

# How over-sharing can harm your kids

By Joanne Orlando



Illustration: John Spooner

Are you over-sharing? That is, sharing too much information about your kids online? Children have a fundamental right to privacy, but the choices adults are making with technology, especially social media, is challenging that right.

A US study has found two-thirds of parents posted pictures of their children online, raising important questions about potential violations of privacy, especially considering this material could potentially be mined by future employers and other authorities in decades to come. How can a parent have an honest discussion with children about the inappropriateness of sharing information online, when they have been posting intimate details online about them their entire lives? While your children may be offended if they are left out of stories you share with loved ones online, there are still questions around the level of personal detail in the funny photos and anecdotes being shared.

A new trend is the growing selection of footage online from parents who have attached a GoPro (a personal camera often used for action video) to a toddler's helmet so that they can see what life is like from their child's point of view. This techno-documentation of infant lives is now extending beyond social media and making its mark as a tool to measure intellectual growth. I recently researched an early childhood centre that attaches a GoPro to children to record what the child does and so evaluate their development.

Sure the desire to understand a child more fully is understandable, however recording the movements of toddlers and babies raises particularly significant issues as they are not in a position to give consent. A similar act of placing a camera atop of an adult's head without their permission would be rightly considered a massive invasion of privacy. So how is monitoring a baby in this way any different from Robin Williams' sci-fi movie *The Final Cut*, where, without consent, implants are placed in the characters' brains and their lives are recorded?

The trend for improved techno-documentation of children is making gains on a large scale. With the increasing obsession for collecting information, data mining and data sharing of information is really threatening children's right to privacy.

In the USA, the Obama administration has recently supported a new initiative aimed at tracking children for more than two decades, from as early as infancy through the start of their careers. The databases are being built in nearly every state at a total cost of well over \$1 billion. They are intended to store intimate details on tens of millions of children and young adults — identified by name, birth date, address and even, in some cases, social security number. Data will be collected in response to hundreds of questions: Did the child make friends easily as a toddler? Was he disciplined for fighting as a teen? Did he take geometry? Does she suffer from mental illness? Did he/she graduate from college and how much does she earn? The database is being promoted with the intention of helping officials pinpoint the education system's strengths and weaknesses and craft public policy accordingly.

While there is an important place for data-driven policies that support children, there are also serious ethical implications regarding such a massive data mining operation. "Did he/she make friends in Year 2?" is not something you as a parent want dragging around decades later, and nor would your child. We've already had laws passed banning the use of DNA for excluding people — now we should be interrogating whether our digital DNA will run into the same abuses. It has now accumulated to a point where we should start calling our online data "eDNA" as a point of comparison. While we expect this data to be secure, we are increasingly confronted with more evidence of the lack of security of information stored online.

What may be driving this desire to techno-document every aspect of children's lives is that we have the technology to do it. However the capability of technology requires us all to be responsible and make informed decisions about what information we collect and make available, and the possible consequences to the rights of children.

We have come to accept the information gathering obsessiveness that defines this era, while recognising that this is the first generation of children who may grow up without anonymity. Techno-documenting children's lives from cradle to grave on their behalf raises important issues regarding privacy, and is a crucial issue of respect for children. They are not there for us to run social experiments. They are just as important as adults, and we should respect their privacy, regardless of the latest technology we would like to try out.

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