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Parenting in the Public Eye

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Parenting in the Public Eye: The Dangers of Sharenting

Abstract

      This paper examines how parents share photos, videos and information about their children on social media websites, called sharenting. COPPA, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act is mentioned specifically because it does not protect children's online presence from their parents. Multiple types of sharenting are examined such as; posts for family and friends to view, informational blogs and posts, punishment posts, and YouTube vlogging, or blogging in a video format. Vlogging is dissected by studying three different family vlog YouTube channels and the content that they create. The confidence and sense of self worth of children whose parents participate in sharenting is discussed as well as both present and future repercussions of these posts. Additionally, threats to children's safety are looked at from how schools, activities and addresses are sometimes available to find on parent's profiles on websites like Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. As well as safety risks, there are often risks of bullying for the child because of the often sensitive nature of these posts. All of these have the potential to be very detrimental to children and their emotional development.

      Keywords: Sharenting, vlogging, family vloggers, punishment posts, social media

In this day and age social media is constantly growing and evolving. Almost everyone has one or more accounts on websites like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat or Twitter. While there are many positives that come with social media; such as connecting with friends, boosting self esteem, and being a good way to relax, there are also some very serious risks that come along with social media. This paper will focus on the negative effects of social media that affect children when their parents post about them online. This is known as sharenting. Sharenting is when parents post online about their children, sharing either pictures, videos or stories about them. With how popular social media has gotten, sharenting is only becoming more widespread today. This paper will discuss the reasons for sharenting, the risks of sharenting, types of posts that parents share about their children, sharenting used as a form of child abuse and the YouTube phenomenon known as "Family Vloggers".

Current statistics from a study done by Stacy Steinberg (2017) show that 56% of parents have shared potentially embarrassing information about their children online, 51% provided their child's location and 27% of parents have shared potentially inappropriate pictures (p.848). While children are protected online by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which keeps children's information safe from mega corporations, there is currently nothing that protects children's privacy from being shared online by their own parents.

While most parents who engage in sharenting have no intention to harm their children, even innocent posts can cause unintended consequences. There are a number of ways that parents who participate in sharenting generally post about their children and many of these are posted about in "family blogs" or "vlogs" which are video blogs usually posted on YouTube. Many of these include parenting tips and tricks meant to help other parents. They also generally include personal stories about their children. All of these statistics also come from Steinberg's research. The most common is advice on getting children to sleep, the second most common is nutrition or eating tips. Also very high in popularity is "discipline", whether using an embarrassing photo or video specifically to punish the child, including stories about how they punish their child,

posting about their child's school or daycare and posting about behavioral issues or even sometimes mental or physical illnesses. Most of these may seem harmless at first, but when you start to consider how they could add up and affect the child, these "harmless" posts can become very detrimental to both the child and the family's safety.

Each of these types of posts are harmful in their own way. Any type of post that would contain information about a child in a story format has the potential to be harmful. This is because if that child's peers from school or extracurricular activities can view the post, it's possible that they may make fun of the child for that story, even if it's not embarrassing in nature. Another instance of bullying from stories posted about children is when strangers on the internet, often adults, will bully a child online if the story is embarrassing. Even if none of the child's peers view the post and if no bullying occurs, damage can still be done. Children are very sensitive and a child could feel embarrassed or uncomfortable because of what their parents are posting about them. This can very negatively affect a child's self esteem, confidence and relationships with their parents and other family members.

Another type of post that can be extremely detrimental to a child's self esteem is when parents post about their child's behavioral issues, disability, mental illness or physical illness. One of the positive impacts of sharenting is that parents can connect and find support from other parents like them. Many parents use their social media as a support group where they talk to other users that have children with similar illnesses, disabilities or behavioral issues as their own children. This can help parents tremendously in realizing that they are not alone with their family's circumstances, but it can be hurtful or humiliating to children who may not want people on the internet to know about their personal struggles. This relates back to how story posts can be embarrassing to children and can cause bullying. The same problems apply here except now their peers, their parent's peers or even strangers on the internet are able to find out about their personal medical, health, or behavioral information. This is very likely to cause bullying for that child if their classmates are able to view these posts and learn this information. However, since it is a huge benefit to parenting it shouldn't necessarily

be cut out completely. It would relieve all of the negatives of this issue if parents would consider posting online anonymously about their struggles with their child's illness, disability or behavioral issues.

It is also common for parents to post about their child's school, daycare or extracurricular activities. Now many parents do this out of pride or school spirit without thinking about the unintended consequences that can occur. The big problem with doing this is that parents are giving away their child's location during school hours to anyone who can view that post. In many cases this would also give away the school district that the family lives in. It is very dangerous for children's locations to be accessible online at all, especially when the parents have a public account. Just posting about a child's school can make them an easier target for predators online. It can also put the entire family in danger if a predator found out where they live from knowing the school district or town they are part of. Oftentimes parents may not even notice that a photo shows street signs or other identifiable landmarks giving away where the family lives.

Discipline posts are the only exception on this list because parents who use social media to discipline their children are intentionally embarrassing or harming them to teach their child a lesson. Discipline posts are also widely considered child abuse. These posts usually consist of a video of the parent publicly shaming their child as a punishment for bad or undesirable behavior. One example of this is a video from 2016 that one parent posted of him shaving his daughters head to punish her for sending a promiscuous photo to a boy from her school. The backstory of this video is unclear and may or may not be true, however it caused this type of punishment to go viral. Today it is not hard to find videos, pictures or stories online with parents either shaving their children's heads or giving them unattractive haircuts as a punishment. Another example is when parents make their children pose in public with signs that say things like "I am a bad kid" "I embarrassed my mother" and other explanations of their behavior and subsequently post photos of this online. These types of posts are generally considered to be emotionally abusive because even though hair can grow back and they were just teaching their children a lesson, these acts themselves can be very damaging to a

child's sense of worth. Once these are posted these humiliations are online for anyone to view forever. What should be considered a private conversation between parent and child has now become available to be viewed and shared by the general public.

Another bizarre phenomenon within sharenting is completely centered around YouTube and "YouTubers". Today, YouTube is an extremely popular site for many people to view, post and share videos by online creators. In the last few years a subcategory of YouTubers known as "Family Vloggers" has surged in popularity. As stated previously, "vloggers" are bloggers who blog in video format by talking directly to a camera and posting their "vlog" online. Family vloggers specifically vlog about their whole family, including their children's day to day lives and post these videos on YouTube. Popular themes of these vlogs include family trips, pregnancy updates, everyday activities such as grocery store trips and birthday parties and even topics such as health issues, emergencies, children breaking rules and disciplinary actions. This is a phenomenon that is exponentially increasing in popularity since YouTube is another social media platform in which parents can connect with other parents online. Many of these vloggers have footage of their children almost every day from the time they are born and onwards. A study from the University of Amsterdam (Lichtenstein et al., 2017) focusing on the YouTube channel the SacconeJolys, found that the total search results on YouTube for the names of all three of the Saccone-Jolys children came to 3,935 results. It is presumed that most or all of these results contain personal footage and information of the children.

Another disturbing aspect of family vlogging is the fact that these YouTube channels make money off of this content. Many of them even use YouTube as a full time job. According to Grant Sabatier (2020) this money is made from things like ad revenue, how many views a video has, affiliate links, company sponsorship, donations and channel merchandise. Because there is no standard revenue for any of these it's impossible to determine an exact salary however, a popular YouTuber could be making anywhere between $3,000 and $10,000 per one million views. While making money off of video footage of your children is an ethical debate in itself, let's take a look at three

popular family vlog channels on YouTube to get a clearer picture of what types of content family vlogs consist of.

J House Vlogs is a YouTube channel with 2.19 million subscribers and over 2 billion total views. The family members include parents, Jeremy and Kendra and their five children from ages two to eleven years old. They began their channel in 2014 and since then have uploaded over 1,400 videos each around five to twenty minutes long. Their most popular video is titled "Laura's 3 Year Old Birthday Special" and has 71 million views. The video goes through her day, beginning with her opening birthday presents, playing with her siblings, going to a playhouse and then going to dinner. Another very popular video from this channel is "First Hide-and-Seek" documenting the youngest child's first game of hide and seek with her siblings. This video has 27 million views.

The ACE Family is an even more popular channel with 19.1 million subscribers. This channel documents the lives of parents Catherine and Austin and their three young children. Their content focuses on Catherine's pregnancies, the parents' marriage, the children's dynamics with each other, and even health related videos. An example of one of their videos is "A DAY IN THE LIFE WITH ELLE" which follows their four year old daughter as she chooses her outfit for the day, brushes her hair and teeth, puts on makeup and plays around the house. This video has 2.8 million views. "WE DID NOT WANT TO DO THIS!" is another example. This video shows the whole family together at their home and ends with Austin taking their middle child to the doctor's office where she is shown in a state of undress, crying while a doctor examines her with a stethoscope. It has 7.1 million views.

Lastly, The LaBrant Fam, run by parents Savannah and Cole with 12.8 million subscribers. Most of their content focuses on the relationship between their two young daughters, popular themes being the children's school and after school activities. This channel has also published many videos about Savannah's pregnancy and even a video of her labor and delivery. Labor and delivery vlogs is another surprising theme that has been done by many other channels as well. This is unique because these

children will have public footage of them from the moment they are born. This usually includes the first time older children meet their newborn siblings as well.

For the first time in history children are having their entire lives documented online for the whole world to view. This also brings up the point that not every child is happy with their own online presence. One father said, during a study on parent bloggers done by Dr. Alicia Blum-Ross (2017), that as his son learned to read he started not wanting to be featured on his father's blog, which resulted in a struggle where the father had to balance his son's wishes to not be online and his loyalty to his fans who wanted updates on his child. This is a strange balance between parental rights and children's rights considering comparisons of importance of parental rights versus parental responsibility. While the parents have the right to post about their own lives, which does include their children, these same children also need to be able to control what personal information they are comfortable with on the internet. All of the family vlogs referenced, and countless more, will be online forever to be used as a source of entertainment for the public. Even after that child grows up, there will always be hundreds of hours of footage of their childhood available to the public. This type of content can be very harmful and will follow these children around for the rest of their lives, and anyone who googles their name can see it all. This content also has the potential to be damaging by putting the everyday lives of children and their families on display for their peers to view and critique.

Vlogging is a very drastic example of the dangers of sharenting, but parents don't have to put hours upon hours of footage of their children online to be putting them in danger. Even just a photo and a name or even a trivial fact about the child can put them in harm's way. According to Steinberg's research, in recent years it has become more common for strangers on the internet to post photos of children they've seen on Facebook or Instagram and pretend that they are their own child (p.854). Even putting miniscule facts online like a child's name, their mother's name or favorite toy or activity can make a child vulnerable to predators. A young child will be much more trusting of someone who knows their name or their parents name, than they would be of a stranger

who didn't know anything about them. So even though many parents are just trying to enjoy social media safely, or are using social media as a source of income, this sometimes seemingly harmless information can put their children at risk.

Social media is becoming more and more prevalent every day, creating many opportunities to connect with and learn from each other. Sharenting in most cases is not necessarily harmful and is a way for people to communicate with family and friends. However, it is also full of dangers that many people are not even aware of. Everything from posting photos of a child on Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat, to sharing about schools or extracurricular activities can be harmful. On the more drastic end of the spectrum there is sharing medical or behavioral information and punishment posts. Sharenting then becomes negative as personal information becomes public, encouraging others to present opinions on private family matters. Vloggers provide entertainment showing birthday parties, holiday celebrations and other fun activities. Where people seem to cross the line is when private matters are discussed and presented to millions of viewers. Many parents are living under a false sense of security that they are able to protect their children from the internet, even though so many of them are putting them in harm's way both physically and emotionally without even realizing.

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