

Young Children and Digital Footprints



Key Vocabulary

digital footprint

A digital footprint is a record of everything an individual does online, including the content they upload. Online, information can migrate, persist, and resurface years later.

geotagging

A feature that allows you to add geographic information (i.e., locations) to uploaded content. For example, a picture taken at Yankee stadium can be geotagged to share the poster's location with followers.

Millennials

Reference to a generation of individuals born between 1980 and 2000.

facial software recognition

Facial software recognition programs use the unique combination of characteristics and features of a person's face to identify them in a photograph, often in order to compare and/or link the photograph to other images of the individual.

Introduction

Taking cute or funny pictures and videos of kids is nothing new — you've almost certainly perused family albums your parents made, or seen home videos of yourself taken at different ages and stages. But the digital world dramatically changes the context of photo and video sharing, and instantly amplifies the potential audience for the images you capture and upload.

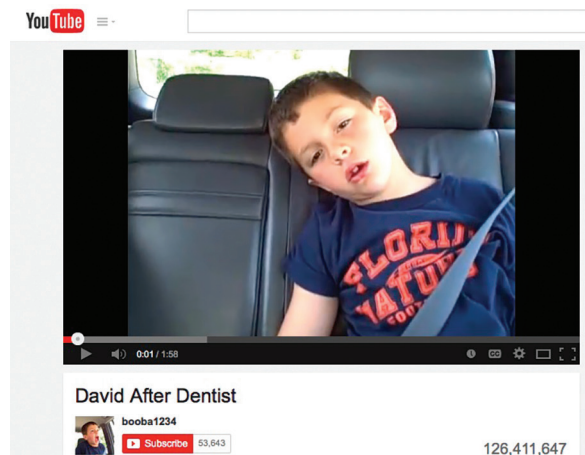
A 2010 study by AVG, an Internet security firm, found that 81 percent of children worldwide have an online presence before the age of 2¹. For some, this digital footprint starts before birth when excited parents share prenatal sonograms; for others, it comes later with snapshots capturing a toddler's "firsts," or even full-fledged profiles on various social networking sites that document adorable details of young life. If we were to look at just those children here in the U.S., that number increases to 92 percent. From the cradle to the grave, children growing up today will experience a digital presence — and its effects — in far different ways than their parents. Today's case invites you to think through the issues and opportunities of sharing images of younger kids through social media, and raises questions about whether posting something that involves someone who is not yet old enough to give their consent is a normal part of modern life or an issue that warrants pause.

In Part 1, consider a short video that a father shared of his son, which subsequently went viral (over 120 million views!). In Part 2, read two perspectives shared as part of *The New York Times*' "Room for Debate" edition on Children and Digital Privacy. In the debate, invited guests share their responses to the question, "Is sharing videos and pictures a violation of a child's right to privacy, or a simple act to remain connected to friends and family?" This is an exercise in being reflective in your practices and how you can improve them; this case is definitely not meant to scare you.

The Case: Part 1

Watch “David After Dentist,” a short video taken — and then shared on YouTube — by one father after his son received anesthesia at the dentist (1 min, 58 seconds).

 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txqiwrbyGrs>



Consider

- What’s your gut reaction to this video?
- Why do you think David’s father decided to share this video?
- Would you ever share a video like this of your kid(s)?
- Do you have criteria that you follow on what to share when it comes to content that showcases your kids?
- Do you have the same approach on all of your social media accounts, or are you more comfortable sharing on some sites than others? Why or why not?
- Take a minute to think about your approach to sharing (or not sharing) pictures or videos of your kids online. Has it changed at all over the past few years? Why or why not?

The Case: Part 2

Read the following two perspectives, shared as part of *The New York Times*’ “Room for Debate” edition on Children and Digital Privacy². The authors are responding to the following question:

Is sharing videos and pictures a violation of a child’s right to privacy, or a simple act to remain connected to friends and family?

I. “Give your children a chance at privacy.” Amy Webb

It seems reasonable enough. On the last day of your daughter’s soccer camp, you snap a few photos of her with the ball. During the game, you record video. After her victory, you take some more pictures of your sweaty mess, because you’re a proud parent.

The problem is what happens next, that moment you decide to upload those photos and videos from your cell phone to Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. **Once you post and tag your child, she becomes subject to an array of databases over which you have little control.**

I’m a parent, and I understand the desire to share happy memories, in real time, with family and friends. I’m also a digital media futurist, which means that I know that the social networks we use aren’t closed circuits, and that our digital identities are increasingly — and inextricably — linked to our faces. **Facial recognition technology** is now engineered into more than you may think: our search engines, our photo editing apps, even our connected TV sets. In the next five years, our faces will start to replace passwords. They’ll also be used by law enforcement, government officials and companies to quickly learn who we are both online and in the real world.

This generation, the Millennials, is the most surveilled generation in our history. **By recording and publishing our children's every dental visit, afternoon recital or poopy diaper, we are removing any possibility of their future privacy.** Once you tag photos and videos with your child's name, you've contributed a significant amount of actionable information to somebody else's structured database. Machine learning algorithms can then analyze your photos, and over time recognize your children, even as they age. Right now, I can easily learn where someone lives, where they work, where they went to high school, who their close friends are — using only a photo to start. Children whose parents willingly contributed photos and videos online will increasingly be easier to search, parse and identify.

Sharing that kind of content may have an additional unintended consequence. Because Millennials are used to being recorded, they are more likely to post an incriminating photo of themselves online. Since photos can be searched, the GenX and Baby Boomer managers are now using data scraped from social networks to make hiring decisions. It's not that these managers object to a drunk night at school necessarily, but that the photo was captured and published for the public to see. The problem is that GenX and Baby Boomers do not always decontextualize the data they're using to inform their decisions, even though they caused the shift in how our attitude toward privacy has evolved as technology has become more ubiquitous.

For parents who want to remain connected to their friends and family, there are plenty of alternatives that won't compromise your child's privacy now, or in the future.

II. “A Visit to the Dentist, A World of Fun.” David Devore (David's dad)

After our video went viral, we didn't know what to think. Our main concern was what people were saying about David. Were they making fun of him? Once we realized they loved his reactions, we were at peace with the attention. I did get some criticism, but we knew we had the vantage point no one else had. We knew the truth. We knew the full story and we were confident in who we were as a family. I quickly realized the most vocal critics were just trying to get attention themselves and weren't truly concerned about David.

Our experience as a viral family has been overwhelmingly positive. We have been able to experience things that we wouldn't have been able to do without the video. David has participated in a panel at M.I.T., traveled nationally and internationally, and has been on several TV shows because of it.

We didn't intend for this to happen, it just did. I had never posted anything on YouTube. **Our intention was to share the video with family and friends and we thought the privacy setting wouldn't allow us to. We opted for the public setting, and the rest is viral history.**

In some ways David is unaware of how big a deal the video is. He is almost 14 now and is somewhat shy in general. He has enjoyed all the experiences we have had with the video but there is so much more to him. He is into sports, school, church — the video is just part of a life he is living to the fullest. Going forward, it will be more up to him to tell people about it. I suspect it will be people finding out on their own and asking him about it. I can't imagine him walking up to anyone and telling them who he is!

As more videos spread rapidly, parents must be sensitive to their kids' personality. Each child is different. One may be mortified while another one may love the experience. But sharing stories about our families is something that has always been part of the human experience. As technology changes, so has the way we share. Each parent needs to step in and decide what's right for their child. **The most alarmist voices out there forget that the likelihood of something bad happening to your kids because of a photo you posted online is about the same probability as getting struck by lightning.**

We can agree on one fundamental thing: Our children are precious and anything associated with them should be done with their best interest in mind. There is no greater priority.

Consider

- Which response do you relate more closely to? What do you appreciate in each of the responses?
- David writes, “*Each parent needs to step in and decide what’s right for their child.*” Other parents, however, argue that when parents post pictures of their kids, they deprive the child of the opportunity to make decisions for himself or herself. What do you think falls under the parents’ rights to share online versus the child’s rights to make his or her own decisions about?
- How do you handle other people (a family friend, a grandparent, a spouse, a camp counselor) sharing pictures of your kid online? Have you ever asked anyone to remove something or not to post it in the first place?
- At what age do you think kids should be able to decide whether or not their parents can post something online about them?
- How do you model curating a positive digital footprint for your kids?

REFERENCES

¹ www.businesswire.com/news/home/20101006006722/en/Digital-Birth-Online-World#.VIh6U4fbCAI

² www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/08/17/children-and-digital-privacy

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- **Think long term.**

Posting photos of your kids creates a digital footprint — a kind of electronic paper trail — that forms your kids' identities in a world they haven't chosen to enter. Someday your preschoolers will grow up, and they might not want documentation of their diaper days hanging out online for their friends to find! Once you post a photo online, you lose control over it. Someone could easily copy the photo, tag it, screenshot it, save it, or otherwise use it — and you might never know. Do a quick mental exercise before you share: Imagine how your child might react to the photo in 5, 10, 15, then 50 years. One of the most exciting aspects about parenting young kids is that the possibilities are endless; they can literally become anyone or anything. Make sure you're not sharing something that could limit the possibilities for them in the future, or which they might resent in the future. While sharing is fun in the moment -- and getting "likes" might certainly brighten your day — you don't want the immediate thrill of posting something laughable or venting about your kid's embarrassing habits to interfere with his life in years to come.

- **Share smart — and safe.**

If you decide to share photos or videos of your kid online, make sure you're sharing safely. Set your privacy settings to "friends only" or, if the platform allows, specify a particular audience who can view your album. Without privacy settings, your family photos might end up on the screens of strangers. Avoid geotagging a picture (linking it to a location), which might unintentionally alert others to where your kid is hanging out. And, determine how to keep information like birthdays, street signs, and school names out of your pictures. Some parents even come up with ways to talk about their kids on social media without linking to their kids' real names, by using made-up nicknames or code names. Also, it's important to remember that by posting images up on certain social media accounts, you are essentially giving that organization licensing rights to that image. As of July 2015, Instagram's policy includes the statement, "you hereby grant to Instagram a non-exclusive, fully paid and royalty-free, transferable, sub-licensable, worldwide license to use the Content that you post on or through the Service ..."

- **If your kid voices a preference, listen up.**

If your kid is already thinking about her digital footprint and the kind of digital identity she wants to portray, give her an extra pat on the back — and listen carefully to her requests! If she asks you not to post a picture, it should certainly give you pause and you should think twice before going against her wishes. The picture will form her digital identity. Plus, leading by example is key: If you respect her wishes, she's more likely to practice a similar respect for others when she has her own profiles in the future.

Note: Tips here are informed by Common Sense's parenting advice:

<http://www.commonsensemedia.org/privacy-and-internet-safety/is-it-safe-to-post-pictures-of-my-kid-online>

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

Before They Have Accounts of Their Own

Jon logs onto Facebook and is surprised when the first thing he sees is a picture of his daughter Allie smiling back at him. He notices that the picture was posted by his sister, Allie's aunt, who babysat her last week. Although Jon occasionally shares pictures of Allie online, he doesn't really like the idea of other people posting pictures of her on social media. He tries to be careful about the kinds of pictures he posts — for example, no photos of her in the bath or running around in only a T-shirt and no pictures of her with her school in the background. The picture his sister has shared isn't anything concerning, but Jon can't help but feel funny about the fact that she shared it (and 52 people have already "liked" it!).

- ? What is your immediate reaction to this story? What seems realistic (or unrealistic) about the dilemma?
- ? Do you relate to Jon's perspective, or do you think he's being unrealistically protective?
- ? Do parents have a right to tell others — family members, friends, spouses — whether or not they can post pictures of their kids online?
- ? Does it make a difference how old Allie is? Would your reaction change if Allie were 10 months versus 10 years old?
- ? If Jon wanted to ask his sister to take the picture down, how could he go about making the request? Do you think his sister would be willing to remove the photo?