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SHARENTING AS AN ONLINE VISUALISATION OF FAMILY LIFE

Summary:

The phenomenon of sharenting has taken on enormous proportions nowadays.
Documenting your children's lives on the Internet has become a social norm,
that shapes our reality. Parents regularly post information about their children, as well as photos and videos with their participation showing them in different situations, without care for their security and anonymity. The article is intended to get the respondents' feedback about posting photos of their children on social media and the consequences that result from this fact.

Key words: sharenting, social media, parents, children, parenting services

Introduction

The digital world has become an integral part of our modern reality. We operate in a world in which so-called new media have taken over. These are all techniques for acquiring, capturing, processing and transmitting information, invented and introduced later than traditional television. Communication technologies, typically using the computer and the Internet, enable and facilitate interactivity between users or between the user and information. Numerous new terms have emerged to describe these technologies. Some of the most commonly used include new information technologies, new communication technologies, mass media, and new information and communication techniques. From the perspective of communication, it seems particularly important that the so-called *new media* encroach on all forms and fields of communication, including interpersonal and group communication (Bednarek, 2006, p.45).

A specific form of social media is parenting websites aimed at parents and people who will be or want to become parents. These websites often serve not only as an opinion-forming tool but also as an educational one, where parents share their experiences of caring for and raising their children (Machowiec.pl).

Social media use has positive but adverse effects on audiences, regardless of age or development stage. The media can act to both integrate and disintegrate society, hindering the way it functions (Lewowicki, Siemieniecki, 2012, p.189). An undeniable threat is the online visualisation of family life, i.e., sharing essential events and moments. The sharing of knowledge about the family, about one's children among family members, but also friends and acquaintances, has always existed and according to B. Grygiel:

> *The very fact of documenting childhood is nothing new. For hundreds of years parents collect memorabilia about their children from the beginning of photography they make albums, secure first teeth, hair and so on. A reflex of retaining the childhood of their offspring should not surprise anyone and is perfectly understandable; it is one of the shades of our caring reflexes* (Grygiel.pl)

However, the means employed by parents to commemorate memories have changed. This applies to a different aspect of this phenomenon when parents regularly post information about their children, as well as photos and videos with their participation showing them in different situations, without care for their security and anonymity. It refers to overstepping the bounds of reasonable sharing of material involving their children. This phenomenon, which is relatively new and a sign of our times, is called sharenting. This term was coined by combining two English words: sharing – as spreading and parenting – parenting. The Children and Parents Consumer Survey 2021, commissioned by the Office of Electronic Communication (OEC), found that only 26.7 per cent of parents surveyed and 23.2 per cent of children were familiar with the concept of sharenting (Keith, Steinberg, 2017, p. 413).

Alongside this term, there is also the concept of oversharenting which is used to denote particularly extreme parental activity in this area and troll parenting as the sharing of content that shows children in situations that are often creepy, intimate and stripped of privacy (Keith, Steinberg, 2017, p. 413).
Such unreflective disposal of a child's image is one form of psychological violence.

The phenomenon of sharenting has taken on enormous proportions nowadays. Documenting your own children's lives has become a social norm. According to A. Brosch, a new dimension of parenting has recently emerged, with parents seeking role models for their role in the virtual world in social media networking (Brosch, 2017, p. 380).

1. Methodological assumptions of the study

Surveys on sharenting were conducted in April and May 2023 in Toruń District (powiat toruński) among 106 respondents. The sample was purposively selected by engaging people who are parents and are active on social media.

This article aims to discover the respondents' feedback about posting photos of their children on social media and the consequences of this. Accordingly, the research problems employed the following form:

1. What do respondents use social media for?
2. What were the motives of the parents surveyed when posting photos of their children online?
3. How often do you post photos of your children in the media?
4. What types of children's photos do respondents most often post?
5. Do parents ask the child for permission to publish the image?
6. Are respondents aware of the risks to children's privacy from uncontrolled posting of their photos?

A diagnostic survey with a questionnaire technique was applied. A research tool in the form of a survey questionnaire was constructed for the survey purposes. The survey data were subject to coding due to the highlighted variables.

2. Analysis of own study results

What the respondents have in common is that they are all parents of children of different ages and use social media. However, they differ in gender, age, education and place of residence.

Table 1. Socio-demographic data of respondents (N=106)

No.	Response categories	Number of respondents	Value %
1.	Gender		
	a) Female	104	98.1
	b) Male	2	1.9
2.	Age		
	a) Up to 25	9	8.5
	b) 26-30	13	12.3
	c) 31-40	57	53.8
	d) 41-50	26	24.5
	e) Over 50	1	0.9
3.	Education		
	a) Higher	19	17.9
	b) Bachelor's degree	30	28.3
	c) Secondary education	55	51.9
	d) Vocational education	2	1.9
4.	Place of residence		
	a) city	51	48.1
	b) village	55	51.9

The respondents were virtually all women, with only two males participating in the survey. Having the findings aside, many studies on social media use show that today, women are more visible online and post much more than men. However, according to Pakoński, they are more involved in entering into online relationships with people they meet and are more likely to like and comment on posted content. According to the researcher, they are more sensitive than men and approach many issues more emotionally, making them easier to interest. Women also frequently visit online shops when making purchases and generate more traffic on the platforms (Pakoński. 2015.).

The respondents range in age from 20 to 52. More than half of those surveyed are between the ages of 31 and 40. The results indicate that the belief that only young people use social media is a stereotype.

In terms of education, more than half of the respondents have a secondary education.

The results for place of residence were more or less evenly distributed. Only 3% more of those surveyed were rural residents.

The surveys showed that the respondents use a range of social media.

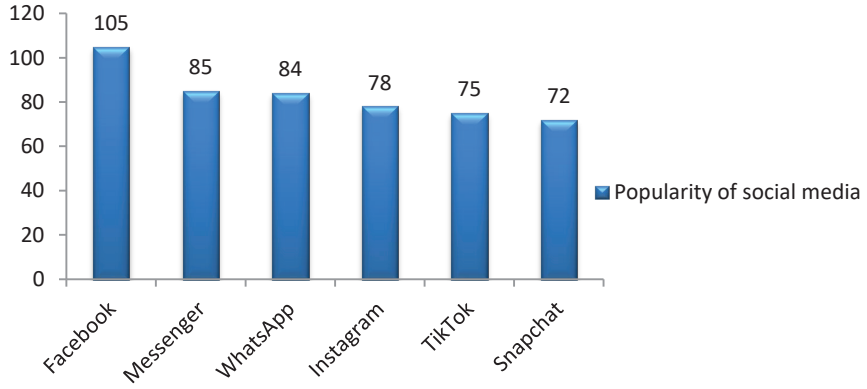


Chart 1. Popularity of social media (N=106)
(Data does not add up due to multiple choices.)

The most popular sites that respondents visit are Facebook (which almost all respondents declared using), Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat. The above results align with nationwide research on media popularity, as we use an average of six social media platforms in our country, with the most popular being Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok. On average, we devote 2 hours and 2 minutes to them per day (Raport Digital, 2023).pl).

It was reasonable to ask respondents what the purpose of their use of social media was.

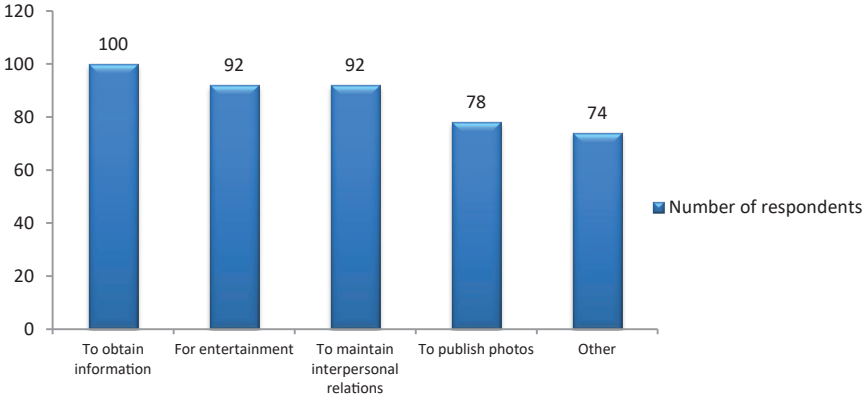


Chart 2. Purpose of using social media (N-106)
(Data does not add up due to multiple choices.)

All respondents stated that they use the media mainly to get information. However, other categories, such as entertainment, keeping in touch with people or sharing photos, ranked just as highly. Among the category 'other', almost all respondents

declared that they were sharing opinions and comments, and one person cited work as the purpose of using the platforms. Consequently, parents are an active group on social media, and one could venture to say that it is an integral part of their lives.

The next question, closely related to the previous one, concerned specific content published on the Internet.

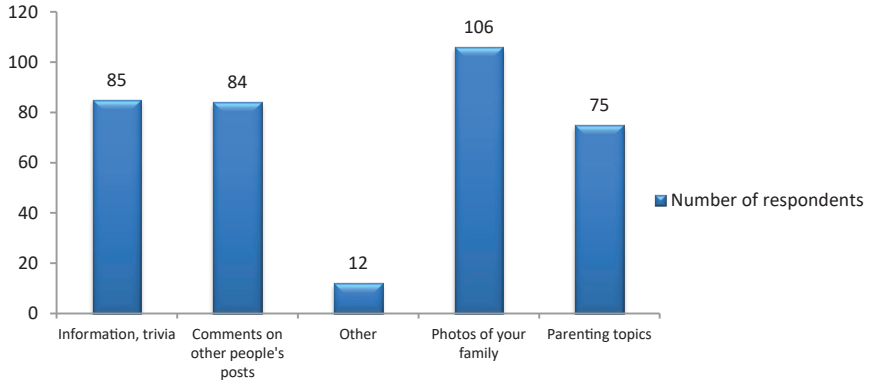


Chart 3. Topics of posts in social media
(Data does not add up due to multiple choices.)

All respondents admit to sharing various content online. The fashion for being an active user of Internet forums, posting, commenting, or giving opinions on everything that appears on the portals has turned the Internet into a space for self-promotion, and its participants have become media celebrities. According to some researchers, a so-called culture of media narcissism has now emerged, in which people often present themselves as well as an idealised image of their family, which fosters the need for self-esteem. According to M. Szpunar,

> *Ordinary people are convinced that their banal everyday life must necessarily be shared with others, and simply being in the media will make them valuable and significant individuals. They gain prominence through their media presence and visibility* (Szpunar, 2016, pp. 55-56).

The study's results indicate that photos of their family dominate the shared content, as declared by all respondents. Leading the way among these are photographs of their own children, which 100% of respondents also admit to uploading. Sharenting is, therefore, a common practice among parents.

According to a 2018 report by the London School of Economics, titled ‚*What do parents think, and do, about their children's online privacy?*', the majority of parents who use the internet regularly (75%) share photos or videos of their children. They are more often distributed by parents of younger children (Livingstone, Blum-Ross, Zhang.

pl). The results of a 2018 research by the Nominet organisation in the United Kingdom show that UK parents post on social media, on average, around a hundred images of their child before they are 13 years old (71 photos and 29 videos) of which one-fifth are available to the public or a wide range of friends (Polak, 2018, p.7). In Poland, a study was conducted on 1,000 parents of children under 18 who regularly use social networking sites. According to the project's authors, around 40% of parents share photos of their children. Annually, each uploads an average of 72 pictures and 24 videos online starring their children (Bierca, Wysocka -Świtała. pl).

It was legitimate to investigate the motives of the parents surveyed when sharing photos of their children.

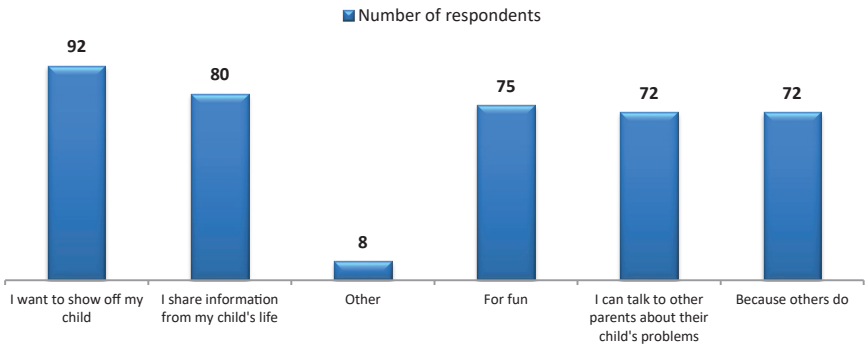


Chart 4. Purpose of your child's photos shared in social media
(Data does not add up due to multiple choices.)

According to the study results, the most crucial motive is pride in the child and their achievements, which parents want to show off to the online forum community. This is said by almost 87% of respondents. However, pride in a child's success is not the only reason for bragging about it in the media. According to the researchers

> *showcasing your child's successes allows you to gain approval from "virtual audience", giving a sense of being a "good parent" and has importance in the construction of the self-image* (Kierzkowska, 2022).

Another essential motive for respondents is to network with other parents. 75% of respondents want to share information from their child's life or talk to other parents about childhood problems. This is understandable, as for many parents, particularly those who are experiencing motherhood for the first time and have no experience of it or help from, for instance, a multi-generational family, social media provides a kind of support. In online forums, they can learn from other parents' experiences, gain knowledge about child development and care or orient themselves in the market for specialist services. The need for such a virtual support group is also mentioned in the results of

the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health project at the University of Michigan, which included 569 parents of
children aged zero to four. As many as 72% of parents find social media helpful to feel that they are creating a community with other people who have similar problems with their children, while 70% get tips on how to handle their child so that they do not make mistakes in care and parenting, 67% can get advice from more experienced parents, and 62% get psychological support to worry less about their child (Parents on Social Media.pl). However, in this case, it is surprising that sharing a photograph of your child is needed for such advice or virtual conversations.

It is, therefore, not surprising that people justify their reasons for sharing photos as doing so for fun or to imitate others. Such behaviour indicates an entirely unreflective approach on the part of the parents and exposes the child to the negative consequences of appearing on the Internet.

In the 'other' category, most people wrote that they treat posting photos of their children as a kind of virtual diary/album to record their leisure activities together, and one person admitted that by posting pictures of their child, they are advertising products. Sharenting, at this point, becomes a source of income. Often, on the Internet, photos of children include the promotion of clothing, food, beauty care or other products, the advertising of which generates income for parents. K. Kopecky reports that an example of promoting a product that produces enormous revenue is the account of the world's best-known children's YouTuber, Ryan Kaji, whose channel specialises in reviewing toys on YouTube. The boy gained over 20 million subscribers, making his parents tens of millions of dollars (Kopecky, Szotkowski, Aznar-Diaz, Romero-Rodriguez, 2020, vol110). Using children's images as a source of income raises ethical questions.

When investigating the phenomenon of sharenting, parents were asked how often they posted pictures of their children online.

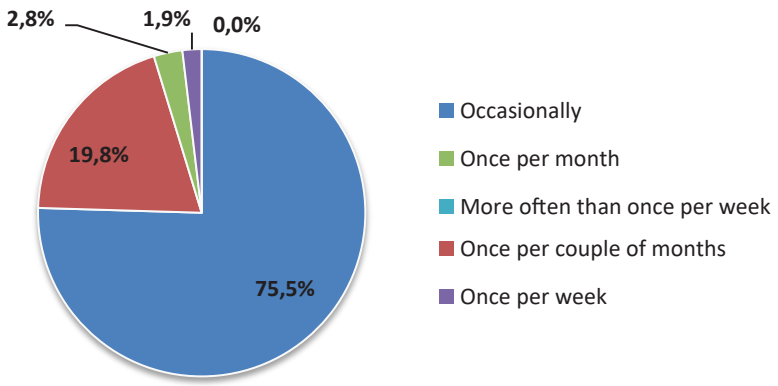


Diagram 1. Frequency of posting photos of your child online (N=106)

Most people, over 75% of those surveyed, said they do this occasionally. Only less than 2% of parents admit to uploading photos of their children at least once a week. According to the aforementioned London School of Economics report, a quarter of the parents surveyed upload photos online on average once a week, while in Poland, of the 40% of parents distributing photos of their children, 21% upload photos on average once a week or more often (Bierca, Wysocka-Świtała. pl).

As parents are making their children into 'media celebrities' at an increasingly early age, often from the beginning of their lives, respondents were asked about posting photos of their child shortly after birth.

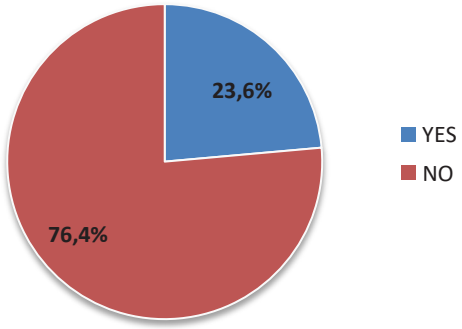


Diagram 2. Sharing a photograph of your child just after birth

According to the survey, almost a quarter of parents posted a photo of their child immediately after birth. Respondents were asked to justify this action. More than 80 % of respondents in this group said they wanted to show off this momentous fact and let family and friends know as soon as possible that a baby had arrived in the world. The others did not provide their justification. Posting photos of babies just after birth is, unfortunately, a common occurrence, according to various studies. The practice of sharenting often begins before the child is even born. This applies to 23% of children whose parents post ultrasound images of their future offspring online. Usually, this documentation covers the entire pregnancy period, followed by birth and subsequent moments of life. The average age at which a child appears online is six months (Borkowska, Wysocka, 2020, p. 9). Therefore, as the study shows, children are functioning on social media from the beginning of their lives or earlier, thanks to irresponsible parents.

When investigating the phenomenon of sharenting, a key question considered the types of photos of children posted on social media forums.

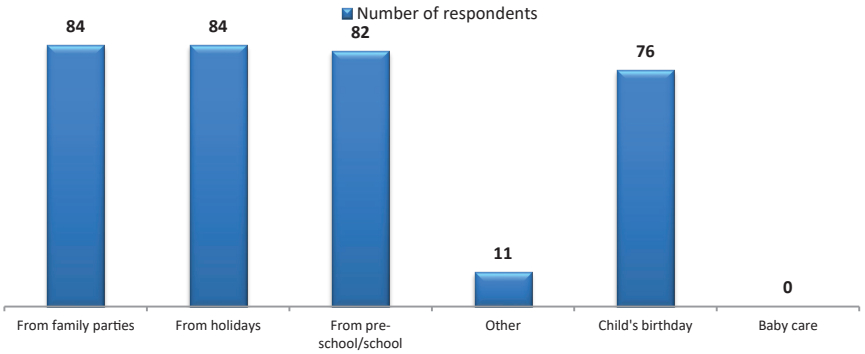


Chart 5. Types of child's photos shared online most frequently
(Data does not add up due to multiple choices.)

The results in each category are more or less equal. Parents boast photos of their children from family parties, birthdays, holidays with the family, or events at the educational establishments the child attends. Among the category 'other', respondents mainly wrote about sharing photographs of important events in their child's life, achievements and leisure activities. Fortunately, none of those interviewed post photos of their child's grooming because when browsing Internet forums, we can very often come across pictures of children showing them in intimate and embarrassing situations.

Parents were also asked about the fact of asking their child's permission to make their image public.

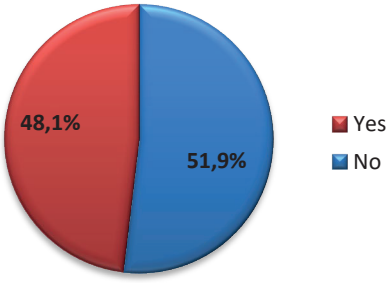


Diagram 3. Consideration of the child's consent to share the photograph (N=106)

More than half of those surveyed do not ask their child's permission to post their photo. Parents of the youngest children explained this by the fact that the child is too young to request permission. However, some parents of older children did not provide an argument in this respect. According to the law, when a child is a minor and lacks legal capacity, the parents possess the child's image and decide on the consent to make it public (Polish Copyright Act, Journal of Laws of 1994). On the other hand, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, no one has the right to interfere in a child's

private sphere, as stated in Article 16 of the document (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1991). This is also stated in Article 23 of the Polish Civil Code, referring to the right to protection of the image (Polish Civil Code, Journal of Laws of 2023). Therefore, parents are responsible for asking their child's permission to publish their photographs. In contrast, in the case of very young children, their pictures should not be posted if it is not known whether the child will consent to a digital footprint on the Internet. Therefore, the boundaries of privacy are transgressed when a child's digital identity is created without their consent, and the child is not allowed to self-determine in public spaces.

A recent study investigated parents' awareness of the dangers of publishing photos of their children. Parents were, therefore, asked about three closely related issues: who they share photos with online, what their views are on sharing photos of their child, and whether, in their opinion, it risks their child's privacy.

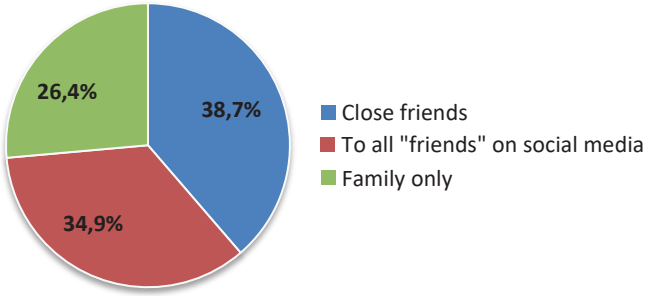


Diagram 4. Recipients of photos uploaded online (N=106)

According to the survey, most only send photos of their children to family or close friends. Unfortunately, as many as almost 35% of those surveyed admit to posting photographs to everyone they have as so-called 'friends' on Internet forums, i.e. in practice, to strangers. This puts the child's identity at risk, as nothing is lost on the Internet, and images can get into the hands of various recipients, often sexual deviants, and be used in multiple ways over which parents have no control. One study in Australia reports that up to 50% of the images published on paedophile websites may come from various social media sites where parents have posted pictures of their children (Zychma.pl).

Also controversial are the findings of another study on respondents' opinions about posting photos of their children.

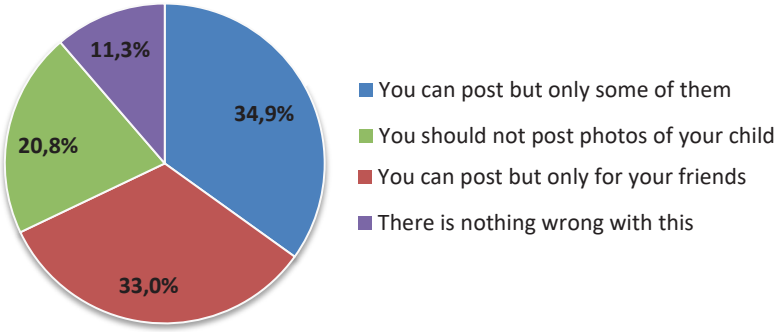


Diagram 5. Opinions on sharing photos of your child online

More than 11% of respondents believe that there is nothing wrong with making photos of children public. Corresponding with this result are the findings of the next study, which raises the question of the threat to the child's privacy once the child's image is made public.

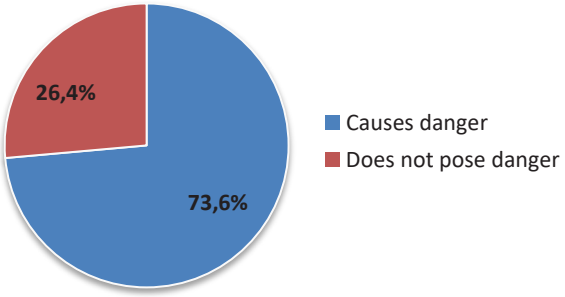


Diagram 6. Threats to children's privacy after sharing photos, according to respondents

Considering that more than a quarter of those surveyed do not see the risks of publishing photos of their children. And yet, as soon as a child's image appears in the media, their anonymity ends. There are then many threats to the child's identity. One of the real threats is the algorithms that follow every occurrence of new information about the child and thus know the child's likes and interests perfectly well, often knowing more about the child than their family. A deluge of advertisements begins, which sometimes evoke traumatic emotions. Another threat is so-called digital kidnapping, i.e. the theft of a child's digital identity. On the one hand, this could be paedophilia, common on the Internet, where a child's picture is used to create a profile of a child that provides false information, e.g. about the child's sexual preferences, or on the other hand, impersonation of a child's profile to extort money for an alleged collection for seriously ill children.

Another problem when parents create a digital identity for their child may be the media footprint left behind, referred to by some researchers as the 'digital tattoo' (Szpunar, 2016, p. 56.), which remains with the child forever. Sometimes, these pictures embarrass the child, showing them in stylised situations to make online viewers laugh. When such an insulting photograph ends up in the hands of, for example, a few years in the hands of peers, the child may become a victim of peer violence, and the seemingly innocent posting of the image will cause problems in adolescence.

3. An attempt at synthetic remarks

Disposing of the image of one's children, often in situations that embarrass and humiliate them, carries many risks. While sharenting is not a crime, it is essential to be aware of its consequences for the child, whether now or many years from now. It seems that many parents are unaware of the dangers of publishing material about their offspring or misconstrue the educational function of the family by transferring it to the virtual sphere. Sharing memories of a child's life versus abusing this right by overexposing family content on social media is a fine line that is quickly, sometimes unwittingly, crossed. Unfortunately, knowledge of the sharenting phenomenon is still insufficient. Parents often think they can share their parenting experience freely and succumb to the illusory belief that they are among their own and that others act identically. Therefore, there is a need for broad public education in this area, which should show the dangers of sharenting and its consequences for the child. A considerable role could be played by educational institutions, which should already be raising children's awareness of inappropriate behaviour on the Internet from pre-school onwards, as well as educating parents in this area in the broadest sense of the word. These can include discussions at meetings and interviews, meetings with cyberbullying specialists, educational films or making professional literature available to the public. The media, in the form of newspapers, television and the Internet, can play a substantial role in countering the threat of sharenting, and they should show the consequences of excessive posting of material from their children's lives in virtual spaces. Finally, parents, when wishing to share photos with their family or close friends, should ask the child's permission so as not to violate their privacy. They should configure their accounts on the portals accordingly and make privacy settings to restrict access to all downstream users. The most crucial issues are the safety of the child and respect for their dignity and intimacy.

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