

PHOENIX POLICY INSTITUTE

## THE AUTHORS

Katherine Graham McCormick |  
kmccormick9@elon.edu  
Molly Frank | mfrank11@elon.edu



# Mommy Bloggers in a Dangerous World

SPRING 2024





# Table of Contents

01 **INTRODUCTION**

02 **PROBLEM DEFINITION**

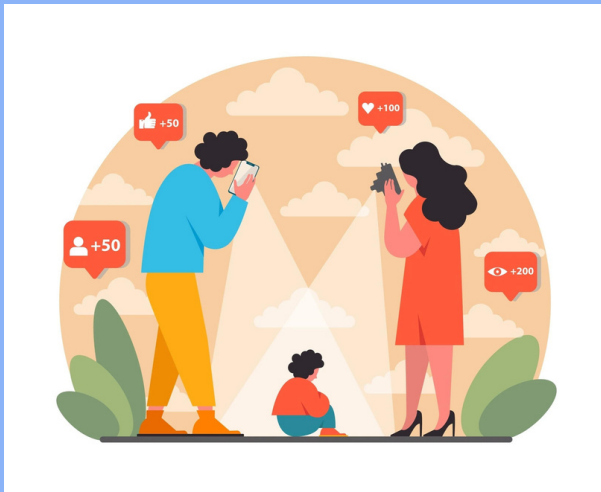
06 **ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT**

08 **RECOMMENDED POLICY SOLUTIONS**

10 **CONCLUSION**

# INTRODUCTION

Gen Z was the first generation to grow up with social media; all major social networking sites – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube – reached new heights of popularity during their childhood (Maryville, 2020). As such, Gen Z was also the first generation to deal with the challenging trend of parents posting them on social media, often without consent. This policy memo explores the trends of “sharenting,” “mommy bloggers,” and “child influencers” and the dangerous policy implications of parents putting children on the internet. We examine what lessons we can take from Gen Z’s experience of having their childhood on public display before it’s too late for Gen Alpha.



“It almost feels like exploiting your children has become a career choice. If you have a baby now, you have a new career opportunity.”

*-Sarah, @mom.uncharted on TikTok ‘exploring generation shared’*

# PROBLEM DEFINITION

Growing up, many children are told to be careful what they post online because it can never be taken down. Parents, however, many of them non-native digital users, often post their children without a second thought. Although many parents enjoy posting occasional family photos and holiday cards on their personal social media accounts, chronic oversharing about children's lives can cause disturbances in family relationships and has the potential to become dangerous. A 2018 study found that **parents frequently share more information online than their children are comfortable with** (Hiniker, et al, 2018). Beyond this normal sharing that nearly everyone's parents are guilty of, there are disturbing trends in parents oversharing their children on social media for financial compensation. These parents, sometimes known as "mommy bloggers" or "parenting influencers" amass thousands to millions of followers and grow a social media presence by posting their children.

Naturally, this type of posting raises a multitude of issues related to invasion of privacy and informed consent. Children, by nature of their age and inexperience, are unable to provide informed consent. **How can a child understand the lasting implications of their digital footprint when they're still grasping concepts as basic as addition and subtraction?** Even if children are old enough to understand, their consent is still affected by the natural power dynamic of a parent-child relationship. Additionally, parents' posts contribute to the child's digital image, which can quickly turn dangerous on the internet. Experts estimate that by 2030 more than  $\frac{2}{3}$  **of child identity fraud cases** will be caused by "sharenting" (Hsu, 2019). Mental health issues from being on the internet without consent at an early age are also an issue and can affect the trajectory of the rest of their lives (Hsu, 2019).

“To any parents that are considering starting a family vlog or monetizing your children’s lives on the public internet, here is my advice: you shouldn’t do it. Any money you get will be greatly overshadowed by years of suffering... your child will never be normal... I never consented to being online.”

*-Anonymous child of a family vlogger*

Family vlogging channels are also an issue of labor exploitation. These channels, popular on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, upload content as frequently as daily and often feature children prominently in videos about family dynamics, pranks, holidays, and everything in between. These channels can be incredibly profitable for the parents, with the most popular garnering millions in ad revenue each year ([Schulman, 2023](#)). Many child influencers have reported that **they never saw a penny for their work** – and yes, it is work; at a minimum children serve as actors in these projects and some go as far to take on editing responsibilities, video promotion, and other creative directives ([Dunphy, 2017](#)). With the lack of current federal and state laws, children who are featured in video blogs have no legal entitlement to compensation for their work ([Edwards, 2023](#)). With the absence of regulations, it is entirely legal for parents to post their children whenever they want, and pocket all of the money. Additionally, as child influencers are not legally defined as workers, there are no labor laws protecting these child influencers from exploitation, ([Qamar, 2023](#)). This means that working hours, conditions, and even the decision to work in the first place are up to the discretion of the parents.

While the majority of family based content is meant to be humorous and entertaining, it can also glorify harmful parenting practices. In several disturbing cases, the lack of regulation has led to the monetization of parental abuse. A prime example is Ruby Franke who, up until recently, documented her parenting style on the family vlog channel “8Passengers” to an audience of more than **2.5 million**. In her videos, Franke would prank her children through varying means including taking her child’s bed away, withholding meals, binding their arms and legs, and other means of physical punishment to teach them a lesson about “misbehaving” (Neumann, 2024). In August 2023, Franke and her podcast co-host Jodi Hildebrant were arrested and charged with six felony counts of child abuse, which later led to Franke deleting her channel completely. Whether Franke’s channel **exposed or encouraged her child abuse** remains unclear but its likely that she continued the escalation of her pranks and punishments to entertain her growing audience.



**Vlogger Ruby Franke pictured with her husband and six children.**

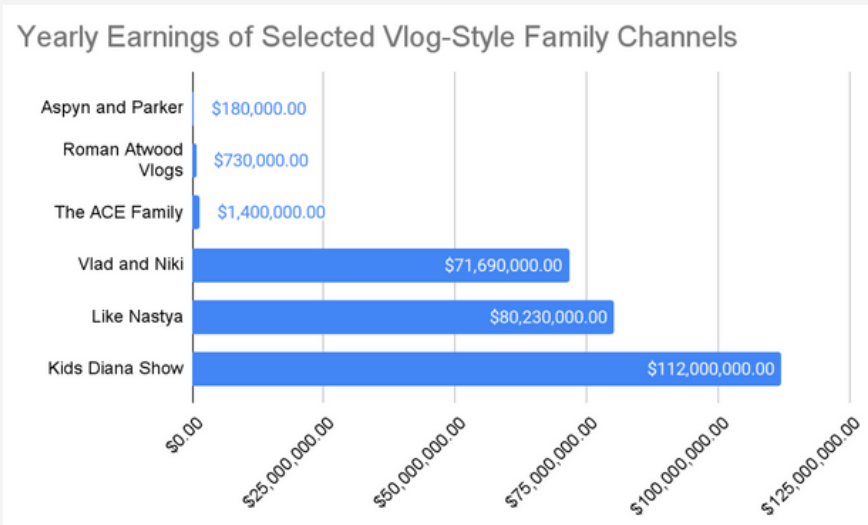
The issue of child influencers also involves one of the most sinister parts of the internet. Posts on public accounts can be viewed by absolutely anyone. This means that child influencers are especially vulnerable to online harassment and the creepy obsessions of online predators because of their large platform and the nature of their content. Parents who run these channels grant access to sensitive information on children's lives, allowing internet trolls to voice their opinions and bully children online (Hsu, 2019). While some might assume that the audience for these family channels is fellow parents or children, the reality is much more dangerous. A study by the New York Times reviewed the accounts of 5,000 different child influencers and found approximately **32 million connections to male followers**, most of whom were much older than the account owners (Wise, 2024). The worst of these accounts frequently send explicit messages and “openly fantasize about sexually abusing the children they follow” (Wise, 2024). Young girls who manage accounts themselves are especially vulnerable because they have difficulty understanding the danger of the situation and feel like they have to respond to the requests of someone older. In some cases, this behavior has shifted from online harassment to physical stalking which can have detrimental effects on the physical and psychological wellbeing of a child. The question is this: **Do parents understand this risk when posting their children online?** Unfortunately, all signs point to yes (Valentino-Devries & Keller, 2024). The problem of random people viewing an account can easily be solved by making accounts private, removing followers, or deleting content altogether. However, the entire point of monetizing content is to get as many views, likes, and interactions as possible. As such, parents have a monetary incentive to continue posting their children.

# ROLE FOR GOVERNMENT

The government has a responsibility to protect minors from labor exploitation. Since 1916, the United States has had laws on the books regulating child labor (National Archives, 1916). Over the next century, congress passed legislation to regulate how many hours children could work, and restrict which occupations were safe for child workers (Department of Labor, 1993). There are specific labor laws regarding children in the entertainment industry. California's Coogan Law protects child actors and their earnings (SAG AFTRA, 2023), though these regulations have been poorly enforced (Robb, 2018). Child influencers, a relatively new phenomenon, remain a legally undefined group and are largely outside any federal or state regulations. To make matters worse, recent efforts by Republican state legislatures to weaken existing state child labor laws have left child influencers and child laborers across the board with even fewer legal protections (Sainato, 2023).

Although no federal regulations have been proposed, there is notable public support for the expansion of labor protections to child influencers. Polling from YouGov in 2022 found that two-thirds of Americans believe that child influencers are exploited by parents at least "somewhat often," and that the majority of Americans believe that child labor laws should be extended to child influencers (YouGov, 2022; YouGov, 2022). In the United States, there are currently no protections for the earnings of child influencers. However, the Washington state legislature has proposed a law modeled after California's Coogan's Law that ensures **15% of child actors' earnings are set aside** by the employer in a blocked trust (SAG AFTRA, 2023).





The plight of child influence goes beyond basic labor regulations. Digital privacy is a major concern. Child influencers are plastered on the internet from a young age, frequently alongside sensitive information, and are especially vulnerable to online predators. Congress has proven itself to be incompetent when it comes to regulating social media. The Protecting Kids on Social Media Act is the only relevant legislation that has been introduced. This act would require social media companies to verify the age of users and prevent children under 13 from accessing their sites (Schatz, 2023), but falls short of providing any restrictions on parental online behavior. Given the evolving nature of social media, it's likely that any substantial legal protections for child influencers will arise through the expansion of existing child labor laws. It is currently not feasible for, nor is there any precedent of, congress enacting regulations on social media activity.

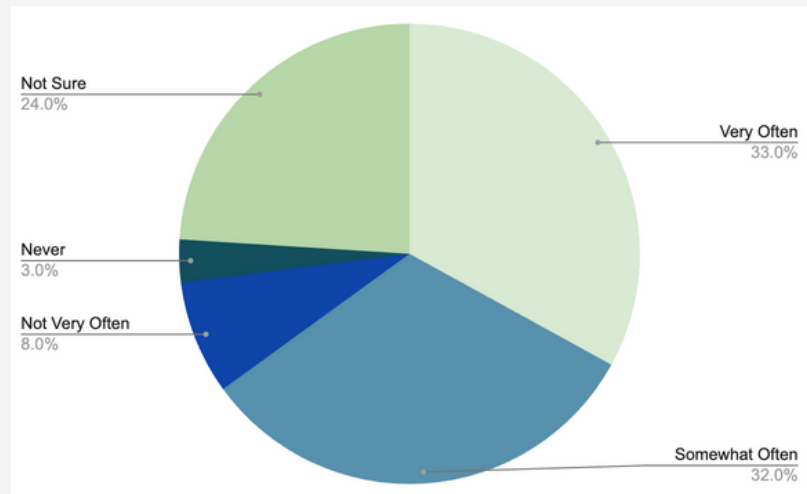
“I plead [with] you to be the voice of this generation of children because I know firsthand what it’s like to not have a choice in which a digital footprint you didn’t create follows you around for the rest of your life.”

*-Former child influencer Cam (24) in testimony to the Washington State legislature*

# RECOMMENDED POLICY SOLUTION

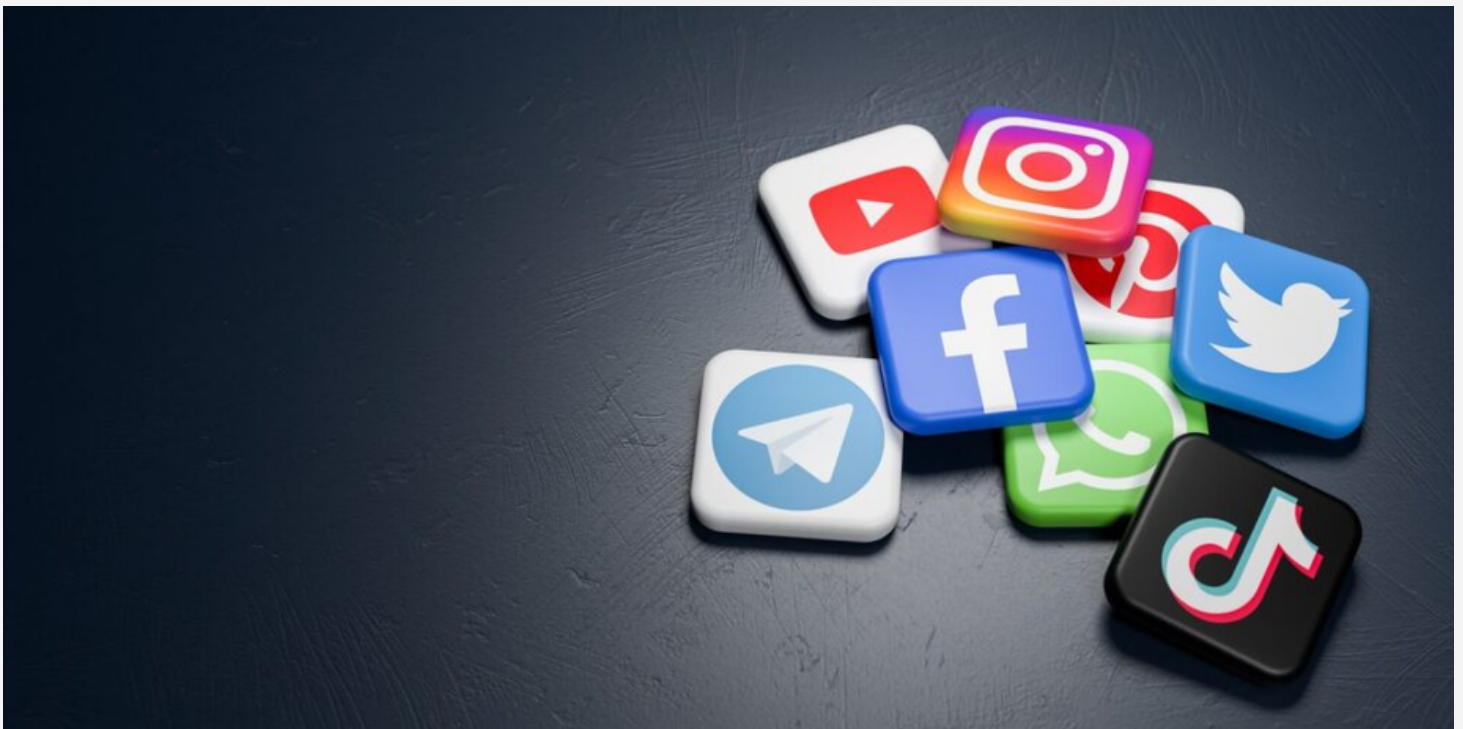
With the abundance of associated problems, an ideal solution is an all-out ban on family vlogging channels, child influencers, and any parental monetization of a child's digital image. Unfortunately, this sort of regulation is impractical and would be nearly impossible to enforce.

**Opinions of How Often Child Influencers are Exploited by Parents or Guardians**



The trouble arises in trying to define a child influencer. **Where do you draw the line?** How should the law distinguish between a parent posting normal occasional content about their children versus a parent forcing their child into an influencing career? The short answer is it probably can't. It's also hard to distinguish parents who are influencers and happen to have children from those engaging in more exploitative behavior. Additionally, it would be difficult to ban parents from ever posting their children and differentiate from kids who post themselves. Any sort of ban would be challenging to enforce and come with significant drawbacks. A ban with a narrow scope would likely include loopholes that popular content creators could exploit; a ban with a wider scope might restrict the social media activities of normal families outside the targeted population.

This influencer economy has remained so unregulated because social media largely has gone unregulated; efforts to regulate social media have focused primarily on political misinformation. The only feasible policy response must come from the labor regulation world rather than through social media. The only global precedent for protecting child influencers comes from France in 2020 (BBC, 2020). This law regulated (1) how many hours per week children could work to make social media content, (2) where their money went, and (3) how content could be taken down if the children requested. In the United States, Illinois became the first state to pass a law ensuring financial compensation for minors featured in vlogs (Rosenblatt, 2023). As of February 2024, six other states – Maryland, California, Georgia, Missouri, Ohio, and Arizona – have introduced legislation similar to Illinois’s law (Latifi, 2024). Passing these laws would not solve the plight of child influencers entirely but is an important building block as social media and the issue continue to evolve.



# CONCLUSION

Mommy bloggers and other variations of family social media influencers are a new issue, but bad parenting is not. The United States must act to protect children from the exploitation of their own parents and create a world where individuals have autonomy over their own digital presence. As social media continues to permeate nearly every aspect of human life, these issues are unlikely to go away any time soon. We don't have a full picture yet on the long term psychological impacts on the affected children, but the prognosis is poor. We are in urgent need for comprehensive social media regulation and mommy bloggers should be just the start.

“We’ve grown accustomed to someone in the public eye apologizing for an idiotic tweet from when they were a teen-ager. What if that record stretched back even further? Could things parents post about children produce real-world outcomes, in terms of fodder for bullying, professional reputation, or future prospects?”

*-Hsu in “Instagram, Facebook, and the Perils of ‘Sharenting,’” [The New Yorker]*

# SOURCES

Dunphy, R. (2017, April 17). *The Dark Side of YouTube family vlogging*. *Intelligencer*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/04/youtube-family-vloggings-dark-side.html>.

Edwards, M. (2023, February 9). *Children are making it big (for everyone else): The need for child labor laws protecting child influencers*. SSRN. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4351827](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4351827).

Hsu, H. (2019, September 11). *Instagram, Facebook, and the perils of “sharenting.”* *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/instagram-facebook-and-the-perils-of-sharenting>.

Neumann, S. (2024, February 20). *A timeline of Ruby Franke’s rise and fall: From family vlogger to convicted child abuser*. *Peoplemag*. <https://people.com/ruby-franke-rise-fall-youtube-vlogger-charged-child-abuse-7969073>

Hiniker, A., Schoenebeck, S., & Kientz, J. (2016). Not at the dinner table: Parents’ and children’s perspectives [https://yardi.people.si.umich.edu/pubs/Schoenebeck\\_FamilyTechRules16.pdf](https://yardi.people.si.umich.edu/pubs/Schoenebeck_FamilyTechRules16.pdf)

Qamar, Z. (2023, January 3). *Why “Kidfluencers” have so few protections - even as Americans support regulating the industry*. *FiveThirtyEight*. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-kidfluencers-have-so-few-protections-even-as-americans-support-regulating-the-industry/>.

Schulman, E. (2023). *How much do family YouTube channels make*. RSS. (n.d.). <https://www.thoughtleaders.io/blog/how-much-do-family-youtube-channels-make>.

Valentino-Devries, J., & Keller, M. H. (2024, February 23). *A marketplace of girl influencers managed by MOMS and stalked by men*. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/us/instagram-child-influencers.html>.

Wise, C. (2024, February 29). *Male predators stalk girls’ Instagram influencer accounts*. *MindSite News*. <https://mindsitenews.org/newsletter/male-predators-stalk-girls-instagram-influencer-accounts/#:~:text=Despite%20the%20shift%2C%20parents%20hoping,underworld%20dominated%20by%20male%20pedophiles>.