

Is there a darker side to sharenting?

October 24 2017, by Cahli Samata

Uploading adorable, diaper-clad baby pics—harmless fun or red flag? Do you remember the first picture of yourself posted on Facebook? I deleted mine. It was in my dyed hair and bad make-up phase. No one wants to look back on that.

But for the kids of today, their first Facebook picture usually features them while they're still in utero! And they don't even have the luxury of hitting the delete button if it's a bad angle.

The sharent trap

We've all seen it before—the Facebook pregnancy announcement ultrasound picture.

"We're excited to announce we're having a baby boy" reads the caption. Or for the more smug ones, "Boy or girl? Find out February 2018 ;)".

Before people are even born, their image is shared with hundreds of Facebook followers. And once they do make their journey through the birth canal? Photo explosion!

We get to see every step of these tiny human lives. From the first time they roll over to their first attempt at the potty and [all the tantrums in between](#). And they don't even know anyone is watching!

With privacy concerns and even children [suing their parents](#) for posting their baby pictures, more people are starting to [speak out against the](#)

[sharenting trend](#).

But is all of this digital validation just too sweet to resist?

I spoke to Dr Catherine Archer of Murdoch University to find out.

Inside the minds of mums

Catherine's research came about as a result of partnering with [St John of God Health Care](#) and [Playgroup WA](#).

As one of Australia's leading maternity service providers, one of St John of God Health Care's concerns is post-natal depression, so they were interested to know mums' motivations to use social media.

To find out, Catherine, working and partnering with Playgroup WA, ran 10 focus groups across rural and metropolitan Western Australian playgroups, supplemented with the responses from 400 online surveys sent to Playgroup WA members.

Her research highlighted something quite unusual about the ways mums viewed social media.

"Although 65% agreed strongly or somewhat that they were concerned about their kid's privacy, over half had uploaded photos daily, weekly or even every so often," says Catherine.

"So there was a bit of a disconnect between the concerns around privacy but the fact that they still did upload the photos."

So if privacy is a concern, why is there still so much sharing?

Catherine points to a lack of digital literacy and also a belief the rewards

outweigh the risks.

"For parents, there is something called the 'privacy paradox', where the perceived rewards of sharenting, such as gaining engagement and likes from family and friends often outweigh the perceived risks of over-sharing their children's photos and other data," she says.

"For many, the risks may be unclear, and their digital literacy is not high."

The privacy myth

When it comes to digitally broadcasting our lives, many of us feel safe behind the shield of our privacy settings.

But is anything on the internet *really* private?

"Facebook is a business. Instagram's a business. They're not there as a not-for-profit trying to help mums ... their mission in life is to make money," says Catherine.

"Once you've posted that photo, it's not really yours any more, it can go anywhere. I guess that's one of the main risks."

So should you be afraid your [family photos are going to end up plastered all over public billboards](#)? Maybe not, but you should at least tread carefully, because it's not an impossibility.

"It's that concept of actually being mindful and being self-aware of what you're doing and knowing that it is going to be part of your life and having some ideas about boundaries."

Likes, loves and social isolation

In Catherine's study, she found the number one reason parents cared to share was for a sense of community and connection.

They were also driven by fear of missing out (FOMO) and feelings of isolation. Some stay-at-home parents said they felt that, if they didn't communicate through Facebook, they might not talk to anyone for a whole day.

"There were some sort of dark sides to the use of Facebook," says Catherine.

"Things like feeling like they were missing out ... and also that sort of looking at [other people's posts on Facebook] and thinking they're all having a wonderful time but I'm not."

We all know the sting of watching our Facebook friends lead these perfect lives and feeling ours doesn't quite match up—whether it's the [envy-inducing resort holiday](#), the [blinding diamond-encrusted engagement ring](#) or the "Why doesn't my butt look like that?" post-gym [selfies](#).

The carefully curated nature of social media makes it look like everyone's lives are amazing. And when you've spent your day cleaning up various human excretions from a wailing, needy infant, that sting is even more pronounced.

So, when you can't beat them, you join them. You wait till your kid's asleep and put them in a [stinkin' adorable Santa sleigh](#) from Kmart and [the cycle continues](#).

But of course, it's not all bad. Many new mothers felt they got a sense of

support from sharing on social media.

"They had to be on [social media] to get that support," says Catherine.

"There's lots of positives, but it's not all positive. Some of the women talked about being anxious and depressed being on there."

"I'm not saying there's definitely a causal link, but there was some discussion of that in the focus groups from some of the women."

Making real connections

What a lot of the sharenting trend comes down to is parents (especially ones that stay at home) looking to make connections, whether it's with their family members overseas, friends or other parents in the same boat.

Catherine understands the desire to connect but says don't underestimate the value of making those connections in person.

"There's definitely a role in social media for connection and community, but also there's a role for face-to-face as well," she says.

"I still see all the value of the face-to-face things like playgroups. There has been research to show it does help with social support. So shout out to playgroups and other forms of in-real-life interaction for parents!"

Even though having a baby means you have company 24/7, it can be an isolating time for new parents. Life changes dramatically, responsibilities increase tenfold. So it's not at all surprising that parents turn to social media for comfort and support.

It's all about balance but also ensuring the safety of your family, which is why St John of God are planning to use Catherine's research to create

some [social media](#) guidelines for parents.

Until then, post with caution and maybe save the embarrassing bath-time photos for your kid's 21st.

This article first appeared on [Particle](#), a science news website based at Scitech, Perth, Australia. Read the [original article](#).

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