

# Parents' and Children's Preferences about Parents Sharing about Children on Social Media

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## ABSTRACT

Prior research shows that parents receive a number of benefits through sharing about their children online, but little is known about children's perspectives about parent sharing. We conducted a survey with 331 parent-child pairs to examine parents' and children's preferences about what parents share about their children on social media. We find that parents and children are in agreement in their perception of how often and how much information parents share about their children on social media. However, there is disagreement about the permission-seeking process: children believe their parents should ask permission more than parents think they should, and parents believe they should ask for permission more often than they actually do, especially younger parents. We describe two categories of content that children are okay, or not okay, with their parents sharing about them. We offer design directions for managing parent sharing.

## Author Keywords

Parent; child; sharing; permission; privacy; social media.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## INTRODUCTION

Parents and children receive a variety of benefits from being able to share personal information online [1,2,16,19]. These include receiving positive feedback through likes and comments, being able to present their families in desired ways, and accessing social support. Before digital photos, families stored photos in shoe boxes or albums and flipped through them privately to find memories [12]. Many children growing up today will have the opportunity to view how their lives unfolded via social media. However, it is not yet known how children will feel about having their personal lives documented online. Little prior work has asked children their

views about parents' sharing about them online; this research investigates that gap.

This work builds on and extends a growing body of HCI research focusing on parent social media use and disclosures [1,2,16,19]. New parents tend to be active social media users. Among those who are Facebook users, over 90% of new parents upload photos of their children to the site [4]. New mothers use Facebook and Twitter to share about their child after birth and their posts are slightly more positive after a child's birth [19]. New mothers may share on sites like Facebook as part of a presentation of "good mothering" [16]. Parents also use anonymous social media sites to discuss topics they may not feel comfortable sharing face-to-face or on non-anonymous sites like Facebook [2,25].

However, less work has investigated parent sharing behaviors among parents of older children. Most parent-teen Internet research to date has focused on teens' use of the Internet and parent mediation strategies (e.g., [15]). A preliminary finding from Hiniker et al. suggests that older children were more than twice as likely as their parents to report resistance to parents posting about them without permission [14], a finding we explore further here.

We embrace a balanced perspective about parent sharing; we believe that some amount of parent sharing offers a variety of immediate benefits for the parent and possible long-term benefits for the child. However, parental oversharing may introduce risks to the child's privacy and identity, as well as to the evolving parent-child relationship. It is important to note that children do not have an inherent right to privacy from their parents [3]. Instead, parents are afforded the right—and the responsibility—of making decisions on behalf of their child, a right that phases in agency and autonomy as the child matures and develops [3].

Communication privacy management (CPM) theory predicts that tensions arise when people neglect to coordinate disclosure of personal information [20]. When family members disagree about what disclosures are appropriate [22], children's expectation of parents as confidants may be violated. On the other hand, children who grow up without a digital record of their lives may feel left out, or even neglected, if their parents did not share about them online. Thus, our first set of research questions is:

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*RQ 1: Are children’s perceptions about how often their parents post about them on social media aligned with their parents’ reports about how often they do?*

*RQ 2: Do children feel that their parents share too much or too little information about them online? Do parents agree?*

When children disclose information to a parent, the parent becomes a guardian of that information [21,22]. Permission-seeking theory suggests that, in Western societies, it is generally assumed that the lack of prohibitive rules gives rise to permission [10]. Our third research question is:

*RQ 3: Do children think parents should ask their permission before posting about them more often than they currently do?*

Self-presentation and impression management are particularly important to teenagers, who seek status among their peers [18]. Parents sharing about teens on social media can compromise that status-building, especially when the content is visible to teens’ peer groups. Our research question is:

*RQ 4: What are children’s preferences for what parents should post about them on social media?*

We conducted an online survey with 331 families (one parent and one child per family) in the U.S. about parent sharing about their children online. Theoretically, this work contributes insights into parent-child tensions around disclosure of personal information. Practically, this work puts forth a set of design opportunities for supporting families sharing personal information online.

**METHOD**

Prior work shows that parent-child conflict emerges when there are misunderstandings between parent and child [26]. We conducted a survey in order to investigate if such misperceptions existed around parent sharing. A survey allows us to capture perceptions of parents’ and children’s own, and each other’s, behaviors (but not their actual postings). We focused on measuring frequency and content of parent sharing because both are related to children’s perceptions of control of their own identity (e.g., [7]).

We conducted a web-based survey with one parent and one child per family using Qualtrics, a service that samples from a national population in the U.S. Parents completed the consent form and the survey and then were given a link for their child to complete the assent form and child-version of the survey. We received 1,900 responses to the parent survey and 740 to the child survey. To check data robustness, two researchers independently read every free response in the dataset, labeled each as valid or invalid (those that contained meaningless responses or where parent and child responses were identical), and then compared and discussed.

For all parent-child dyads, survey questions were coded to display the other participant in the dyad (children saw

<b>Age</b>	Median 13.34	SD 2.15
<b>Gender</b>	Female 52.6%	Male 47.4%
<b>Relationship</b>	Daughter/Stepdaughter 52%	Son/Stepson 46.2%

**Table 1a. Child demographics (N=331).**

<b>Age</b>	Median 43.28	SD 8.26
<b>Gender</b>	Female 71.6%	Male 28.4%
<b>Relationship</b>	Mother/Stepmother 72.3%	Son/Stepson 27.2%
<b>Marital Status</b>	Married 69.2%	Divorced 11.5%
	Living with partner 10%	Never married 7.9%
	Widowed .9%	Separated .6%
<b>Education</b>	High School or Less 17.8%	Some College 37.2%
	Bachelor’s 24.2%	Some Graduate School 6.3%
	Masters/Professional 13.9%	PhD .6%
<b>Race</b>	White Non-Hispanic 82.8%	Black 8.2% Hispanic 7.9%
		Asian 3.3%
<b>Employment</b>	Full time 46.5%	Part-time 14.5%
	Stay-at-home 28.1%	Not working 7.8%
	Student 3%	Retired 1.5%
<b>Household Income</b>	<\$30k 15.1%	\$30-49k 21.1%
	\$50-75k 28.1%	>\$75k 35.6%

**Table 1b. Parent demographics (N=331).**

“Mother”, “Step-father” and parents saw “Jack”, or “Elly” throughout). Parents were asked a series of questions about posting and permission-seeking behavior including how often they posted content about their children on social media, whether it was too much or too little, and how often they asked permission before posting. Children were asked similar questions in reverse (e.g., how often do your parents post content about you) as well as an open-ended question about the top two things that are (a) okay and (b) not okay for parents to post about their children on social media.

Survey questions did not specify a particular social media platform to minimize parents or children over-focusing on their use of a particular platform. However, this limits us to only general results rather than specific results about any given social media site. For example, prior research suggests that children might be far more okay with their parents sharing about them on Facebook than on a site like Snapchat, where children tend to have small, close friend groups [5].

Participants lived in 40 different states in the U.S. Child participants ranged in age from 10 to 17 years old, as was the case in [14] and similar to [8,9] who had 10 to 16 year olds. Also following [8,9,14], we refer to this collective group of participants as “children.” Our parent participants included mothers, fathers, step-parents, and legal guardians. Our sample included both parents who identified as partnered (i.e., 79.2% of parents identified as married or living with a partner) and those who identified as divorced, never married, separated, or widowed (collectively representing 20.8% of

parent participants). This oversamples two-parent households compared to national households (which are 62% two-parent [23]). Table 1a,1b provides demographic data.

Differences in attitudes and self-reported behaviors were analyzed using independent-samples t-tests. Differences in the effect of parent age (controlling for child age) and child age (controlling for parent age) were analyzed using one-way analyses of co-variance (ANCOVAs) with post-hoc Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons when appropriate (note: for these results we report covariate-adjusted means). The ANCOVAs were run with the following three parent age groups: 27-39 year olds ( $N=120$ , 36.3%, referred to as “younger”), 40-49 year olds ( $N=135$ , 40.8%, referred to as “middle”), 50-76 year olds ( $N=76$ , 23%, referred to as “older”). The older group roughly encompasses the baby boomer generation (born 1946-1964) which is both an age and cultural demarcation [24]. The younger and middle groups roughly comprise Generation X (born 1960s to early 1980s) and are divided into two decade-long cohorts (a practice suggested by sociologists and demographers (e.g., [17])). Children were also grouped into three groups: 10-12 year olds ( $N=128$ , 38.7%), 13-14 year olds ( $N=96$ , 29%), and 15-17 year olds ( $N=107$ , 32.3%). These correspond with developmental milestones in early adolescence (middle childhood (10-12), young teens (13-14), and middle adolescence (15-17)) [11,13].

Two researchers read through the open-ended responses and developed an initial codebook for each set of responses. The research team then discussed the codes and revised the codebook. Two researchers applied the revised codebook to 15% of responses for each question, at which time the research team discussed and reviewed the codes once again to establish a finalized codebook. Finally, one researcher coded 100% of the responses using the final codebook with a second researcher reviewing all coding until agreement was reached.

### PARENTS’ POSTING PRACTICES

Frequency of posting was a 7-point Likert scale where 1=Never and 7=Several times a day. Both children and parents reported that parents post about children “every few weeks” (these reports were statistically not significantly different from each other,  $t(596) = -.68, p = .50$ ). Amount of information parents share was a 5-point item where 1=Far too little and 5=Far too much. Children and parents are also aligned in their perception of how much information parents share about children on social media; children and parents reported that the amount of information parents share about their children is “about right” (reports that again were statistically not significantly different from each other,  $t(497) = -.40, p = .50$ ). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics.

However, the self-reported frequency of parents posting about their child differs by parent’s age,  $F(2, 327) = 14.89, p < .001$  (Reminder: all parent age differences reported here control for the child’s age, and all child age differences reported here control for the parent’s age.). The older group

	Parents		Children		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
How often parent posts about child on social media	2.81	1.54	2.72	1.45	-0.68	596	-0.06
The amount of information parent posts about child	2.96	0.79	2.94	0.67	-0.40	497	-0.04
How often parent <i>should</i> ask permission before posting	2.80	1.06	2.57	1.09	-2.75*	660	-0.21

**Table 2. Children’s and parents’ perceptions of parents’ posting. \*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$ .**

of parents reported posting about their children less often ( $M=2.16$   $SD=1.42$ ) than the younger group of parents ( $M=3.26$   $SD=1.41$ ) ( $p < .001$ ). The middle group ( $M=2.56$   $SD=1.38$ ) also reported posting less often than the younger group ( $p < .001$ ). The amount of information a parent reported posting about their child did not differ by age of the parent,  $F(2, 327) = .09, p = .91$ . Children’s report of how often their parent posts about them did not differ by child’s age,  $F(2, 263) = 2.17, p = .12$ , nor did the amount of information that children reported their parents post about them differ by child’s age,  $F(2, 252) = .85, p = .43$ .

### PERMISSION ASKING BY PARENTS

How often parents ask for permission and should ask for permission were 4-point Likert scales where 1=Never and 4=All of the time. Children and parents differ in their attitudes about how often a parent *should* ask for permission to post about their child on social media. Children believe parents should ask children for their permission before posting about them more often than parents believe they should,  $t(660) = -2.75, p < .01$ ; the effect size is small but non-trivial. Both on average agree that parents should ask permission at least “sometimes.” See Table 3.

How often parent asks permission		How often parent <i>should</i> ask permission		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>d</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
2.13	0.99	2.57	1.09	5.08**	586	-0.42

**Table 3. Children’s preference for parent posting. \*\*  $p < .001$ .**

When posting about their children on social media, parents reported that they ask their children permission less often than they believe they *should*,  $t(586) = 5.08, p < .001$ . Further, parents’ reported beliefs of how often they should ask for their child’s permission differ by parent’s age,  $F(2, 327) = 5.5, p < .01$ . The older group of parents believes they should ask for their children’s permission more often ( $M=2.95$   $SD=1.13$ ) than the younger group ( $M=2.46$   $SD=1.1$ ) ( $p < .05$ ) and more often than the middle group of parents

( $M=2.47$   $SD=1.05$ ) ( $p < .01$ ). Parents' self-reported frequency of actually asking permission also differed according to the parent's age,  $F(2, 253) = 3.22$ ,  $p < .05$ . The older group of parents reported that they ask permission more often ( $M=2.95$   $SD=1.13$ ) than the middle group of parents ( $M=2.47$   $SD=1.05$ ) ( $p < .05$ ). Children's attitudes about how often parents should ask for permission did not differ by the child's age,  $F(2, 328) = .529$ ,  $p = .59$ .

### CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON PARENT SHARING

Our data reveal that children value content that supports a positive, rather than negative, online image or identity. Parents sharing positive content about their child's participation in sports, school, and hobbies is viewed as okay. As part of that positive online image, children are also okay with parents sharing information that reflects a positive parent-child relationship or happy family life. For example, children are okay with parents posting praise of them or with posting about happy family moments.

On the other hand, content that reflects negatively on a child's self-presentation is perceived as not okay for parents to share. Children report an aversion to parents sharing content that they perceive as embarrassing, which was often described in generic terms (e.g., "*anything embarrassing*") or in specific contexts such as sharing "*naked butt baby pictures*." Children do not want parents sharing content that is visually unflattering, which was often referenced as "*ugly pictures of their children*," or in more specific terms such as, "*when I'm not dressed up and when my hair isn't fixed*." In general, content considered negatively valenced, such as sharing "*when they get in trouble or do something bad*," was also cited as not okay for parents to share.

Children also prefer that parents do not share information about them that is overly revealing. Children do not believe it is okay for parents to share personal information (e.g., "*private stuff*," "*MY BUSINESS*"), visually revealing content (such as "*swimming pool pictures*" or "*Kids in their underwear or in the bathtub*"), or content deemed too candid, or as one child described, "*what they are really like at home*." Finally, children do not believe it is okay for parents to make overly intrusive disclosures, such as posting about a child's friends or dating partners (e.g., "*Status about my friends and my relationship with my boyfriends*") or other content posted without permission or against a child's wishes.

A common theme across these different types of positive and negative content was photography. Many examples of content that children do not want parents sharing online were described in terms of photography, for example "embarrassing photos," "ugly pics," "baby photos," or "[p]hotos that can expose intimate life." On the other hand, photos can be a welcome way for parents to share about their children on social media when the photo is perceived as positive or flattering. Children believe it is okay for parents to share "cute pictures," "fun family pics," or "pictures that make me look good."

### DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

There are a number of promising takeaways from our results. Children list a variety of topics that they are okay with their parents sharing about them. They also agree with their parents that parents' frequency of sharing is about right. This suggests that at least some concerns about parent sharing from the perspective of the child may be unwarranted. Furthermore, these results introduce possible benefits of parenting sharing, such as building trust between parents and child when preferences are known, and increasing self-esteem of the child when parents share positive posts.

While parents are uniquely situated to decide what should be shared or not about their own children, HCI is well-positioned to address a broader question: how can technology help parents and children to better manage online disclosures? Based on our results, we present design opportunities for managing family sharing on social media.

*"Okay to Post" Recommendations:* Parent infringements of children's privacy can violate trust, an important component of a healthy and secure parent-child relationship [6]. Social media could support parents rebuilding trust by recommending content children deem "okay to post."

*Permission-Seeking:* Parents could explicitly tag their child in a post, then the child could choose to approve or disapprove the post and select a dropdown reason why. The parent would learn their child's preferences in a supportive and non-confrontational interaction.

*Learning Preferences:* A permission-seeking mechanism could allow social media sites to learn and adapt to preferences over time. For example, our qualitative data suggest that some topics are likely to be embarrassing—baby photos for younger teens, boyfriends/girlfriends for older teens. An engine could collect labeled content of what is embarrassing, negative, unflattering, oversharing, or other generated categories to capture the pulse of children's evolving preferences.

*Detecting Tone:* We find that children prefer positive, achievement-oriented praise but not negative, critical embarrassment. Posts could be scanned for positive or negative text/expressions, and when negative, the user could be given a prompt asking if they really want to share this.

This work was intentionally platform-independent to focus on the underlying principles. This work leads to a series of open questions, such as: is it ethically appropriate to post photos of someone else's child online? Should children be able to take ownership over content about them when they turn 18? Are algorithms "encouraging" parent oversharing via likes and comments received? Future work could also take a temporal perspective that looks at how children's preferences change over time.

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