

Point of View

Sharenting: How much is too much?

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Introduction

Social media has become a popular method of communication, sharing information, entertainment, marketing and keeping up to date with current news and trends. By July 2022, there were 4.7 billion social media users globally, which is a 5.1% increase from the previous year¹. Social media is commonly used to share photos and videos, with 70.2% of Instagram users and 64.5% of Facebook users reporting using these sites for this purpose¹.

With the rise in the use of social media, posting images, videos and information about one's children has become a social norm². Often, sharing of information about one's children precedes their birth, with close to a quarter of parents sharing the images of their antenatal sonograms³. Research shows that more than 90% of parents post about their children on social media and close to half create separate social media accounts on behalf of their children. Not surprisingly, more than 80% of children have a digital footprint created by their parents, by the age of 2 years⁴.

The term 'sharenting' has been coined to describe this new phenomenon. Sharenting is defined as the habitual use of social media to share news, images etc., of one's children. It is formulated by combining the terms 'sharing' and 'parenting'^{2,5,6}. The main reason parents post about their children online is to share the milestones and information of their children with relatives. The validating feedback the parents receive in return, reinforces the sharing behaviour.

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Parents are often anxious about their children's use of social media and its effects. However, when it comes to posting about their children, parents tend to overlook the possible negative effects it may have on their children. There is an extensive research base on adolescent use of social media and its impact. However, there are many gaps in the literature on sharenting, which may also be associated with similar detrimental effects. This article aims to summarize the current evidence on sharenting, focusing on providing recommendations on how to balance the parents' right to freedom of expression with the child's right to privacy.

Sharenting and privacy

Research shows that parents who use Facebook have 200 or more friends on the platform on average, and this includes people that they would not consider as friends in the offline world⁹. Many parents have profiles that have minimal privacy settings, making the shared content accessible to more people than they think. A study done in Australia has found that 50% of the images shared on paedophilic sites were taken from social media sites¹⁰, which highlights the dangers of posting pictures of children online. There is also evidence that half of the parents share personal information of their child, such as their name, school and location at a specific time, which makes children vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, kidnapping and identity theft. Evidence shows that 76% of the kidnappings of minors are done by relatives or acquaintances, which shows the risk of sharing the personal information of the child, even among acquaintances¹¹. In addition, personal data shared online can be collected for marketing purposes and be accessible to "dataveillance" firms who then sell this information to employment agencies and college admission offices, among others. There is emerging evidence that this may even lead to potential college and job rejections in children later in their lives¹¹.

Parents are also known to share content that their children may find embarrassing. For example, studies show that 56% of parents share potentially embarrassing content and another 27% share potentially inappropriate content of their child¹² (e.g., pictures in which their child is only partially dressed), which could possibly damage the child's reputation and also lead to bullying³. On the other

hand, sharenting may give children a distorted view of privacy, leading to an acceptance of their personal details being widely accessible¹³.

Sharenting and family relationships

While children and adolescents generally view sharing positive content about their achievements and happy family moments by their parents as acceptable, there is evidence to suggest that children often feel embarrassed, frustrated and annoyed by their parents' sharing practices^{14,15}. Parents and children may have different views of what is suitable to be shared. For example, while adolescents are preoccupied with the perfect physical appearance, parents may be less concerned about the physical appearance of their children when posting pictures¹⁵. In addition, while parents consider using endearments (e.g., my princess, my angel) while referring to their children on social media an expression of love, adolescents consider this as highly annoying and unsuitable¹⁵. This may lead to conflicts within the parent-child relationship as children are often unable to voice their opinion on their preferences on what is being shared by their parents, or their views are often ignored¹⁶. Privacy, respect and trust is vital in a healthy parent-child relationship, and there is evidence to suggest that disregarding the child's right to privacy and their opinions when posting on social media can impact the child's ability to build a trusting relationship with their parents¹⁶.

In addition, some hypothesize that sharenting can undermine the parental authority in regulating their children's use of technology and social media. By frequently posting about their children on social media, parents not only introduce their children to social media, but also becomes the mediator between their children and social media¹⁷.

Research has also focused on how sharenting can influence the identity development during adolescence. Having the freedom to create one's identity is vital during adolescence. However, the online identity parents create for their child, by posting pictures and updates, may conflict with the identity adolescents want to create for themselves¹⁵, which may lead to identity confusion and parent-child conflict.

Recommendations when sharing contents of children online

Although there are certain risks associated with sharenting, that does not imply that parents should stop sharing any content of their children online. Steinburg (2017) explains that the aim is to raise awareness among parents about the dark side of sharenting, so that they are empowered to make informed decisions about their sharenting practices³. Literature suggests that paediatric practitioners play

an important role in helping parents navigate the sharenting experience while protecting the best interest of the child¹⁸.

As a general rule, experts advise parents not to share online any content of their child that they would not share publicly¹⁹. Parents also need to familiarize themselves with the privacy policies of the social media sites they use and set their personal privacy settings to make the shared contents only accessible to restricted audiences³. Furthermore, parents should be cautious when adding friends to their social media sites, to ensure that anyone who has access to view these posts do not use them for unintended purposes³. Moreover, parents are advised against posting pictures of their child, no matter how young, in any state of undress¹⁸. Parents should also refrain from sharing personal identification data (e.g., full name, birth date) or posts displaying the location of the child at a particular time¹⁸ (e.g., posting the child's school and class will let anyone know where to find the child when school ends).

Parents also need to consider the child's views and take their consent before posting about them on social media¹⁸ and avoid sharing potentially embarrassing content. If parents are sharing their parenting struggles or their children's mental or physical health problems online, in order to get advice and support from others, it is advised to share this anonymously¹⁸. Parents should also keep in mind the close relationship between parental social media use and social media use in children and the need to model healthy ways of social media use.

Future directions

Experts recommend that a public health model should be adopted to disseminate information on the dangers of sharenting and responsible use of social media among parents¹⁸. However, as socialization and parenting practices differ significantly across cultures, studies need to be conducted in the local context to assess the extent to which sharenting is a problem in Sri Lanka at present, in order to design such educational programmes.

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