Author Rachel Sarah found it "unsettling" when a Web site used a photograph of her and her daughter as an advertisement PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Young parents

photo-sharing and social networking sites with images of their children dancing, singing and bathing. Not everyone is sure that all that sharing is such a good idea

Guardians of their smiles

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For Jessica Gwozdz, a professional photographer and mother of two, Flickr was a blessing. It allowed her to share photos of her children, Grace and Henry, with distant, tech-averse relatives for whom a username and password would have been too great an obstacle. It even allowed potential clients to freely browse her gallery.

Then a friend sent her an e-mail message with the kind of subject line no parent cares to read: "Oh no — it's Gracie."

The message contained a link to Orkut, a social networking site popular in Brazil. Someone had created a fake profile, using headshots of Gwozdz's 4-year-old daughter.

"They gave her a fake name, Melodie Cuthbert, and a relationship status that said she was interested in making friends and dating men," Gwozdz recalled in a recent telephone interview. Other Orkut members had given the profile a "sexy" rating of two and a half hearts.

The discovery turned out to be little more than a gut-churning prank. According to a Flickr spokeswoman, young teenage girls in Brazil were copying children's pictures from the photo-sharing site to create "paper doll" profiles, then giving each other "sexy" ratings depending on the quality of their work.

Gwozdz contacted Flickr and Orkut, which deleted the profiles. And Gwozdz has now taken advantage of Flickr's privacy settings. But to this day she occasionally gets e-mail messages to her Flickr account from strangers saying things like "family very beautiful" and "I would ask you, let me use the photos of his daughter."

Such is the stuff of parents' nightmares in the social networking age, when Facebook is rapidly taking the place of the baby book. Young parents are flooding photo-sharing and social networking sites — Snapfish, Twitter, YouTube, even Match.com — with images of their children dancing, singing and bathing.

Not everyone is sure that all that sharing is such a good idea. Several groups on Facebook rail against people posting children's photos. On Parenting.com, the editor, Susan Kane, says the debate "is constantly going on." And on blogs, school listservs and at kitchen tables, the argument flares: Should young children's photos be shared online?

Just consider these recent postings on UrbanBaby.com and Momversation.com, two discussion sites for young mothers:

"You should not have any photos of your children on the Internet at all!"

"They're 3 years old, it's not that big a deal."

"If you want to post pictures of my kids online, you'd better ask me first (so I can say no!)"

"Why were they naked?"

Like other parental debates — whether to spank or when to let children travel alone — the issue tends to divide parents into two familiar camps: the vigilant and the laissez-faire. Some parents want to protect their children from what is unlikely but still tragically possible. Others say children will do best when learning to live with the realities of the Web.

Squashed in the middle are parents who impose their own haphazard rules: Only post on password-protected sites. Leave out names. Yes to Flickr, no to YouTube. And for heaven's sake, no bathtub photos.

Rebecca Woolf, with Archer, 4, and Fable, 1. She posts their pictures online — but not undressed. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Parents are grappling with what is safe, and what fears are irrational. As with most debates about child safety, the risks are not as severe as many imagine. But neither is posting photos online as safe as many assume.

Elizabeth Hunter, a blogger from Arlington, Massachusetts, frequently posts pictures of her 2-year-old daughter on her site. To her, it's a matter of living with the reality of the Web.

"Hundreds of kids die in swimming pools every year, but we don't shut down all the pools," she said. "We teach kids how to swim."

"I don't put up pictures of her completely naked or ones that show her genitalia, obviously, but I have shown pictures of her in the bathtub," she added. "Sure, people can probably figure out where she is and stalk her, but child abductions from strangers are such strange occurrences, really."

Rebecca Woolf, a Los Angeles-based writer, uses her children's real names on her site, and shows their faces. But she said in an interview, "I wouldn't even post a picture of my son from behind if he were naked."

It's not always easy to know what's the right thing to do. "I feel conflicted about it," she said. "People have said to me, 'Oh, you're exploiting your kids.' But the medium is so new, none of us know what is going to happen."

Other parents see a case of dangerously mixed messages: How can you teach a child not to share private information if you post a picture of him wearing his baseball uniform — with the town name — as your profile photo on Facebook?

"We tell our children all the time to be careful, don't reveal your information, don't give your name, don't talk to strangers," said Jodi Garrett, a registered nurse in San Diego, California, who does not post pictures of her two children. "To me, a picture posted on the Internet is a big piece of information. I cringe when I see what people post."

And even strict parents can't always keep out the rest of the world. Kathryn Murray, a mother from the Upper East Side of Manhattan who asked to use her middle name instead of her first to protect her family's privacy, said she limits pictures of her son to Picasa, a site that allows for invitation-only access. But she recently had an awkward moment when a friend told her she had posted pictures of her son on Facebook. She was considering how to ask her politely to take it down, when her friend, sensing the tension, beat her to it.

"My facial expression was enough," she recalled.

Fueling the anxiety of parents like Murray is a doomsday scenario: a predator finds pictures of a cute child on the Internet, figures out where the child lives or goes to school and snatches him or her.

"It's probably not too difficult to go through those pictures and figure out we live on the Upper East Side," Murray said. "And then it's 'Oh, I've been to that park,' or 'I know that street.' What's to stop a pedophile from putting two and two together?"

Her fears are misplaced, experts on online safety say.

"Research shows that there is virtually no risk of pedophiles coming to get kids because they found them online," said Stephen Balkam, chief executive of the Family Online Safety Institute. While the debate makes this crime seem common, he said, all the talk is really just "techno-panic."

David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, says TV shows like the *Dateline NBC* program, *To Catch a Predator*, have falsely inflated the danger of the Internet.

"There is this characterization of pedophiles using the Internet as an LL Bean catalog, but this is not the way it happens," he said. Predators are much more likely to look in chat rooms or other sites, he said, where teenagers are suggesting that they may be open to a sexual relationship.

The real danger is that a photo is appropriated and mistreated. Gretchen White, a blogger from Westminster, Colorado, discovered a young woman on MySpace passing off pictures of her baby as her own. "It turns out she had faked a pregnancy online and needed a baby to show for it," White said.

Suspicious friends of the young woman traced the photo back to White's blog and alerted her. "My initial reaction was, I'm never blogging again," White said, but decided instead to brand all her pictures with a watermark of her blog's URL, an increasingly common tactic for mommy bloggers.

Rachel Sarah, author of the book *Single Mom Seeking*, recently came across a Web site for a group in California that used a picture of her and her daughter as an advertisement. They took it down at her request, but she said the experience was "unsettling."

The possibility always exists that pedophiles are lifting such pictures, Finkelhor says, but it is not something he has encountered. And, he said, it's unlikely for a discomfiting reason: Actual child pornography is so readily available that pedophiles aren't likely to waste time cruising social networks looking for less explicit material.

Regardless of what danger may come to your children by posting pictures, there is one hazard whose existence no one can question: other parents. And their wrath could be enough to make anyone think twice before posting photos of little Charlie's fourth birthday party.

Aaron Baar, a freelance writer from Chicago, posted a video last year of his son's school holiday concert on YouTube, so his parents could see it.

"I put it up there and I forgot about it," he said. But he had tagged the video with the name of the school, and one by one students started finding it.

Several months later he received an e-mail message from the mother of the child standing next to his son asking him to take it down. That parent also shared her e-mail message with the class' other parents, touching off a small avalanche of disapproving posts on a local message board regarding Baar's parenting skills.

"To this day I don't feel comfortable bringing a camera to a school play," he said.
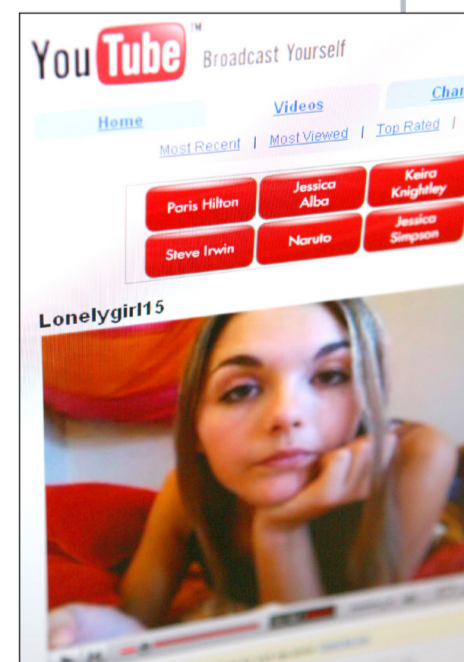
YouTube contributor Lonelygirl15, whose real name is Jessica Rose, looks into a webcam in a YouTube video. Some parents worry that pedophiles could trawl the Net and track down children who post details about their private lives online.
PHOTO: BLOOMBERG