Clicking 'pause': Re-thinking the risks of Sharenting

Educating family and friends about the importance of respecting privacy plays a crucial role when it comes to sharenting — shared parenting.

By **Nikhil Naren** Published May 15, 2024 | 11:00 AM — Updated May 15, 2024 | 11:00 AM

Sharenting

Sharenting is a term for the overuse of social media by parents to share content about their children, typically photos, videos, or anecdotes.

It's a portmanteau of the words "sharing" and "parenting."

While sharing family moments online can be a way for parents to connect with friends and family, it can also raise concerns about the child's privacy, safety, and consent, as well as potential long-term consequences for the child as they grow older and realise the extent to which their lives have been documented online without their input or consent.

Parents have no control over what happens to their children's images once they are on the internet. Even though some parents may use privacy settings on their social media profiles, once they share images of their children, they cannot manage what people do with the photos.

Related: Summers and screen-times

What is 'not' right?

Children have a right to privacy and autonomy over their online presence. Such digital autonomy must be carefully considered before parents publicly post content about their children.

When I teach my students about cybercrimes, I make it a point to highlight the use of 'new methods' to commit traditional crimes.

After all, the crimes committed through the internet or the use of digital devices may not be entirely new.

So, ask ourselves the question of whether we would be comfortable printing a picture of our child, sharing their likes and dislikes, and handing it over to a stranger. We are essentially doing this through sharenting.

In fact, one of the surveys of security.org on sharenting led to the finding that eight in ten parents have friends or followers on their social media whom they have never met in real life.

Also read:

Privacy, identity risks

Constantly sharing details of children's lives without their consent can undermine their autonomy. Sharing personal information about a child online can expose them to privacy risks, including identity theft, online exploitation, and invasion of privacy.

Content shared online can have long-lasting effects on a child's reputation, relationships, and future opportunities. As children grow older, they may not view what seems harmless now in the same light.

Sharing too much information about a child's whereabouts, routines, or personal details can compromise their safety and security, making them more vulnerable to online predators, cyberbullying, or real-world threats.

Additionally, overexposure to social media can contribute to feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and anxiety, especially as children may start to compare their lives to the curated images presented by their parents.

Barclays, in a report, estimated that by the year 2030, sharenting by millennial parents could lead to identity fraud that could cost us close to $900 million per year in damages.

The bank noted that parents who share their children's lives online are often "lulled into a false sense of security," possibly owing to the ubiquity of social media.

Related:

Way forward

It is true that while the human brain has a limited capacity to retain information, it is the complete opposite for our digital devices and the internet. Every website visited, every search made, and every online post gets recorded and stored somewhere.

This concept of permanence can be scary, especially when one is casual and does not think of the consequences it may lead to in future.

Hence, it becomes quintessential for us to discuss the measures to reduce the practice of sharenting.

To begin with, we need to set clear boundaries. Establish guidelines for what is and isn't appropriate to share about your child online.

Consider the child's privacy, safety, and future well-being when making decisions about sharing content. Avoid oversharing personal or 'identifiable' details about your child's life.

Think if the content could potentially embarrass or harm your child in the future. As children grow older, involve them in discussions about what they're comfortable sharing.

This would also help them understand the importance of digital autonomy and privacy, which I think is critical as we navigate the age of digitisation.

Set and respect boundaries

Review and adjust the privacy settings on your social media accounts to control who can see the content you share about your child. Rather than sharing publicly, limit the audience to close friends and family members.

One may communicate with family members and friends about their preferences regarding sharing content about their child online. Encourage them to respect your boundaries and avoid sharing photos or information without your permission.

Just like audits are necessary for governments, corporations, and other institutions, to ensure accuracy and detect risks, we must make it a habit of auditing our social media accounts.

Apart from reviewing audiences, one should periodically review the content they've shared about their child online and remove anything they no longer feel comfortable sharing or that could compromise their privacy or safety.

Educating family and friends about the importance of respecting privacy plays a crucial role. By leading by example and modelling responsible online behaviour, parents can foster a culture of privacy and consent while still enjoying the benefits of sharing meaningful moments with loved ones.

(Nikhil Naren is a British Chevening Scholar, Assistant Professor at Jindal Global Law School, and Of Counsel, Scriboard, New Delhi. Views are personal.)