

Researchers caution about potential harms of parents' online posts about children

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What parents share with others about their children in today's digital age presents new and often unanticipated risks, according to new research being presented at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 2016 National Conference & Exhibition in San Francisco on Friday, Oct. 21.

Pediatrician Bahareh Keith, DO, MHSc, FAAP, and law professor Stacey Steinberg, JD, will present the abstract, "What Parents Should Share: Child Privacy in the Age of Social Media and the Pediatrician's Role," based on extensive review of medical and legal literature surrounding the topic. In it, they encourage pediatricians to provide [parents](#) healthy rules of thumb about online disclosures related to their [children](#).

Parents often create their children's first digital footprints. Previous research has shown that 92 percent of 2-year-olds in the United States have an online presence, and about one-third make their first appearance on social media sites within their first 24 hours of life.

"The amount of information placed in the digital universe about our children in just a few short years is staggering," said Dr. Keith, director of the pediatric global health track and an assistant professor of [pediatrics](#) at the University of Florida College of Medicine. "Parents often consider how to best protect children while the child is using the internet. However, parents—including myself, initially—don't always consider how their own use of social media may affect their children's well-being."

Social media offers many benefits to families, Dr. Keith said, including giving parents a voice as they struggle through difficult child-rearing experiences, building community and celebrating the joys of their lives. "But when we share on social media, we must all consider how our online actions affects our children's well-being, both today and long into the future," she said.

Pediatricians can advocate for increased awareness among parents to protect a child's online identity, according to the authors. "We need to encourage responsible and thoughtful sharing," Steinberg said, "and address a dearth of discussion on the topic that leaves even the most well-meaning parents with few resources to thoroughly appreciate the issue before pressing 'share' on their digital devices."

Steinberg cautions that information shared can be stolen or repeatedly re-shared, unbeknownst to parents, potentially ending the in hands of pedophiles or identify thieves.

"Even more likely, the child might one day want to have some privacy and control over his or her digital identity," Steinberg said, noting that the first "children of social media" are just now entering adulthood, college, and the job market. "Untangling the parent's right to share his or her own story and the child's right to enter adulthood free to create his or her own digital footprint is a daunting task."

The authors propose public health based, best-practice guidelines that include encouraging parents to familiarize themselves with the privacy policies of the sites they use, to post anonymously if they choose to share about their children's behavioral struggles, and to give their child "veto power" over online disclosures, including images, quotes, accomplishments, and challenges. They also advise never to share pictures that show their children in any state of undress or share their child's actual location in a post.

More information: The abstract, "What Parents Should Share: Child Privacy in the Age of Social Media and the Pediatrician's Role," will be presented on Friday, Oct. 21 at 4:45 p.m. PT in Moscone South room 102/1045.

Provided by American Academy of Pediatrics

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