

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Double-Edged Sword of Sharenting: Ethical Considerations and Solutions for Protecting Children's Digital Privacy

WAJIHA RIZWAN, NAZISH IMRAN, TIPU SULTAN

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ABSTRACT

In the age of social media, the phenomenon of "sharenting"—the practice of parents sharing extensive information and images of their children online—has gained significant attraction. While this trend allows parents to connect with friends, family, and broader communities, it raises profound ethical concerns regarding children's privacy and autonomy. This narrative review explores the implications of sharenting, focusing on the potential risks it poses to children's well-being, including privacy violations, cyberbullying, and the long-term impact of digital footprints especially from perspective of commercial sharenting and kid influencers. Through a review of existing literature, the discussion highlights the delicate balance between parental expression and the child's right to privacy. It examines the ethical responsibilities of parents in curating their children's online presence and considers the perspectives of child development experts on how such practices may affect children's identity formation and social interactions. Furthermore, the article underscores the need for parents to be more cognizant of their children's consent and the potential ramifications of sharing personal information in a public forum. Ultimately, this exploration seeks to foster a dialogue about responsible sharenting, advocating for a framework that prioritizes the best interests of children while allowing parents to share their experiences. By addressing these ethical dilemmas, we can contribute to a more informed discourse on the implications of parental sharing in the digital age.

Key Words: *Sharenting, Children's privacy, Child rights, Digital footprint, Kid influencers.*

Correspondence to:

Dr. Wajiha Rizwan,
Associate Professor,,
Department of Pediatric Medicine,
University of Child Health Sciences,
The Children's Hospital, Lahore

E-mail: drwajiharizwan@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Sharenting, where parents share images, videos, and personal details of their children online, has surged in popularity with the rise of digital platforms and technological advancements. While it may seem harmless, this trend brings forward serious ethical concerns regarding children's rights, privacy, and the potential long-term effects

on their emotional and psychological well-being in an increasingly connected digital world.¹ This narrative review article explores the origins of sharenting, parental motivations behind the behavior, key ethical considerations, psychological and social consequences for children, and recommendations for a balanced and responsible approach.

DEFINITION AND ORIGINS OF SHARENTING

Sharenting is a trend where parents or relatives post detailed information, including text information, images, videos and personal details, about their children (usually under 18 years of age) online, particularly on social media.¹⁻³ The term first appeared online in 2013 and was formally introduced in a scientific publication in 2015.² In current times, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok have shifted from being private spaces to public arenas where individuals, particularly parents, often share not only their but also their children's private information. Parents mostly do so without consideration of the fact they are creating digital foot prints and digital identity of their children on their own that might compromise child's privacy and dignity.^{1, 2}

PARENTAL MOTIVES BEHIND SHARENTING BEHAVIOR

The decision to share information about their children is tied to a parent's fundamental right to guide their child's upbringing.¹ According to available literature, parents engage in sharenting for various reasons that mainly include:^{1, 4}

- Expression of parental pride and celebration of milestones that starts from conception of child.
- Desire for social connection and validation from peers for their parenting skills.
- Creation of a digital gallery to document and preserve memories of childhood.
- Seeking advice, support, and a sense of community from online networks especially when the child is suffering from some ailment or disorder.
- Recent evidence shows that many parents are motivated by financial gain especially as sharenting becomes a lucrative business.⁵

ETHICAL CONCERNS REGARDING SHARENTING

Sharenting highlights the complex interplay between social media and parenting, merging personal expression with public exposure.^{1, 2} Many parents remain uninformed about the ongoing debate regarding the rights of parents versus the

rights of children in the context of sharenting. It raises significant ethical concerns about children's privacy and the potential psychological impacts on kid influencers, who may have their right to privacy compromised by their parents.^{2, 5}

i) **Child's right to privacy:** In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child established various rights for children, including the right to privacy. It states that no child should be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family, home, or correspondence, nor be subjected to attacks on their honor and reputation. Additionally, the child is entitled to legal protection against such interference or attacks (UNICEF, 1989).⁶ While the right to privacy for children seemed clear 30 years ago, its application in today's digital and interconnected world has become far more complicated, especially with the rise of sharenting, which many parents see as their own right. As children grow older, they become more aware of their online reputation but often lack the tools to effectively manage it.⁷ Social media platforms prioritize content based on relevance rather than timing, allowing childhood posts to resurface, often with lasting and unintended consequences. The ability for adolescents to escape the long-term effects of their past actions has diminished, as these posts can reappear in new, often inappropriate, contexts. This creates an uncertain future for young people, making it increasingly difficult to safeguard their privacy or assert the right to be forgotten in a digital world where their lives have been shared publicly without their consent.^{7, 8}

ii) **The digital footprint and future implications:** Every post, image or video shared online contributes to a child's digital footprint, which can follow them into adulthood.⁹ Without the child's consent or understanding (especially of pre-verbal age), parents might be inadvertently shaping a digital identity that could have far-reaching consequences on self-perception, social interactions, and even job prospects later in life.⁹ According to a study conducted in 2010, children can begin to develop an online identity as early as six months of age.¹⁰ The

adolescents may experience long-lasting effects from their parents' sharenting, such as feelings of embarrassment and online bullying, which can ultimately lead to low self-esteem.^{7, 9} A study conducted at University of Michigan Health System indicates that 55% of parents share embarrassing information about their children on social media, which negatively impacts the children's self-identity development.¹¹

- iii) **Cybersecurity risks and online vulnerability:** The distinction between sharing and oversharing can easily become blurred for parents, leading to the posting of information that may later embarrass or harm their children. Even many parents might share information on social media with good intent and may be unaware that the pictures and comments they post online can potentially be viewed by a wide audience due to the vast reach of social media.¹¹ Many adults find it challenging to dedicate time to reviewing the Terms and Conditions of each app they download and often feel unprepared to effectively manage their own data and privacy online.⁸ Surveys indicate that three-quarters of parents have witnessed "oversharenting," where other parents share embarrassing stories or location-identifying information about their children. Parents often share sensitive information such as birth dates, names, locations and photos or videos of their children during various daily activities. Such sharenting habits can make children vulnerable to identity theft, data broker profiling, hacking, facial recognition tracking, security threats, violence, cyber stalking, or even worse, online predatory behavior.^{10, 12}

Incidents of sharenting have raised significant privacy concerns, including the alarming trend of "digital kidnapping," where strangers hijack children's photos and share them online as if the children were their own. Additionally, children's images can become targets for ridicule and cyberbullying, exemplified by a notorious Facebook group that mocked "ugly" babies. These scenarios highlight the serious privacy risks and unintended consequences of sharenting in the digital age.¹¹

Sharenting may result in children's images being exploited on pornographic websites, underscoring the critical need for parents to prioritize digital privacy. A mother posted images of her twins during toilet training and was shocked to learn that how quickly innocent photos could be misused. Strangers accessed, altered, and shared these photos on a site frequented by pedophiles. It highlights a serious and often overlooked danger in today's culture of sharing personal data.¹²

A Barclays study predicts that by 2030, "sharenting" could contribute to two-thirds of identity fraud cases affecting this generation. Over time, this information can be exploited to create false identities, open bank accounts, apply for credit, or engage in other forms of financial fraud using a child's name. Since children usually do not monitor their credit until adulthood, these fraudulent activities can remain undetected for years, making them more difficult to uncover and address.¹³

- iv) **Child shaming:** One negative consequence of parents' sharenting is emotional abuse, exemplified by "child shaming" videos where parents punish their children for negative behavior. These punishments can include humiliating actions such as shaving heads, taking away favorite toys, forcing them to eat hot sauce, and subjecting them to cold showers. The YouTube channel Shaytards, with 4.82 million subscribers, features a couple sharing their children's lives from birth to the present. In one video, a child is seen pleading with his father to remove a previously shared video, illustrating the emotional impact of such exposure.¹⁴
- v) **Exploitation and commodification of childhood:** The rise of digital technology and social media has transformed cultural and economic landscapes, leading many individuals to pursue influencer status for recognition and rewards.¹⁵ This shift is based on the perception that social media provides equal opportunities for digital fame and financial success.¹⁶ In this environment, an increasing number of parents are engaging in sharenting—posting content about their

children on online platforms—as a way to generate income from their family experiences.¹⁷ This trend brings ethical concerns to the forefront, especially regarding the potential exploitation of children's images and identities for commercial gain. As parents establish accounts specifically for their children, they may unintentionally or sometime even intentionally jeopardize their children's privacy and autonomy, turning their lives into public narratives.¹⁸ Such parents often aim to boost their popularity and connect emotionally with their audience by sharing personal and sensitive moments. This practice not only exposes children to online risks but also questions the authenticity of these emotional disclosures and raises ethical concerns about the motivations behind sharenting and the impact it has on children's rights and well-being.^{2,15,17}

Kid influencers like Ryan Kaji and Pixie Curtis illustrate the increasing trend of minors whose online presence is curated and controlled by their parents, often leading to substantial financial success. Ryan's World, previously known as Ryan's Toy Review, is a prime example of how a child can become a worldwide phenomenon, earning millions through toy unboxing videos. His parents left their careers to focus on managing his YouTube channel, exchanging aspects of Ryan's privacy for significant monetary gain. Similarly, Pixie Curtis, the daughter of PR executive Roxy Jacenko, has gained considerable attention on Instagram and launched a successful brand at a very young age.⁸ The rise of kid influencers has encouraged parents to adopt sharenting as a means to showcase their children's lives, often seeing it as a route to fame and financial gain. Real-life cases discussed below highlight the dark side of commercial sharenting, where the exploitation of children's online personas for profit raises serious ethical concerns and potential harm.

Fantastic Adventures: The channel Fantastic Adventures, with over 700,000 subscribers and 242 million views, was revealed to be a front for exploitation. What seemed like a fun and innocent YouTube channel featuring children acting out

imaginative "superhero" scenes was not as it appeared. Machel Hobson, the mother running the channel, was found to be abusing her children while making nearly \$300,000 annually from their appearances. Police charging documents disclosed that the Hobson children had been removed from school for years to continuously produce videos. Furthermore, they were subjected to severe abuse, including physical beatings, pepper-spraying, molestation and starvation, all for failing to meet their mother's demands or perform adequately in the YouTube videos.¹⁸

The Circuses: Zoe Killen, who appeared on her mother's YouTube channel, The Killen Clan (now The Circuses), reflected on her experience, saying that there were moments when she was younger and *didn't want to be filmed, but she couldn't communicate that*. Her sister, Piper, expressed similar feelings, noting that *she used to feel like they were characters inside a snow globe, with the world watching them from outside*. This underscores the urgent need for legal reforms to protect children's rights and grant them control over their digital footprints.¹⁹

- **Pakistan: Ahmad Shah:**

In Pakistan, commercial sharenting is also gaining popularity, especially after the overnight fame of a five-year-old boy, Ahmad Shah. He is one of the youngest child stars in Pakistan, having gained widespread attention on social media and television after a video of him, in which he innocently and assertively spoke to his teacher, went viral. His blunt and loud mannerisms quickly made him a sensation, leading to regular appearances on popular TV shows, Ramadan transmissions, and game shows, raising questions about the potential exploitation he faces in the media. He has millions of followers on various social media platforms, including YouTube, where he now appears regularly with his siblings and cousins. His fame is often criticized for exploiting him as a source of entertainment, compromising his education and mental as well as physical health, with many pointing out that he is treated as a novelty or joke rather than being valued for any actual talent.²⁰

DISCUSSION

The impact of sharenting on children's privacy and well-being. The effects of sharenting are becoming increasingly evident as the first generation raised in the public eye begins to speak out about breaches of their privacy, often without their consent. Their voices reflect the emerging consequences of having their lives shared online by parents from an early age. A study conducted by the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) in the UK in 2015 found that 7% of parents acknowledge having shared negative or critical content about their children online, including posts about poor grades or inappropriate behavior.²⁰ Interestingly, in a study involving Turkish parents, 86.9% of participants expressed the view that parents, relatives, and caregivers sharing children's photos and videos on social media platforms could be considered a form of child neglect and abuse.²¹ Whereas, the study conducted by University of Washington and the University of Michigan highlights the significant gap between children's concerns about their online privacy and their parents' lack of awareness. It also underscores how children, far more than parents, believe there should be clear guidelines on what is shared about them on social media, reflecting the emotional impact of sharenting on their well-being.

Moreover, an anonymous letter shared on TikTok by a teenager from a well-known social media "family vlogger" household gives insight into how, beyond privacy and trauma, children can feel exploited for content, losing autonomy and control over their identity. He wrote: *"Because I'm in too deep, there's no going back now, and I never consented to being online. I wouldn't have been able to anyway, I was two or three when I went viral for the first time, and now there's things I just can't do. There are several things about me and my identity that the world isn't allowed to know, because I don't choose what content my parents post, the channel isn't mine. Again, they're the boss and I'm the employee."*¹⁸

Toward a balanced approach to sharenting: proposed solutions and best practices: To address the growing concerns surrounding sharenting, a balanced approach is essential. This involves implementing a combination of legal

regulations, educational initiatives, and best practices for parents.

- i) **Legal frameworks addressing sharenting and children's rights:** Research indicates that parents often post photos or videos out of frustration, seeking support from others, which can inadvertently expose their children to bullying and other negative consequences.^{9, 11} This behavior underscores the need for parental responsibility when sharing children's information online. To mitigate risks like digital kidnapping and cyberbullying, child rights organizations such as UNICEF and the Child Rights International Network should develop ethical framework for digital parenting and advocate for laws regulating parental postings on social media. Few countries, like France, have taken steps to protect children's rights, allowing adult children to sue their parents for sharing content without consent.²³ Notably, a Canadian child successfully sued his parents for posting baby photos online without permission, highlighting the urgent need for global attention to children's rights and privacy.⁹ Despite progress in some nations, many, including Pakistan, lack policies to safeguard against the negative impacts of sharenting.

Moreover, there are concerns regarding economic abuse of child influencers. The Coogan Laws, established in California in 1939, emerged as a critical protection for child actors following the financial exploitation of Jackie Coogan, who lost most of his earnings due to his parents' mismanagement.²⁴ The original law mandated that fifteen percent of a child actor's earnings be set aside until adulthood, addressing the specific needs of child performers. However, with the rise of kid influencers, who often operate in domestic settings, there is an increasing necessity to adapt these protections. Many parents view their children's online presence as play rather than work, highlighting a gap in legal safeguards. Extending similar protections to child influencers could help prevent potential misuse of their earnings and ensure that their rights are upheld, building on the foundational principles of the Coogan Law.¹⁸

- ii) **Awareness campaigns for parents: fostering a culture of responsible digital parenting:** While research has aimed to improve parents' digital literacy for supervisory roles, many do not recognize how their sharenting practices can violate their children's privacy. It is essential to educate parents about the potential risks associated with sharenting. Awareness campaigns can promote responsible digital parenting by highlighting the importance of respecting their children's privacy even in online spaces to prevent them from harm.²⁵ As we navigate this landscape, we must ponder the thought-provoking question: *"While a picture may indeed be worth a thousand words, likes, or even dollars, is it worth compromising a child's dignity?"*²⁶

A notable example of promoting responsible sharenting is Anna Whitehouse,⁸ known as Mother Pukka, a parental influencer who emphasizes ethical practices. Her approach includes using pet names and emojis instead of her children's real names, avoiding the sharing of specific details about their schools and personal information, and photographing her children in ways that obscure their faces or capture them from behind. Whitehouse actively engages with her audience on social media about children's privacy, encouraging other influencers and parents to reconsider their practices regarding sharing images and information about their children. Her efforts reflect a commitment to modeling responsible sharenting and fostering a broader dialogue about online privacy. These varied approaches emphasize the difficult decisions parental influencers must make in balancing public exposure, financial success, and the overall well-being of their children.

CONCLUSION

Sharenting raises complex ethical questions about privacy, consent, and the long-term emotional and psychological impact on children. A balance must be struck between parental rights and the child's right to privacy and future autonomy. By developing ethical and legal frameworks for sharenting and raising awareness to encourage responsible digital behaviors, parents and communities can ensure that they are protecting their children's interests in the digital age.

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Authors' affiliation

Dr. Wajiha Rizwan,

Associate Professor, Department of Pediatric Medicine, University of Child Health Sciences, The Children's Hospital, Lahore

Prof. Nazish Imran,

Child & Family Psychaitry Department, King Edward Medical University/Mayo Hospital, Lahore

Prof. Tipu Sultan

Professor of Neurology, Department of Neurology, University of Child Health Sciences, The Children's Hospital, Lahore

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