

## #Sharenting

In September 2022, TikTok creator Caroline Easom shared an anonymous letter sent to her by a teen who had grown up on a popular family vlogging channel. The teen, who first went viral as a toddler, spoke out against the many downsides of their monetized, public childhood, including forced and tireless work, a lack of privacy, inappropriate messages from adult viewers, and the way that monetization warps caretaker-child relationships. “[I]f you manage to [achieve virality],” the teen warned prospective family vloggers, “your child will never be normal. You will be their boss, and they will be your employee.”<sup>1</sup>

Children who work in the entertainment industry are protected by some of the most stringent labor laws in the country, but social media platforms with user-generated content are still largely unregulated.<sup>2</sup> Some proponents of family vlogging, however, claim that responsible family vlogging does not qualify as child labor at all. Ami McClure, the mother of YouTube famous twins Ava and Alexis McClure, argues that her children don’t work—she and her husband do. In an *Wired* interview with Bee Fisher, a mother with Instagram-famous sons, Fisher’s three-year-old son Tegan hardly seems to understand what Instagram is at all.<sup>3</sup> When family vlogging goes wrong, proponents argue that the blame lies with caretakers who have acted abusively, not with family vlogging itself. When monetized family vlogging goes right, profits can fund the children’s education and help caretakers build a platform for sharing positive messages with large audiences.

Others argue that all monetized activities are work. Former child star Sheila James Kuehl says that play “is not play if you’re making money off it.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it can be difficult to separate “work” from “life” when, as on family vlogging channels, “real life” is the product. Money incentivizes family vloggers to shape “life” according to profitability. The teen in Caroline Easom’s video instructs children forced to star on monetized channels to “perfect [their] thumbnail face and fake smile...,” implying that the motivating factors of money and fame can fundamentally change how child stars understand non-work activities and authentic emotions.

To date, children on monetized YouTube channels have no legal protections to guarantee that the money from the channels will ever reach their pockets. Opponents of unregulated family vlogging argue that if vlogging is work, then children on monetized channels should receive the same protections against exploitation as employees in any other industry.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How far does parents’ authority over their children extend?
2. On what grounds can children claim to be exploited by their guardians?
3. What makes an activity count as work?

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.tiktok.com/@caroline\\_easom/video/7149213992307674410?is\\_from\\_webapp=v1&item\\_id=7149213992307674410&lang=en](https://www.tiktok.com/@caroline_easom/video/7149213992307674410?is_from_webapp=v1&item_id=7149213992307674410&lang=en)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/apr/24/its-not-play-if-youre-making-money-how-instagram-and-youtube-disrupted-child-labor-laws>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/age-of-kidfluencers/>

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