

## No photos: Parents opt to keep babies off Facebook (Update)

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In this Saturday, Aug. 16, 2014 photo provided by Wasim Ahmad, Ahmad, left, and his wife, Lakshmi Ramsoondar-Ahmad, pose with their newborn son in Merrick, N.Y. Two days after his son was born, Ahmad bought the website domain with his son's name. "I'm going to make it a private website with a password so family can log in" to see updates, he says. "When he gets old enough, I'll probably give him the keys." (AP Photo/Courtesy Wasim Ahmad, Scott Stamile)

Behold the cascade of baby photos, the flood of funny kid anecdotes and

the steady stream of school milestones on Facebook.

It all makes Sonia Rao, a stay-at-home mother of a 1-year-old in Mountain View, California, "a little uncomfortable."

"I just have a vague discomfort having her photograph out there for anyone to look at," says Rao. "When you meet a new person and go to their account, you can look them up, look at photos, videos, know that they are traveling."

At a time when just about everyone and their mother—father, grandmother and aunt—is intent on publicizing the newest generation's early years on social media sites, an increasing number of parents like Rao are bucking the trend by consciously keeping their children's photos, names and entire identities off the Internet.

Reasons for the baby blackout vary. Some parents have privacy and safety concerns. Others worry about what companies might do with their child's image and personal data. Some simply do it out of respect for their kids' autonomy before they are old enough to make decisions for themselves.

"I have a no tolerance policy," says Scott Steinberg, a St. Louis-based business and technology consultant who has more than 4,800 Facebook friends. Steinberg says he shares no photos, videos or any information about his child.

"If I don't want somebody to know about my child, to take an active interest in them, to recognize them in a city street or as they are leaving the schoolyard, the easiest way to do that is to not have any identifying information out about them," he says.

As for Rao, she says she is otherwise active on Facebook, and even had

an Instagram account for her dog before the baby was born. She's happy posting photos of the canine, but not the many snapshots of her daughter and the dog together —no matter how cute they are. Rao does share baby pictures, via email or text, but only with close friends and family.

Facebook, for its part, encourages parents to use the site's privacy setting if they want to limit who can see their baby photos and other posts. It's possible, for example, to create a group of close friends and relatives to share kid updates with. But that's not enough for some users.

New parents Josh Furman and his wife, Alisha Klapholz, are "very protective" of their newborn. The Silver Spring, Maryland couple believes it's in their daughter's best interest to limit her Internet presence for as long as possible. As such, they haven't posted her legal name on Facebook and don't post photos of her on the site. Instead, they share her Hebrew name and also came up with a nickname to use just on Facebook. They ask friends and family to do the same.

"In 2014 we sort of feel like the repercussions of sharing private data are totally unpredictable," says Furman, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Maryland.

Like his wife, Furman is very active on Facebook. Even so, he says "our child isn't capable of making decisions about what details of her life she'd like to share or not." So they are waiting until she can.

A big reason parents are wary, even if they use social media sites themselves, is that the companies "have not been very transparent about the way they collect data about users," says Caroline Knorr, parenting editor at the nonprofit Common Sense Media, which studies children's use of technology. "Facebook's terms of service and privacy (policies)—no one reads it, it's too obscure."

Some parents look back to their own childhoods, when they were able to make mistakes without evidence of those blunders living on —forever— online.

"I had the choice of what I wanted to reveal publicly," says Wasim Ahmad, journalism professor at Stonybrook University and father of a newborn son. "I'd like to, as much as I can, retain the possibility of choice for him."

Two days after his son was born, Ahmad bought the website domain with his son's name.

"I'm going to make it a private website with a password so family can log in" to see updates, he says. "When he gets old enough, I'll probably give him the keys."

The parents hasten to make clear that they have no problems with other people who post their own baby photos.

"Many of our close friends put up photos of their kids and we love seeing them," says Furman. "This is just a decision that we made for our child, and people have been respectful."

People have shared baby photos since the dawn of the camera, and stories about kid's shenanigans long before that. Parents who decide to keep photos of their children and other data off social media say they still want to share those things, but they are bothered by the idea of online permanence.

"I think my parents told embarrassing stories about me as a child at cocktail parties, no doubt. But those can't be brought back up now—or if they are, it's to a small audience and not the whole world," says Amy Heinz, who regularly shares anecdotes about her three children on her

blog, [usingourwords.com](http://usingourwords.com).

To protect the privacy of her children, she refers to them in blogs by nicknames—Big, Little and Pink. At first, she didn't use photos of their faces, but she's eased up.

"I am always conscious that what I'm posting is affecting more than myself," she says.

Parents who enforce strict blackout rules are still very much in the minority. In a 2011 survey, 66 percent of Generation X parents (people born in the 1960s and '70s) said they post photos of their children online, while more than half said they have shared news about a child's accomplishment online. The poll was part of the Longitudinal Study of American Youth at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.

Aisha Sultan, a fellow at the institute when the poll was conducted, thinks the results might be different if the same questions were posed to respondents today.

"Back (then) there wasn't a lot of conversation about this," says Sultan, who is a nationally syndicated parenting advice columnist at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "When parents first started joining Facebook in large numbers it wasn't the primary concern. We felt like we were in control of information we were sharing with friends and family."

Facebook's privacy blunders over the years, not to mention frequent updates to its confusing privacy policies, changed all that. Now, Sultan says, parents are much more aware of the little control they have over their personal data online.

Lawmakers have begun to pay some attention to the issue, too. A new

California law requires online services, websites or apps that collect personally identifiable information to remove content that minors have posted, if requested. The measure goes into effect next year.

"It's a good start, but I don't think it replaces a lot of parental conversation, regulation and oversight," Sultan says.

She should know. Recently, her sister had a baby. Not thinking about it, Sultan posted a photo of her newborn niece on her Instagram account, which is locked and only includes close friends and family.

"I got in big trouble with my brother-in-law," she says. "He said... 'Please ask before you do that.'"

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