Opinion | Facebook Is Stealing Your Family’s Joy

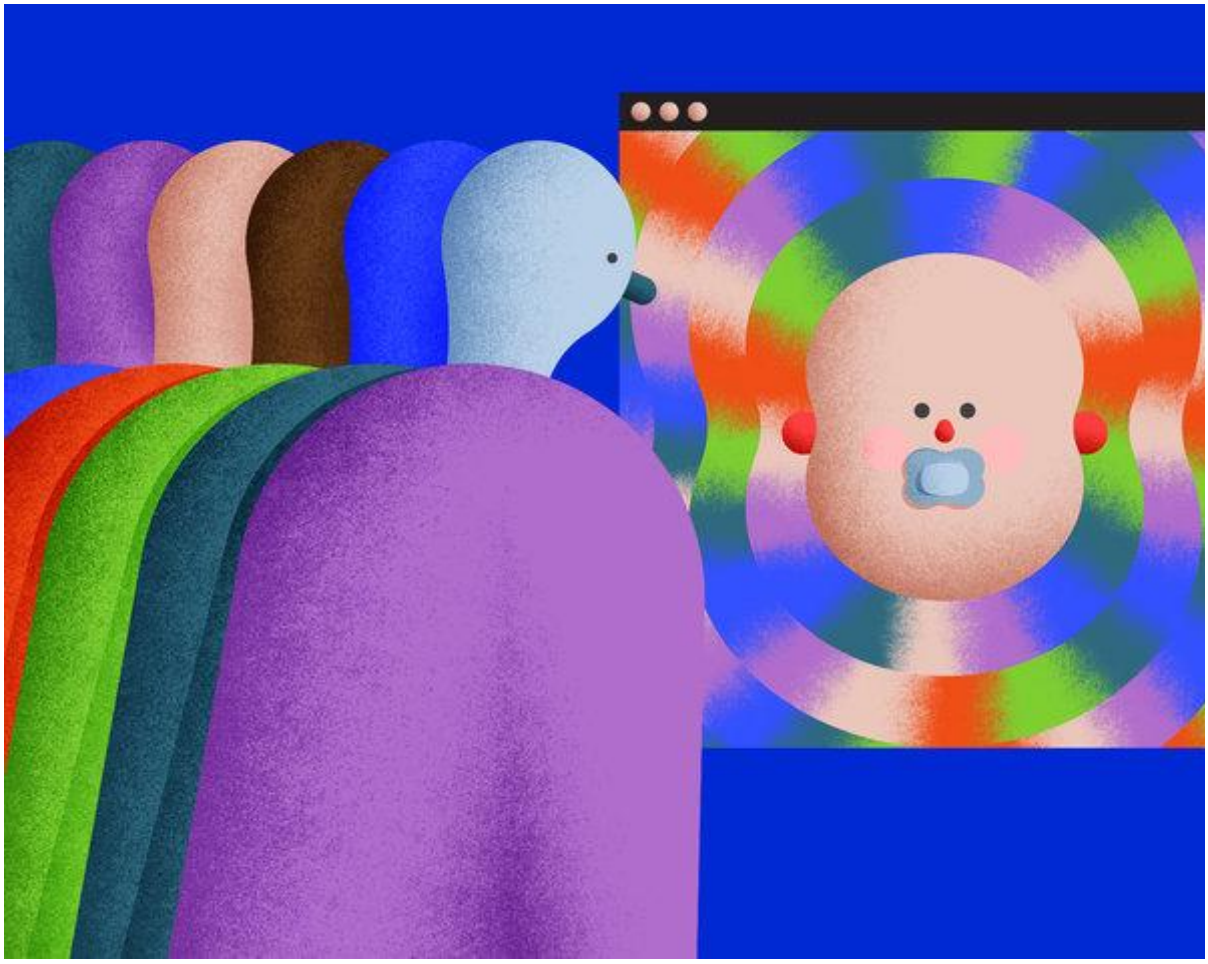
Facebook Is Stealing Your Family’s Joy

Before you post that baby bump or college acceptance letter online, remember how much fun it used to be to share in person.

By KJ Dell’Antonia

Ms. Dell'Antonia is a novelist who writes frequently about parenthood.

- April 12, 2019



CreditCreditMartin Nicolausson

My kids have had some good news lately. Academic triumphs, hockey tournament wins, even a little college admissions excitement. They've had rough moments too, and bittersweet ones. There have been last games and disappointments and unwashed dishes galore. If you're a friend, or even somebody who knows my mom and struck up a friendly conversation in line at the grocery store, I'd love to talk to you about any of it. I might even show you pictures.

But I'm not going to post them on social media. Because I tried that for a while, and I came to a simple conclusion

about getting the reactions of friends, family and acquaintances via emojis and exclamations points rather than hugs and actual exclamations.

It's no fun. And I don't want to do it any more.

I'm not the only one pulling back from social media. While around two-thirds of American adults use Facebook, the way many of us use it has shifted in recent years. About 40 percent of adult users report taking a break from checking Facebook for several weeks or more, and 26 percent tell researchers they've deleted the app from their phone at some point in the past year.

Some have changed their behavior because of Facebook's lax record on protecting user data: More than half of adult users have adjusted their privacy settings in the past year. Others seem more concerned with how the platform makes them act and feel. Either way, pulling back on social media is a way to embrace your family's privacy.

"I have definitely seen an evolution toward sharing less," said Julianna Miner, an adjunct professor of global and community health at George Mason University and the author of the forthcoming "Raising a Screen-Smart Kid: Embrace the Good and Avoid the Bad in the Digital Age." She added, "It's hard to tell if the changes are a response to the security breaches, or a result of people just getting tired of it."

Even Mark Zuckerberg, the chief executive of Facebook,

seems to suspect it's at least in part the latter — that after experimenting with living our lives in a larger online sphere for over a decade, many of us are ready to return to the more intimate groups where humans have long thrived. In a recent blog post, Mr. Zuckerberg announced plans to emphasize private conversations and smaller communities on the platform. Interacting on Facebook, he wrote, "will become a fundamentally more private experience" — less "town square," more "living room."

That's a shift I've already made for myself, and since doing so, I find myself asking why I embraced my personal soapbox in that online square in the first place. The more I reserve both good news and personal challenges for sharing directly with friends, the more I see that the digital world never offered the same satisfaction or support. Instead, I lost out on moments of seeing friends' faces light up at joyful news, and frequently found myself wishing that not everyone within my network had been privy to a rant or disappointment.

"There's plenty of evidence that interpersonal, face-to-face interactions yield a stronger neural response than anything you can do online," said Ms. Miner. "Online empathy is worth something to us, but not as much. It takes something like six virtual hugs to equal one real hug."

Time spent seeking those virtual hugs can take us outside the world we're living in, and draw us back to our phones (which, of course, is the reason many networks offer those

bursts of feedback in the first place).

“Ultimately, you’re not just giving social media the time it takes you to post,” said Stacey Steinberg, the associate director of the Center on Children and Families at the University of Florida Levin College of Law and the author of a paper on the topic called “Sharenting: Children’s Privacy in the Age of Social Media.”

“The interaction doesn’t end the minute you press share,” she said. “Some part of your mind is waiting for responses, and that amounts to a small distraction that takes us away from whatever else we would be engaged in.” Once we post that image of our toddler flossing, we’re no longer entirely watching him dance. Some part of us is in the digital realm, waiting to have our delight validated.

That validation can be satisfying, but the emotion is fleeting, like the sugar rush that comes from replacing a real breakfast with a Pop-Tart. Watching your mother’s reaction to the same video, though, brings a different kind of pleasure. “I see parents sharing differently than I did five years ago,” said Ms. Steinberg. “We’re looking for smaller audiences and ways to share just with close friends.”

She also warned that even seemingly innocuous public updates have long shadows. “You could have a child who was a star baseball player and later decides to make a change, still being asked by relative strangers about his

batting average," she said. "Or one who decides on a college, and then changes her mind. Decisions are complex. Lives are complex. Marie Kondo-ing your Facebook page is not so easy."

There are exceptions. Facebook shines as an arena for professional connection and promotion, of course. For those of us with children who have special needs, it can offer an invaluable community of support. And for the very worst of bad news — for calamities or illnesses or deaths — Facebook can help users speedily share updates, ask for help and share obituaries and memories.

Cal Newport, the author of "Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World," suggests that when we evaluate the ways we use the social media tools available to us, we ask ourselves if those tools are the best ways to achieve our goals. In those cases, the answer is yes.

But for sharing personal moments, for venting, for getting good advice on parenting challenges while feeling supported in our tougher moments? I've found that real life, face-to-face, hug-to-hug contact offers more bang for my buck than anything on a screen ever could. Why cheat yourself out of those pleasures for the momentary high of a pile of "likes"?

Recently, I ran into an acquaintance while waiting for my order at a local restaurant. "Congratulations," she said, warmly. I racked my brain. I'd sold a book that week, but

the information wasn't public. I wasn't pregnant, didn't have a new job, had not won the lottery. My takeout ordering skills didn't really seem worthy of note, and in fact I probably had asked for too much food, as I usually do. I wanted to talk more about this happy news, but what were we talking about? Fortunately, she went on, "Your son must be so thrilled."

Right. My oldest — admitted to college. He was thrilled, and so were we, and I said so. But how did she know?

My son told her daughter, one of his classmates, and her daughter told her.

Perfect.

KJ Dell'Antonia is the author of "How to Be a Happier Parent" and the forthcoming novel "The Chicken Sisters."