

Dangers of sharenting

Counsellor Elaine Nicholson MBE has a unique insight into the anxiety-provoking experiences of autistic people. She relays the impact that ‘sharenting’ can have on adults on the spectrum when their parents have documented often-embarrassing details about them on social media

“

I am seeing many autistic young people who are suffering because of sharenting”

If in doubt, leave it out: be wary of sharing details about your child on social media

Over the past 20 years of working as an autism specialist counsellor, I have observed many themes in the autistic therapeutic space. These themes are important and must be brought into the open to aid and educate future generations of counsellors and psychotherapists currently working or intending to work in the field. These thematic proliferations should also be brought to the attention of neurodiverse individuals and their close others for purposes of support and enlightenment.

What is sharenting?

A burgeoning theme in the therapeutic space is “sharenting”. This is a common syndrome among many parents in modern-day life. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines it as “the practice of a parent to regularly use social media to communicate a lot of detailed information about their child”.

Some parents will catalogue their child’s existence on Facebook or similar – from the foetus stage right through to A-levels and beyond. They will do so arbitrarily and without their child’s consent, and while most shares are well-meaning, there are risks attached to such activity.

On a macro level, there’s the potential for identity theft and the use of images on child porn websites. According to the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (US), half the photographs shared by child sexual abusers were initially posted on a social media site by their parents.

Some parents have gone so far as to chart their child’s developmental steps through YouTube. Even with the most stringent of privacy settings on any of these sites, can we, as parents, be certain that this content is absolutely private and cannot be broken into, now or in the future?

Case study: Anton

On a micro level, I am seeing many autistic and other neurodivergent young people who are suffering because of a parent’s sharenting behaviours. I recall one young man, aged 17, who was crippled >



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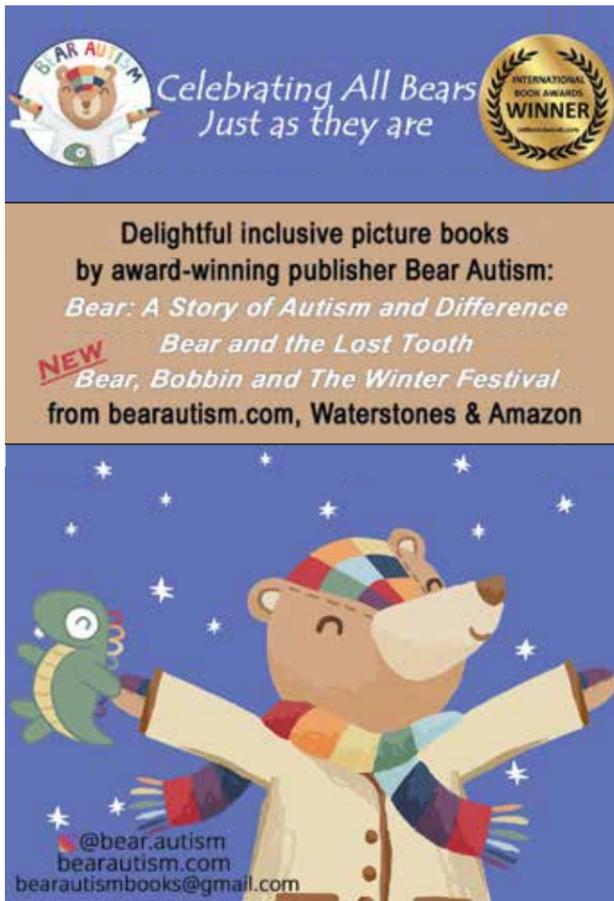
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Elaine Nicolson MBE is a registered counsellor with a master's degree in autism and a post-grad certification in Asperger's syndrome. She is also founder of Action for Neurodiversity: www.actionforneurodiversity.org

with anxiety over the potential revelation of a time 10 years past when he was going through a particularly low episode. His mother had remarried a man who didn't understand her son. Aged seven, semi-mute at the time and unable to read or write, he had smeared his poo in an attempt to communicate his feelings of distress. His mother, a kindly woman, wrote on her social media feed to her followers, many of whom were other parents of autistic children: "Anton smeared today," and followed this up with a sad face emoji.

This post was met with lots of support from other parents of autistic children. It was met with lots of "hugs" emojis, and other parents admitted that their child or children had engaged in a similar activity at some point.

This outpouring of camaraderie, at that moment, must have helped the mother to feel a lot better after her half-hour of scrubbing the wall with an intensive cleaning agent.

Anton, now no longer semi-mute and able to read and write, is aware that his mother's post remains "out there". He cannot get over it and has grown his hair so long that it covers his face. He wants to disguise himself. He wants to distance himself from his mother by becoming unrecognisable.

Anton talks about the sharenting a lot but is too afraid to confront his

mother about it. Anton is worried that his friends may find this out and will then have an excuse to tease and bully him, just like he was teased when he had no voice as a little boy.

Anton has worked hard to fit in with his neurotypical friends over the past two years and fears the smearing statement and other statements and video shares that his mother created over the years and which point to his

Anton's self-esteem is rock bottom and he is falling behind academically"

academically, which is adding to his stress.

Case study: Candice

Candice, now aged 27 and a solicitor, was non-verbal until she was aged five, when she suddenly started speaking in full sentences. Both her parents engaged in YouTube "show and tell" behaviours. There are videos in the cloud of Candice babbling, screeching, stimming, spinning and hand-flapping. As Candice eventually reached her milestones, her parents saw these occasions as excuses for great celebrations on YouTube.

Candice is now a highly competent city solicitor. She is described as a "rising star to be watched" by her older colleagues within the law firm where she works, but no one there knows that she is autistic, for, like many, she masks daily, trying to fit in with her neurotypical peers. She has dyed her hair differently from her natural colour and has developed an international accent that replaces her distinctive regional speaking voice. She fears being recognised as "that child" on YouTube.

It matters not to Candice that watchers of her videos – likely other parents of autistic children – may have gained some comfort from them. Candice knows that her parents love her, but in a cogent manner, she will state each time in

autism, are like dynamite. The revelation that he is autistic could blow any moment and he doesn't want that. He has found happiness in masking.

His fear of exposure is adversely affecting his studies. He cannot concentrate on his academic work and obsesses on what his mother did and what his mother might do next. Anton's self-esteem is rock bottom and he is falling behind



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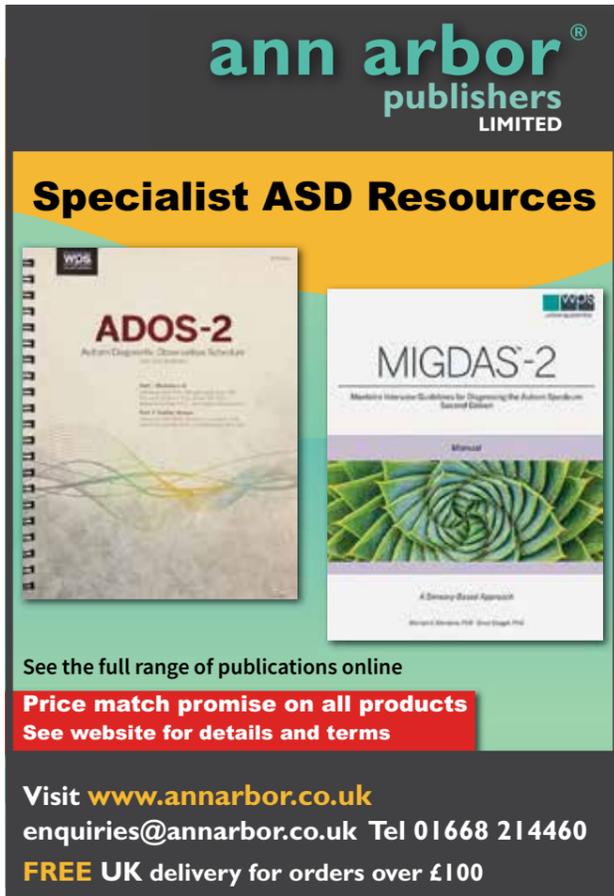
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A parent's duty is to protect, so consider these points before sharing information

In both Anton's and Candice's cases, I think sharing material about one's child to a broader audience than immediate family or friends, whether neurotypical or atypical, should be carefully thought out and planned with almost military precision. Parents should hesitate before their fingers/thumbs tap the proverbial keyboard. They need to consider the following:

- Could this embarrass my child now or in the future?
- Who, other than close friends or family, will see this?
- Do I have full control over sharing rights?
- Is this private, not public, content?
- Will I regret my add-on comment about my child?
- Could I/should I gain my child's consent?
- Could my child be bullied for this, now or in the future?
- What gains are there to be had?

Plus, more questions must be considered, depending on the child concerned, the content being shared, and the online platform on which the content is being shared.

Autistic individuals have notoriously higher rates of poor mental health and suicide risk than their neurotypical counterparts. For years, they have been bullied and mistreated more than most. It could be argued that autistic individuals experience all the downsides of being in a minority group:

- Unequal treatment and limited power
- Distinguishing traits
- Involuntary membership of a group
- Awareness of subordination

Parents of autistic children have a duty to protect their children during their developmental years. Sharenting exposes your child to the dangerous macro and micro risks outlined in this feature. Sharenting is a tricky social media fad to partake in and should be carefully navigated.

I am not saying that parents should never post about their child, but asking themselves the important questions listed above will help to mitigate any potential damage to themselves or to their child/children. The dangers of sharenting are immense. In some cases, families have completely broken down because of it.

therapy: "It's my life!" Candice fears broaching the subject with her parents for fear of hurting their feelings, despite her being a fully-fledged grown-up. Her parents' persistent mollycoddling, in addition to their filming every aspect of her life, has left Candice feeling "small" on the inside, like a little girl.

Candice cuts a sorry figure on my couch. She is gaunt-looking through her eating disorder, with pale, almost translucent skin that is likely not helped by her agoraphobic tendencies.

At every session, there is hand wringing. Her spine cannot rest on the back of the chair. She cannot relax, fearing that I might expose her, too. She asks me each time if there are recording devices in the room. I reassure her there are not. I anticipate years of working with Candice to get her to a place of peace and balance within herself. We will need time to repair the

“ Until the age of 10 her life had been a non-stop fly-on-the-wall documentary ”

damage caused by the fact that until the age of 10 her life had been a non-stop fly-on-the-wall documentary to the world.

Case study: Judith

Judith, aged 18, was diagnosed as autistic aged nine. Her mother was so impassioned by her daughter's diagnosis and plight that not only did she engage relentlessly with social media about "autism and

girls", but she also set up an autism and girls support group, often using her daughter as the poster girl for the group.

Judith is about to start university, where she will read one of the sciences. She is unbothered about her mother's fervour and passion to get "girls and autism" out there. She understands her mother's "why", but wishes that she would remove her image from all the social media promoting the cause. Judith wants a "fresh start" away from autism when she leaves home for the 200-mile trip to her halls of residence in September.

It is not uncommon for autistic young people to want to reinvent themselves upon leaving school or college and entering the world of work or university. They tend to relish the idea. Many want to leave their special or additional needs descriptors behind, often to the chagrin of their parents.

NB All names have been changed, and scrambled composites have been used for the vignettes.

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