

Sharenting: Risks and Remedies

Sharenting is the growing practice of parents sharing their children's photos, identities and information on social media platforms. The term itself combines "sharing" and "parenting." This often occurs without children's consent and is especially common on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. Approximately, 75% of parents currently engage in sharenting.ⁱ While capturing children's photos and videos is not new, what sets sharenting apart is the public and widespread sharing of these moments online.

Why does sharenting happen?

For one, social media offers quick and convenient ways to connect.ⁱⁱ Parents engage in sharenting to celebrate milestones and share updates about their children to their family and friends. However, without realizing it, some parents may share content for attention and online approval to boost their likability. In some cases, sharenting is a way for parents to showcase their parenting skills, and the positive feedback they receive can validate their experiences and make them feel supported.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, many parents view their children as extensions of themselves, and by sharing their children's milestones or achievements, they are also presenting themselves in a positive light.^{iv}

But...

Even with the best of intentions, parents may not consider or realize the long-term consequences of sharenting. If they haven't faced real risks themselves, they might believe nothing negative will happen to them or their children.^v Social media can create a false sense

of security^{vi} which can lead parents to inadvertently put their children at risk, including the misuse of sensitive information shared online.

What are the big risks?

Sharenting may negatively affect both parents and children in unexpected ways. For parents, sharing their child's life and parenting practices might lead to judgment from others, which can make parents feel insecure about themselves and engage in unhealthy comparisons with others. It can also lead to conflict within the family if there are disagreements about what should or shouldn't be shared.^{vii}

For children, there are more serious concerns, especially as some content shared on social media fall into the wrong hands. For example, when personal details like their face, name, or school are shared online, they can be at risk of identity theft or exploitation, as the information can be misused to deceive or scam the family. It is predicted that by 2030, almost two-thirds of identity theft will be able to be traced back to sharenting, with information coming from social media and parent blogs.^{viii} In all, it is important to remember that once a child's information is in the public domain, it becomes difficult for parents to fully control who sees or uses it.

Since children often can't give consent, they may later feel uncomfortable with their photos, videos, and personal details being shared publicly. This can lead to embarrassment or even bullying, which can affect their mental health. There is always the possibility that sharenting, having been more common, may reduce embarrassment for some, feelings of shame are still possible. That's why it's so important for parents to be careful about what they share online about their children.

Could sharenting be helpful?

While sharenting has its disadvantages, it's not all bad news. For one, the ease of social connections allows parents to build global communities,^{viii} exchange advice, and support other parents in navigating similar parenting experiences.ⁱⁱⁱ

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Additionally, sharenting can help geographically distant family members stay connected, enabling them to participate in their loved ones' lives through photos and updates. This can foster a sense of closeness despite physical distance.

Another benefit is that some parenting practices and family dynamics that used to be stigmatized are becoming more accepted. For example, sharenting has helped normalize conversations around breastfeeding, postpartum struggles, and mental health challenges experienced by parents.^{ix} Online social connections can also raise awareness and encourage support for issues like the experiences of neurodiverse children or single-parent households. This growing awareness can further reduce the stigma and increase understanding of different types of families.

What should parents do?

The idea is not to completely shun social media, but to engage in sharing more mindfully and cautiously. There are several steps parents and guardians can take to make this happen, and we offer some strategies below.

1. According to sharenting experts such as Stacey Steinberg, discuss consent with your children when they are as young as three years old. Ask them before posting, and do not share unless they are comfortable and let you know they are okay with it.
2. Reduce and control your followers list.^{vii} This helps ensure that information about your children only reaches those you personally know and trust. Parents can also think about alternative sharing mediums such as email chains.
3. Think about how your child might feel about the post before sharing it. This makes parents more mindful of their children's feelings and helps avoid embarrassing them in the future.
4. Parents should take time to reflect and think about why they are sharing online. In the past, people mostly saved photos to preserve memories. Today, however, other reasons like social validation or monetary benefits may take priority. It's important for parents to reflect on their own values and underlying purpose behind sharing with the world: Why are you posting, and what are the potential implications?

Experts like Stacey Steinberg remind parents not to confuse online "reel" memories with real ones. Sharing too often can shape how children remember events,

sometimes replacing their real feelings with the version posted online. As children grow and become more independent, experts suggest posting less about them.

Remember, the key is to find the balance between sharing enough information to keep you and your children connected to your loved ones while maintaining your and your child's privacy.

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