SAFEGUARDING CHILDHOOD IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE IMPERATIVE OF DIGITAL HEALTH LITERACY TO COMBAT SHARENTING RISKS

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ABSTRACT

The digital age has brought significant changes to how we live and communicate, including the rise of "sharenting," where parents share content about their children on social media platforms. While this practice allows for the celebration of milestones and connection with others, it also presents serious concerns about privacy, consent, and the commercialization of childhood. We explore the motivations behind sharenting and examine its potential risks, including the erosion of children's privacy, the creation of lasting digital footprints, and the rise of "kidfluencers"—children whose lives are monetized online by their parents. Through a critical analysis of these issues, we argue that effective solutions must prioritize digital health literacy for both parents and children, equipping them with the tools to navigate the online world safely and responsibly. Additionally, we examine existing global policy initiatives aimed at protecting children's digital rights and highlight the need for stronger enforcement mechanisms and adaptable frameworks that can keep pace with technological advancements. In light of these findings, we posit that a coordinated effort from parents, educators, policymakers, and technology companies is essential to creating a digital environment that safeguards children's rights. By fostering a culture of digital responsibility and awareness, we can ensure that children are protected from exploitation and privacy invasions, allowing them to grow and thrive in a digital world that respects their autonomy and dignity.

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I.

THE STARTING POINT

A mother starts an Instagram account dedicated solely to documenting her child's journey from birth onward. She shares photos of her baby's first smile, first steps, and first words, each milestone accompanied by heartfelt captions. As the child grows, so does the account's following—hundreds, then thousands of followers, eager to witness the child's every new achievement. What begins as a digital scrapbook for close friends and family gradually transforms into a platform with a vast audience, including strangers. Over time, the account includes more intimate moments: bath times, tantrums, and even medical updates. As the number of followers increases, so does the sense of obligation to post regularly, capturing and sharing every significant moment in the child's life.

With the growing popularity, companies take notice of the account's influence, offering the mother sponsorship deals and paid partnerships. She begins to earn money by featuring baby products, clothing, and toys in her posts, effectively turning her child into a brand ambassador. The mother justifies these decisions by reasoning that the income can benefit her child's future and well-being. However, the commercial aspect of the account introduces new pressures: the need to maintain a constant online presence, curate content that appeals to sponsors, and engage an ever-expanding audience.

This scenario illustrates how the boundaries between personal sharing and commercial exploitation can become blurred in the context of sharenting. Ethical questions arise about using a child's image for profit and the potential impacts on their privacy and autonomy. What started as a way to document and share personal milestones has evolved into a situation that involves complex considerations regarding the child's right to privacy, consent, and the possible long-term effects of having their life monetized and publicly exposed.

II.

THE RISE OF "SHARENTING" IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The digital revolution has profoundly transformed how we live, work, and interact with one another. Among the significant changes brought about by this shift is the rise of "sharenting," a blend of "sharing" and "parenting," which refers to the practice of parents posting about their children on social media[1]. What was once confined to the physical space of photo albums and private family gatherings has now migrated to the digital realm of social networks. In this space parents share a

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[1] Ilaria Cataldo et al., *From the Cradle to the Web: The Growth of "Sharenting"—A Scientometric Perspective*, 2022 HUMAN BEHAVIOR AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES 1 (2022).

wide range of content related to their children, from proud milestones to everyday snapshots, potentially reaching vast and often unseen audiences.

"Sharenting" has become widespread, driven by various motivations[2]. Many parents share content to celebrate joyful moments with loved ones, document their child's growth, and engage with a community of other parents who provide support and advice. In some cases parents intentionally use their children's images and experiences to increase social media engagement, recognizing that content featuring children often attracts more attention and interaction. While these practices may seem harmless, they carry significant risks that could have lasting consequences for a child's privacy, security, and future autonomy[3]. As society navigates this new reality, it is crucial to understand both the immediate and long-term implications of "sharenting" on children's rights.

There are parents who meticulously document every aspect of their child's life online—from the first steps to the first day of school, from birthday celebrations to minor misbehaviors. Such posts, often accompanied by photos or videos, are shared on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok, sometimes attracting considerable attention. While this creates a digital archive of the child's life, it also exposes these intimate moments to public scrutiny, potential misuse, and exploitation. A particularly concerning trend in this context is the rise of "influencers," children whose lives are extensively documented and monetized by their parents through social media[4]. These children, often too young to understand the implications, become public figures without their consent, with their digital identities shaped by their parents' choices. Some influencers have faced criticism for exposing their children to large audiences, sometimes deliberately to boost engagement, which inadvertently subjects them to risks such as privacy invasion and unwanted attention from strangers. In some instances, these children have later expressed discomfort or distress over the content shared about them, which can have lasting effects on their sense of self and privacy[5].

These examples underscore the unintended—and sometimes intentional—consequences of sharing personal information about children in public forums and highlight the ethical responsibilities parents must consider when navigating the digital world.

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[2] Lisa Lazard et al., *Sharenting: Pride, Affect and the Day-to-Day Politics of Digital Mothering*, 13 SOCIAL & PERSONALITY PSYCH e12443 (2019).

[3] Andra Siibak & Keily Traks, *The Dark Sides of Sharenting*, 11 CATALAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION & CULTURAL STUDIES 115 (2019).

[4] Marina A. Masterson, *When Play Becomes Work: Child Labor Laws in the Era of" Kidfluencers"*, 169 U. PA. L. REV. 577 (2021).

[5] Karen Verswijvel et al., *Sharenting, Is It a Good or a Bad Thing? Understanding How Adolescents Think and Feel about Sharenting on Social Network Sites*, 104 CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES REVIEW 104401 (2019).

III.

THE PERILS OF SHARENTING

The risks associated with "sharenting" are numerous and increasingly concerning in the digital age[6]. Foremost among these is the critical issue of *privacy*[7]. The extensive online documentation of children's lives can create significant challenges for them in managing their digital footprints as they grow older. The permanence of online information means that once something is shared, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to completely erase. This lasting digital trail can have far-reaching consequences, potentially affecting future opportunities, relationships, and mental health. For instance, moments of childhood embarrassment, once inconsequential within the family, may resurface later in life, impacting an individual's self-esteem or professional prospects.

Another significant concern is the *risk of exploitation*, especially with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI)[8]. The widespread sharing of images and videos of children online can be exploited by malicious actors for various illicit purposes, including identity theft, cyberbullying, and child exploitation. A particularly disturbing development is the creation of deepfake videos using AI. These manipulated or synthetically generated videos can depict children in compromising or explicit scenarios, posing serious threats such as child pornography or extortion. The frequent online sharing of children's images, often accompanied by personal details, exacerbates their vulnerability to these dangers, creating a digital environment fraught with risks that parents may not fully anticipate.

The issue of *autonomy* is also critical[9]. Children have the right to privacy and to be the primary agents in shaping their own identities. "Sharenting" can significantly erode this right by exposing children to public scrutiny without their informed consent. As these children grow into adolescence and adulthood, they may struggle to reconcile their digital personas, shaped by their parents, with their own identities. This can lead to conflicts, psychological distress, and a sense of lost control over their lives, impeding their ability to define themselves on their own terms.

The convergence of AI and "sharenting" underscores a more urgent than ever need for increased awareness and protective measures to safeguard children in the digital age. Parents, educators, policymakers, and technology companies must work

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[6] Siibak and Traks, *supra* note 3.

[7] Verswijvel et al., *supra* note 5.

[8] Pietro Ferrara et al., *Online "Sharenting": The Dangers of Posting Sensitive Information about Children on Social Media*, 257 THE JOURNAL OF PEDIATRICS (2023), https://www.jpeds.com/article/S0022-3476(23)00018-5/abstract (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

[9] Mary Jane Amon et al., *Sharenting and Children's Privacy: Parenting Style, Practices, and Perspectives on Sharing Young Children's Photos on Social Media*, COMPUTER SUPPORTED COOPERATIVE WORK (2022), https://par.nsf.gov/biblio/10319486 (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

together to uphold children's digital rights and privacy, preventing the misuse of their images and information in ways that could harm them now or in the future.

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IV.

ETHICAL ISSUES IN SHARENTING: A CALL FOR SOLUTIONS

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The ethical implications of "sharenting" are profound and complex, raising critical questions about balancing a parent's right to share life experiences with a child's right to privacy and autonomy. While parents may view sharing as a way to connect with others, document their child's growth, or preserve cherished memories, they must also consider the potential long-term effects on their children. The digital domain is not a static repository of images; rather, it is a vast, interconnected space where the dissemination of content can have unpredictable and far-reaching consequences.

One of the most significant ethical concerns associated with "sharenting" is the issue of *consent*. Young children, in particular, are unable to fully understand the implications of having their images and personal information shared online. As they mature, children may feel pressured to conform to their parents' expectations, complicating the possibility of obtaining genuine consent. This dynamic can result in children's digital identities being shaped without their informed input, which may affect their sense of self and privacy well into the future. The decisions made by parents today may have unforeseen and potentially harmful consequences for their children's well-being.

Another pressing ethical issue is the *commodification of childhood[10]*. In an era where social media influence is often monetized, some parents may exploit their children's lives as content to build personal brands or generate income. This practice raises significant ethical concerns about the exploitation of children for financial gain. The expectation that children should perform for an audience or maintain a curated public image can create undue stress, negatively impacting their mental health, development, and self-esteem. The line between sharing family experiences and monetizing a child's life is often blurred, leading to potential conflicts over the child's rights and well-being.

These ethical issues underscore the urgent need for a broader societal conversation about the responsibilities of parents in the digital age. As society confronts these challenges, it is crucial to explore how we can protect children's

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[10] Liselot Hudders, Steffi De Jans & Emma Beuckels, *Kidfluencers and the Commodification of Childhood: A Comprehensive Review and Research Agenda in Contemporary Entertainment*, *in* ADVERTISING LITERACY FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES IN THE DIGITAL AGE 65 (Beatriz Feijoo & Erika Fernández Gómez eds., 2024), https://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-031-55736-1_5 (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

rights while recognizing the evolving nature of family structures and digital communication. This discourse must include not only parents but also educators, policymakers, and digital platform providers.

Addressing the ethical concerns associated with "sharenting" requires solutions that carefully balance the rights of both parents and children. One approach is to promote *greater awareness and education about the risks and responsibilities* involved in sharing children's information online. Parents must be equipped with the knowledge to understand the long-term consequences of their actions and to make informed decisions that prioritize their children's privacy and well-being. Establishing *guidelines and best practices for "sharenting"* is another crucial step. These recommendations could offer clear advice on how to obtain meaningful consent from older children, protect children's privacy, and avoid sharing sensitive information that could be misused. *Legal frameworks* also have a vital role to play in addressing the ethical issues related to "sharenting." Some countries have already begun implementing legislation to protect children's online privacy. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[11], for example, grants children certain rights regarding their digital data. Expanding and enforcing these protections can help safeguard children from the risks associated with "sharenting" and ensure that their rights are respected in the digital environment.

As we move forward, it is essential to continue developing and refining these solutions, ensuring that they adapt to the rapidly changing digital landscape. By fostering a culture of responsibility and awareness, we can help protect children from the potential harms of "sharenting" and support them in growing up with their privacy and autonomy intact.

V.
DIGITAL HEALTH LITERACY: A CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF CHILD PROTECTION

The ethical complexities of "sharenting," when examined alongside the potential risks it poses to children, underscore an urgent need for proactive solutions. The delicate balance between a parent's right to share and a child's right to privacy is often precarious. Without adequate awareness, parents may unintentionally expose their children to long-term consequences. We argue here that addressing these challenges effectively requires a focus on a critical element underpinning responsible digital behavior: *digital health literacy*.

As digital technologies continue to evolve and permeate all aspects of life, digital health literacy has emerged as a crucial tool for navigating the complex online landscape. This concept goes beyond basic digital skills, encompassing the

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[11] General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Legal Text, GENERAL DATA PROTECTION REGULATION (GDPR), https://gdpr-info.eu/ (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

knowledge and understanding required to use digital technologies safely and effectively. It includes the ability to identify potential online risks, make informed decisions about personal data management, and comprehend the broader implications of digital actions[12].

In the context of "sharenting," digital health literacy is not just important—it is essential. For parents, simply knowing how to use social media is insufficient. They must also understand the potential ramifications of sharing information about their children online. Parents need to be aware of how their posts might impact their children's privacy, safety, and future autonomy. Equipping parents with the knowledge to protect their children's digital identities is vital to ensuring their online presence is managed with care and attention. For children, digital health literacy involves developing the skills necessary to navigate the online environment securely and responsibly from an early age. As they grow, children should be educated about their digital rights, including their right to privacy and control over their personal data. This education should empower them to manage their digital footprint, recognize online risks, and make informed decisions about their online interactions.

Protecting children online must be a fundamental aspect of digital health literacy. It is not enough to simply warn parents about the risks of "sharenting." Instead, they must be provided with practical strategies to safeguard their children's privacy. This includes guidance on responsible information sharing, obtaining meaningful consent from older children, and avoiding the posting of sensitive information that could be exploited.

Digital health literacy should be viewed as an ongoing process of learning and development, adapting to the changing needs of children as they grow. For young children, this might involve basic lessons on online safety, the importance of privacy, and the fundamentals of digital interaction. As they mature, they can be taught more advanced skills, such as managing their digital footprints, understanding the implications of data sharing, and critically evaluating online content. This progressive education can help develop informed and responsible digital citizens, capable of navigating the complexities of the online world.

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in promoting digital health literacy. Integrating digital literacy into the curriculum allows schools to equip children with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the online world safely and responsibly. This education should go beyond technical skills, fostering critical thinking and ethical reasoning, which are crucial for making informed decisions about online behavior. Through this comprehensive approach, children can be better prepared to face the challenges of the digital age.

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[12] Robin van Kessel et al., *Digital Health Literacy as a Super Determinant of Health: More than Simply the Sum of Its Parts*, 27 INTERNET INTERVENTIONS (2022), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8861384/ (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

In response to the growing importance of digital health literacy, numerous global initiatives have emerged, particularly focusing on child protection. For example, Google's Be Internet Awesome[13] program provides parents and educators with resources to teach children the principles of online safety and digital citizenship. The program includes interactive lessons on topics such as privacy, security, and managing online reputations, offering practical tools to help children and their families navigate the digital landscape.

Another notable initiative is Childnet[14], a UK-based organization that offers a wide range of resources to help parents, educators, and children navigate the digital world safely. Childnet provides guidance on various digital-age issues, including "sharenting," cyberbullying, and online privacy, with a mission to raise awareness of the risks and responsibilities associated with digital technologies. These initiatives highlight the necessity of a unified approach to fostering digital health literacy and protecting children in the digital age.

These examples demonstrate that viable solutions exist for promoting digital health literacy and safeguarding children in the digital world. By equipping both parents and children with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate the digital landscape safely, we can ensure that children's rights are upheld and their digital futures protected. As we advance further into the digital era, fostering a culture of informed and responsible digital behavior must be a collective priority, ensuring that the next generation can thrive in a world where their privacy and autonomy are respected.

VI.
IMPLEMENTING POLICIES TO PROMOTE DIGITAL HEALTH LITERACY: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

While individual efforts to advance digital health literacy are undeniably valuable, they must be reinforced by broader policy measures to ensure these goals are supported on a larger scale. The responsibility for creating an environment that prioritizes the digital health and well-being of children extends beyond parents and educators to include governments, educational institutions, and technology companies. These entities must collaborate to establish frameworks and regulations that protect children's rights and equip them with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate the digital world safely.

Several countries have already taken commendable steps to implement policies that promote digital health literacy and protect children online. In France,

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[13] Be Internet Awesome, BE INTERNET AWESOME, https://beinternetawesome.withgoogle.com/en_us (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

[14] Childnet — Online safety for young people, CHILDNET, https://www.childnet.com/ (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

the Digital Republic Act includes provisions that grant children the right to have content removed from the internet[15]. This legislation acknowledges the evolving digital landscape and the importance of allowing children to exercise control over their digital identities. By enabling children to erase content that could negatively impact their future prospects or well-being, France has set a precedent in recognizing the digital rights of minors and safeguarding their privacy online.

In the United Kingdom, the Age-Appropriate Design Code[16], also known as the "Children's Code," is a pioneering effort to ensure that online services prioritize the best interests of child users. This comprehensive code requires digital platforms to implement measures that protect children's privacy, such as minimizing data collection, ensuring transparency about data usage, and creating age-appropriate content. The Children's Code serves as a model for adapting regulatory frameworks to safeguard children's rights in the digital age, aiming to ensure that digital environments are secure and conducive to healthy development.

Australia has also made significant progress in promoting digital health literacy and online safety, largely through the efforts of the eSafety Commissioner.[17] The eSafety Commissioner has launched various initiatives targeting both children and parents, aiming to raise awareness of online risks and provide practical guidance on how to navigate them safely.

These initiatives include educational programs, resources, and public campaigns addressing issues such as cyberbullying, online privacy, and responsible use of digital platforms. By taking a proactive stance, Australia is helping to establish a strong foundation of digital health literacy, which can protect children from the many risks they face online.

These global examples demonstrate that effective policy implementation is not only feasible but also essential for enhancing the protection of children's rights in the digital age. However, several challenges remain that must be addressed to ensure the success and sustainability of these efforts. One primary challenge is the need for consistent enforcement of these policies across different regions and platforms. Without robust enforcement mechanisms, even the most well-crafted regulations may fail to protect children's rights. Additionally, the rapid pace of technological change often outstrips the ability of existing policies to adapt. As new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things, emerge, they introduce new risks and complexities that require updated regulations and adaptive frameworks. Policymakers must maintain a vigilant and responsive approach, continuously revising and enhancing regulations to keep pace with technological

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[15] LOI n° 2016-1321 du 7 octobre 2016 pour une République numérique (1), 2016-1321 (2016).

[16] Age appropriate design: a code of practice for online services, (2024), https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/childrens-information/childrens-code-guidance-and-resources/age-appropriate-design-a-code-of-practice-for-online-services/ (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

[17] Online safety | eSafety Commissioner, https://www.esafety.gov.au/ (last visited Aug 12, 2024).

advancements. Moreover, the diverse cultural contexts in which these policies are implemented can influence their interpretation and application. The effectiveness of a given approach may vary significantly depending on the cultural context, due to differing norms, values, and levels of technological adoption across countries and regions. This underscores the need for developing flexible, context-sensitive approaches to digital health literacy and child protection that can be adapted to different environments while maintaining the core principles of safety and privacy.

Despite the significant progress made, the effort to establish a secure and empowering digital environment for children is ongoing. It is crucial that all stakeholders—governments, educational institutions, technology companies, and civil society—work together to protect children's rights and equip them with the skills they need to thrive in the digital age. By addressing the challenges of enforcement, technological change, and cultural diversity, we can build a global framework that supports the digital health and well-being of children worldwide.

VII.
CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the phenomenon of "sharenting" and the broader issue of children's rights online demand urgent and immediate attention. While parents have the right to share aspects of their lives, they also bear the responsibility to protect their children's privacy and autonomy. The ethical concerns associated with "sharenting" underscore the need for a more informed and cautious approach to sharing children's lives on social media.

To effectively address these challenges, promoting digital health literacy must become a fundamental aspect of child protection in the digital age. By equipping both parents and children with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the online world safely and responsibly, we can ensure that children's rights are respected and upheld. It is crucial for schools, governments, and technology companies to embrace their roles in fostering a culture of digital responsibility, where protecting children is a collective priority and an integral part of the digital ecosystem.

However, this issue extends beyond raising awareness; it is a clear and pressing call to action. Parents must critically evaluate their online sharing practices, prioritizing their children's best interests over the desire for social connection or validation. Educators and policymakers must integrate digital health literacy into curricula and legislation, creating environments that empower children to take control of their digital identities and understand their rights. At the same time, technology companies have an obligation to implement stronger safeguards for

children, ensuring their platforms are designed with the safety, privacy, and well-being of young users as top priorities.

This is to say that navigating the topic of sharenting requires acknowledging that the issue is not simply black or white. It isn't about wholly banning the sharing of children's photos online or advocating for unrestricted access to their lives through social media. Instead, there is a middle ground, a "responsible sharenting," which allows parents to share meaningful moments while still respecting their child's right to privacy. This balanced approach involves adopting thoughtful practices that minimize risks without completely forgoing the joy of sharing.

A key aspect of responsible sharenting is recognizing the importance of consent and age appropriateness. As children grow older and develop a sense of self-awareness, they can begin to understand the implications of having their images and information shared online. Involving children in these decisions respects their autonomy and helps them feel a sense of control over their digital identities. For younger children, who cannot yet comprehend the concept of online privacy, parents are encouraged to consider the potential long-term impacts of what they post. Erring on the side of caution helps protect the child's future sense of self and personal boundaries.

Another crucial practice is the use of privacy settings and audience control. Social media platforms offer tools that allow users to restrict who can see their posts. By limiting the audience for photos of their children to trusted friends and family, parents can significantly reduce the risk of unwanted attention and potential misuse of their content. Some parents might also opt for private photo-sharing platforms or applications that provide a controlled environment, where they can share moments with a select group of people. These steps help maintain a layer of protection around a child's digital presence.

Avoiding oversharing is also a vital component of responsible sharenting. Rather than documenting every aspect of their child's life, parents can adopt a more mindful approach, focusing on sharing only those moments that are truly significant. It's important to avoid posting images or details that could be embarrassing or sensitive, such as photos of children in vulnerable situations like tantrums, bath time, or in states of undress. By being selective and thoughtful about what they share, parents can help preserve their child's dignity and privacy, ensuring that their online persona is not shaped by moments that could later cause discomfort or regret.

Lastly, understanding the long-term implications of sharenting is critical. Digital footprints are lasting and can follow children into their adolescent and adult lives, potentially affecting future opportunities such as college admissions or job prospects. Educating parents about these long-term effects encourages a more cautious approach to online sharing. By being aware of how their actions today can

influence their child's future, parents are more likely to make informed decisions that prioritize their child's well-being over momentary social media gratification.

Responsible sharenting, therefore, is about finding a balance. It allows parents to engage in the digital sharing that is now a part of modern life while safeguarding their child's right to privacy and a future free from the unintended consequences of an online presence crafted without their consent. By adopting these mindful practices, parents can create a digital environment that celebrates family moments responsibly and respectfully.