BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Children want parents to ask for permission before ‘sharenting’

Now that social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic is increasingly shifting our interactions with each other into the digital sphere, it may feel natural to post pictures of our children on various social media platforms – ‘sharent’ – more than usual. But before parents do so, they should stop and think for a second: How do children feel about this? During the family day of the annual ‘SciFest’ science festival in Uppsala, Sweden in early March 2020, we asked children about ‘sharenting’.

The survey consisted of two background questions, four questions aided by pictures about different forms of sharenting (Fig. 1), and an open-ended question: What do you think adults should do? The questions on sharenting specified and depicted a behaviour and asked the child to rate whether or not it is okay on a 10-point Likert-scale with an angry face anchoring 1 and a happy face anchoring 10 (Fig. 1). The online questionnaire was administered by two researchers, both clinical psychologists, using tablets.

A total of 68 children, 4–15 years (M = 9.4, SD = 2.6), completed the anonymous online questionnaire. About two-thirds of the respondents were boys (n = 42).

Descriptive statistics were performed for ordinal and scale variables and differences between age groups were investigated with Kruskal-Wallis H test and further analysed with Mann Whitney U test. The open-ended questions were analysed using manifest content analysis. Because the data collection

Fig. 1 Questions about sharenting with visual support.

Send a picture to a relative

Take a picture without asking for permission

Post a picture on social media, such as Facebook or Instagram

Write on social media about children, such as Facebook or Instagram

doi:10.1111/jpc.14945

Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health 56 (2020) 981–983
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was anonymous, no ethical clearance was necessary according to Swedish legislation.

Children were generally quite negative towards sharenting (Fig. 2). Most acceptable was sending photos to a relative and least acceptable was posting photos of the child on social media without asking. Further analysis of the Take a photo item suggested a statistically significant difference in score based on age, \( \chi^2(3) = 14.146, P = 0.003 \), with stepwise increasing scores across the age groups 4–6, 7–9, 10–11 and 12–15 year olds, indicating that the older the children, the more acceptable they thought it was to take a photo without permission. Further, the 4–6 year olds showed significantly lower scores compared to all other age groups (\( P \) ranging from 0.031 to 0.001). This indicates that the youngest children thought it least acceptable to take a photo without permission, contrary to what many parents might believe.

The open-ended answers could be sorted into two main categories: Instruction to the adult and Qualifier. The Instruction category was surprisingly unanimous: children and youth, quite irrespective of age, wanted parents to ask them before taking pictures or sharing images of them and listen to their answers. The Qualifier category further specified situations and circumstances, but was always accompanied with an instruction (Table 1).

As a generation of adults raised in a digital culture have become parents, the phenomenon of sharenting has evolved and is now common practice internationally. The content of sharenting has been explored, as well as ethical considerations from the perspective of mothers; however, there has been little exploration of how children feel about the phenomenon. A survey (\( n = 817 \)) in the Netherlands indicated that adolescents (M = 15 years) largely disapprove of sharenting, and qualitative exploration of the topic (\( n = 46; 12–14 \) years) revealed the need to establish boundaries. There is some evidence that preteens (\( n = 14; 9–13 \) years) share this frustration and need for clearer boundaries.

This brief report addresses the previously underexplored view of younger children by including children as young as 4 years, using adequate visual support.

Children’s voices, brought to the forefront by this community engagement activity, convey a very clear message: Children want to be asked about, and listened to, before their parents ‘sharent’, that is share stories or images about them on social media.

**Acknowledgement**

We would like to thank the children who participated in the study.

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**Table 1** Results from the manifest content analysis. The examples of instruction and qualifier are not part of the same quote

| Category               | Instruction to the adult                                      | Qualifier                                                 |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Ask first              | They do not have to show the photo                            | Parents are allowed                                        |
| Ask for permission     | If ok to take a photo, it is ok to send it                     | If ok to take a photo                                     |
| Ask first and listen if the child says no | Check if the child likes the photo                            | If the child likes the photo                               |
| Do not take pictures without permission | If the child says no, they should not post the picture | Depends on what it is they want to write                   |
| Listen to the child    |                                                                 |                                                            |
| Ask before posting pictures |                                                                 |                                                            |

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**Fig. 2** Average scores regarding the different aspects of sharenting.
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