



Online “Sharenting”: The Dangers of Posting Sensitive Information About Children on Social Media

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The term “sharenting,” which is a portmanteau of “sharing” and “parenting,” describes the growing habit of parents to share photos, videos, and other identifying information about their children on personal social media accounts.¹ A recent European study reports that parents share online an average of about 300 photos and sensitive data concerning their children each year.² The top 3 destinations for these photos are Facebook (54%), Instagram (16%), and Twitter (12%).² The risks and consequences of sharenting are different in nature and often much more complex in their interpretation than imagined, as they also involve legal issues relating to the protection of the child’s image, confidentiality of the personal data, and digital security. Even if unintentional, this growing phenomenon can expose children to several serious risks, including sexual exploitation, future emotional distress, and digital kidnapping.¹ Sharing images, videos, and any kind of content starring children means, in fact, building a child’s “digital dossier” without his/her consent or even him/her being aware of it.³

This commentary, prepared by the European Paediatric Association/Union of National European Paediatric Societies and Associations Social Pediatrics Working Group, briefly discusses the recent phenomenon of sharenting and its risks to children. The purpose is to draw pediatricians’ attention to the growing practice of parents and families publicizing sensitive content about their children on internet platforms and the serious risk that potential abusers may intrude on their privacy and exploit data made unwittingly available on the Web. Pediatricians can play a central role in alerting parents and families to the risks of this practice.

The Social Dimension of Sharenting

Social issues generally refer to common problems that affect people within a community. However, as the result of changing cultural, economic, or social circumstances, single issues such as “sharenting” can develop into a larger phenomenon involving many people.⁴ Sharenting is often the cause of conflicting opinions about what is perceived as correct or incorrect behavior in personal or interpersonal social life. Recent statistics have revealed its social dimension and potential risks.^{5,6} Online posting of children’s photos, videos, and stories is increasingly common for parents and usually occurs without the child’s explicit consent because of the child’s

young age. The psychosocial motivations for parental behavior leading to the disclosure of sensitive information concerning children on the internet have been the subject of previous studies, which have analyzed the positive and negative outcomes of this form of ritual. Frequent access to social media, coupled with repeated handling of posted information, often is associated with high levels of stress in new mothers.⁷ In general, the motivations behind parents’ sharing behaviors are usually positive and not malicious.^{7,8} Parents often share pictures and stories of their children with the intention of showing affection and pride in their children’s achievements. In return, they receive support and encouragement from family members and friends in their family network, which help mitigate any stressful conditions, foster a sense of security,⁹ and help them develop and maintain social ties. Sharenting is also associated with various positive outcomes, including normalizing male parenting through sharing personal experiences of parenthood or helping other parents improve their parenting experience.⁷ However, the practice of sharenting is controversial because of the significant potential risks associated with sharing children’s photos and other sensitive information online. A recent study found that on average 81% of children living in Western countries have some sort of online presence before age 2 years, 92% in the US and 73% in Europe.^{10,11} The digital birth phenomenon occurs in children at approximately 6 months of age, and recent data show that within a few weeks of birth, 33% of children have their photos and information posted online.^{11,12} In Australia and New Zealand, 41% of infants have an online presence from birth; in the US, the percentage is 37%.¹⁰⁻¹² More than 30% of mothers regularly post photos of their newborns and, thanks to sharenting, an increasing number of babies are born digitally even before natural birth.¹¹ The phenomenon of posting pictures of ultrasound scans, recounting personal experiences during pregnancy,

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2023.01.002>

and even activating email addresses and social network profiles is on the rise, and a quarter of babies are reported to have some type of online presence before birth. In the US, 34% of parents routinely post ultrasounds online, 13% in France, and 14% and 15% in Italy and Germany, respectively.^{11,12}

The Dangers of Sharenting and the Right to Privacy

The practice of sharenting through social media is relatively low risk, providing that children are not identifiable. Because of the growing concern about the risks of the internet, parents have begun posting photos of their children in which only the back of the head is visible or only after pixelating the child's face. However, most parents continue to share information and pictures of their children without any precautions, often due to a false sense of security about the privacy settings claimed by social media. Sharing is a dangerous practice that exposes children to multiple risks, including violation of their privacy, sexual exploitation, emotional harm, unlawful access to metadata, online persistence, and digital kidnapping.¹³

As soon as images or videos are posted online, any effective control over them is lost. Even home cameras and simple baby monitors that generate digital data can be illegally accessed and may end up in the wrong hands. Therefore, it is advisable to take precautions and technical guidance if families use smart tech in their homes. In the area of online child sexual exploitation, child abuse investigators have found that hundreds of thousands of innocent photos depicting children in their private sphere, shared on social media over the years, have reappeared on pornographic platforms, associated with explicit or inappropriate comments.¹⁴ Ownership of photos uploaded by parents to social media is lost and it is generally difficult to obtain their removal due to a substantial lack of legislation.¹⁵ Even as children grow up, information about their childhood continues to exist, and this can cause emotional damage due to shame or embarrassment over some online content. Despite parents' initial good intentions, the negative consequences of a digital footprint can follow individuals for years after the fact. Metadata attached to images and videos is also a major problem related to sharenting, as it makes accessible a large amount of personal information about subjects, which later can be misused by cybercriminals or data brokers to build social profiles or digital dossiers about the posts.^{14,15}

An Important Legal Implication: Identity Theft

Identity theft is one of the major risks associated with sharenting.^{15,16} The notion of identity, although recurrent in our everyday language, remains expansive and ultimately indeterminate. Indeed, although various social sciences have attempted to describe its content, we do not have a truly comprehensive definition of what identity is. The term "personal identity" can be given different meanings. However, we

Table. Main types of fraud resulting from digital identity theft

The availability of data provided by the practice of reporting sensitive content on internet platforms can facilitate the following forms of digital fraud

- Identity cloning: the substitution of a person for the purpose of creating a new identity and using it in illicit activities.
- Financial identity theft: identity theft for the purpose of using a person's identifying information to obtain any kind of financial benefit, including credit or financial loans or to open bank or credit cards accounts in the victim's name.
- Criminal identity theft: using a victim's data to perform various types of illicit public acts in the victim's place.
- Synthetic identity theft: use of personal data of different individuals combined to "technically" construct in the laboratory, in whole or in part, a new identity according to one's needs.
- Medical identity theft: use of others' personal data to obtain health care services, other types of medical advantages, or public and individual's health-related crimes.

can say that with the concept of "personal identity" we denote all that we are, our physical, psychological, and cultural characteristics, starting with our name and date of birth. Every individual has the "right to personal identity," and it is accepted and legally established throughout the world that everyone has the right to the integrity of his or her intellectual, political, social, religious, and professional heritage that begins to develop from the day of birth. Identity theft is a complicated and somewhat-unknown crime. Complicated in that it is difficult to combat and particularly difficult to prevent,¹⁷ and unknown because it is constantly evolving, driven by technological evolution, which continually transforms the crime and the modus operandi of the perpetrators.^{15,16,18} Parents often post confidential information, unaware of the possible consequences.^{15,16,18} Parents have already shared nearly 1000 photos of their children when their children turn 5 years old. In 19% of cases, parents who post their children's stories also reveal their names and date of birth, and 45% of Facebook posts include the child's first name.¹⁰⁻¹² The availability of this information coupled with illegally obtained social security data on the dark web,¹⁴ can expose children to serious risks (Table), including digital kidnapping.¹⁵

Conclusions

The practice of parents publicizing sensitive content concerning their children on internet platforms is well-established and increasing. Pediatricians can play a central role¹⁹ in making parents aware of the dangers associated with sharenting.²⁰ To protect children's privacy, families can be instructed to use defensive strategies such as photo editing and self-censorship. They can also be helped to balance their natural inclination to share pride in their children's progress and educated about the risks associated with this practice. ■

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