November 28, 2018

[www.mediaethicsinitiative.org](http://www.mediaethicsinitiative.org)