

Study finds parents' social media use is associated with parenting style

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Mary Jean Amon is an assistant professor in UCF's School of Modeling, Simulation, and Training. Credit: UCF

A new study finds that parents who frequently share photos of their children on social media tend to have more permissive and confident

parenting styles and engage their children with social media at younger ages.

These [parents](#) also tend to share posts beyond small networks of family and friends, regularly posting on more public networks, which raises privacy and safety concerns. The findings also show that parents don't see parental sharing as much different from regular photo sharing and rarely ask for their young children's input.

"There is no doubt that many parents are very careful regarding what they share online about their children. And there are significant benefits to sharing photos with grandparents and groups who can offer support and help keep families connected. But we need to be aware of some of the [privacy issues](#) when sharing children's information online and conduct further research to figure out long-term impacts. This is all still so new. We're still learning," says Mary Jean Amon, an assistant professor in the School of Modeling, Simulation, and Training (SMST) at UCF who is one of the researchers on the study.

The team of researchers from UCF and Indiana University Bloomington surveyed 493 parents who are regular [social media](#) users and have children under the age of 10. The Association for Computing Machinery: Computer Supported Cooperative Work has published the research.

"We were interested in looking at what parents consider private when it comes to sharing young children's information online and the perceived risks," Amon says. "We were surprised. Contrary to previous research that highlights the significant benefits of parental sharing, our study reveals that such sharing of children's photos is associated with permissive parenting styles. That means parental sharing is linked to those parents having more friend-like relationships with their children and offering less guidance than other parents. Notably, permissive

parenting has been linked to problematic internet usage among children."

The research team's findings also suggest that parents do not strongly differentiate between parental sharing (sharing photos of their children) and general photo sharing on social media and may therefore underestimate the unique risks of sharing children's photos online and engaging children with social media at early ages.

The study found most parents surveyed were comfortable sharing photos and with others resharing their photos. Most parents felt relatively comfortable with other adults sharing their children's photos and anticipated the child would enjoy the photos posted, rather than be embarrassed by them.

Although the Children's Online Privacy Act provides many rules to safeguard children, the data doesn't lie and shows that many children engage with social media at early ages. Social media platforms have a minimum age for use (13), but without a verification system it is not uncommon to see children—some very young—with their own YouTube channel or TikTok accounts. About one-third of parents with children ages 7 to 9 reported that their kids used social media apps via phones or tablets, according to the 2021 C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Health. About half the parents with children ages 10-12 reported the same.

In the survey, the team asked questions including how often a parent posted their children's photos, as well as their own social media activity. Other questions asked about their children's social media interest and behavior, as well as how parents made decisions to post photos of their child. Participants had accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest, TikTok, Myspace, and Flickr, with most users favoring Facebook, Instagram and Twitter in that order.

The study raises important questions about ensuring comfort and privacy of young children as they are introduced to social media. Research in this area also aims to help parents who use this mode of communication for support raising their children.

"There are broader questions about children's privacy in social media, where a central question remains as to how much autonomy and control children, including children of different ages, should have over their photos and information online," Amon says.

The research team is continuing to investigate connections between parental sharing and effects on children. For example, there is speculation that parental sharing might desensitize [children](#) to sharing their own information in social [media](#).

More information: cscw.acm.org/2022/index.html

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