



FROM VIRAL PUNISHMENT VIDEOS TO DOCUMENTED CHILD ABUSE

How Public Shaming on Social Media Evolved Into a Child Welfare Crisis (2017-2026)

A Retrospective Analysis

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 2017, I wrote about an emerging trend: parents publicly shaming their children on social media as a form of discipline. At the time, viral videos showed parents berating children for bad grades, breaking rules, or ditching school—recording their humiliation and broadcasting it to the world. I interviewed a former Child Protective Services worker who warned that dealing with this issue would require work "at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work."

Nine years later, what began as isolated punishment videos has escalated into documented patterns of child abuse, leading to criminal prosecutions, child removals, and national attention. The CPS worker I interviewed in 2017 was prophetic: "The issue of public shaming via social media will continue to be an uphill battle."

This white paper revisits my 2017 analysis, examines how public shaming evolved from questionable discipline tactics into substantiated abuse cases, and provides a framework for child welfare agencies responding to digital abuse in 2026.

WHAT WE KNEW IN 2017: THE EMERGENCE OF DIGITAL SHAMING

The Viral Trend

Social media has become a common platform for parents to publicly shame their children. Viral videos depicted parents livid over their child's offenses—often berating them, using profanity, or laughing while shaming. Children appeared helpless, sobbing uncontrollably, terrified, humiliated, and in utter disbelief that the act of public shaming was being recorded and shared online. Legal scholars documented this emerging phenomenon of parents using social media platforms as punishment tools (Goldman, 2015).

The question we asked then: *Was publicly shaming the child worth it?*

Some parents defended the practice, stating it was worth it and "served their child right"—claiming public shaming would deter future misbehavior.

However, there were also viral videos of parents who *refused* to shame their children on social media. One father explained that publicly shaming his son for misbehaving in school would be "far more emotionally and psychologically damaging" because his son viewed him as a protector. The father noted that publishing such videos would linger in cyberspace and could ruin his son's future when pursuing higher education and employment. Instead, he chose face-to-face conversations and age-appropriate consequences like restricting video game privileges.

The Expert Perspective

In her article "Shaming Children Is Emotionally Abusive," licensed marriage and family therapist Karyl McBride, PhD stated, in part:

"Shaming and humiliating children is emotionally abusive. It is not ok to smack children physically or with words. Young people deserve and are entitled to reach out, attach and bond with their caretakers."

Dr. McBride further explained:

"Shaming and humiliation causes fear in children. This fear does not go away when they grow up. It becomes a barrier for a healthy emotional life and is difficult to eradicate. If these same children become parents, the possibility also exists that the fear and negativity can be unwittingly passed through the generations."

Voices from the Field: A CPS Worker's Perspective (2017 Interview)

The following interview was conducted in 2017 with a former Child Protective Services worker who requested anonymity. No edits were made to preserve the integrity of their responses.

Aneeta Pearson: Thank you so much for completing this interview with me. I really appreciate your time and insight that you will provide on this story.

Interviewee: Absolutely. I am thrilled and honored to be a part of this particular blog. As a social worker, I've spent a significant portion of my career serving underprivileged children and families in my community. I'm convinced that in the days, weeks, months, and years to come, child welfare related issues will remain a pertinent subject and as social workers we have the professional responsibility to confront this matter head on.

Aneeta Pearson: Can you please tell me a little about your experience working in the child welfare system?

Interviewee: I was a child protective services worker for approximately three years. During this time, I managed active investigations and active ongoing cases after placing prevention services within homes where child abuse or neglect had been substantiated. After leaving my government job, I enrolled in graduate school to pursue an MSW and went on to further hone my advocacy skills while working with abused and neglected children within a medical setting alongside a team of physicians who were certified child abuse pediatricians. In my current role, I serve as a patient advocate within a medical setting and oversee several advocacy projects throughout the institution.

Aneeta Pearson: What are some of your experiences as a child welfare worker regarding this story?

Interviewee: With recent advancements in technology and the availability of endless social media options, users are essentially able to broadcast any detail of their personal lives at any given moment. As a result, the public has recently become inundated with images and live videos of day to day events within the average family and this sometimes includes videos of parents "disciplining" their children. Unfortunately, on this particular issue of shaming children on social media, there have been several cases that have caught the attention of social workers and the public at large. I have personally found these videos disheartening and downright disturbing.

In reflecting upon my early professional experiences within the child welfare field, social media was never a major catalyst during the many child abuse and neglect investigations I substantiated. Most of the substantiations I made on behalf of the department were based upon disclosures from children, siblings, family members, mandated reporters and sometimes physical evidence. As time went on, I can recall several high-profile cases where social media did become very instrumental in building criminal cases against parents who publicly abused their children online, engaged in criminal activities in the presence of their children online, and openly admitted to abuse to social media followers.

Aneeta Pearson: What are some of your concerns of this growing trend as it relates to child welfare?

Interviewee: From a professional perspective, I am immediately concerned about the short and long term physical, emotional, social, and relational damage that results from incidents of excessive discipline and public shaming. These consequences are profound and should not be ignored as this baggage often follows recipients of public shaming into adulthood.

As a child welfare professional, I've unfortunately had the opportunity to have a front row seat to a wide range of abuse and neglect related issues involving countless children and their families. In cases I have investigated much like the incidents of public shaming and or inappropriate and excessive "discipline" we have begun to witness via social media. I believe at the root of the issue are segments of parents who are overwhelmed, frustrated and unequipped with the proper tools to effectively institute boundaries and consequences in a nurturing way which promotes the safety, trust, and emotional bond essential to a healthy and happy child and a solid parental relationship.

The causes for such matters are multifaceted and would require a deeper dive to highlight the intersectionality been race, class, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, generational traumas often inherited by abusive parents, and certainly systemic failures within the legal and child welfare system.

I think there is certainly a great deal of work to be done within this subject at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work which might include developing partnerships with social media outlets to raise awareness and develop reporting practices, revisiting current evidence based parenting interventions, and to also develop an alliance between the child welfare and legal systems in addressing this specific issue.

The issue of public shaming via social media will continue to be an uphill battle and has revealed itself as one of many layers wrapped within the larger issues of child abuse and neglect faced by vulnerable children every day.

WHAT HAS CHANGED: 2017-2026

From Questionable Discipline to Criminal Abuse

The 2017 interviewee's prediction proved accurate—but the problem escalated beyond what we anticipated. What began as viral punishment videos has evolved into documented patterns of severe child abuse, with social media content serving as evidence in criminal prosecutions and child welfare interventions.

In 2017, we debated whether public shaming constituted emotional abuse. By 2026, the question is no longer theoretical—courts have answered definitively through criminal convictions.

Cases Demonstrating the Evolution

Several high-profile cases demonstrate how social media documentation of abusive parenting has led to criminal accountability:

Ruby Franke/8 Passengers (2023-2024)

Popular family content creator Ruby Franke documented strict parenting practices on her channel with millions of subscribers. In 2023, she was arrested for aggravated child abuse after her malnourished children escaped and sought help. Evidence of torture, starvation, and severe physical abuse emerged. The content she had proudly shared online became evidence of a pattern of escalating abuse that ultimately resulted in her conviction and lengthy prison sentence (NPR, 2024; *State of Utah v. Franke*, 2024).

This case illustrates how public shaming videos often mask deeper, more severe abuse occurring off-camera. What appeared to be "*strict parenting*" on social media was evidence of systematic torture.

DaddyOFive (2017)

Parents posted "prank" videos showing children in visible distress—crying, screaming, and begging for the abuse to stop. What parents framed as "family fun" showed clear patterns of emotional and psychological abuse. The videos led to CPS investigation and emergency removal of two children from the home (Ohlheiser, 2017), followed by criminal charges for child neglect later in 2017.

This case demonstrated that parents' characterization of abuse as "discipline" or "pranks" does not shield them from legal accountability when the harm to children is documented.

How Child Welfare Practice Has Changed

The shift from 2017 to 2026 is profound. While traditional evidence sources remain central to investigations, social media has become an increasingly important source of evidence in abuse cases. CPS workers now:

- May review parents' social media accounts when relevant to investigations
- Receive referrals that include concerning content posted online

- Can use video and photo evidence from social media in substantiation decisions
- Collaborate with law enforcement when content documents criminal abuse
- Are beginning to educate mandated reporters to recognize digital evidence of abuse

CURRENT CHILD WELFARE IMPLICATIONS

Assessment Framework for Digital Abuse Cases

Child welfare agencies should evaluate parenting content shared on social media using frameworks that recognize digital shaming and humiliation as forms of emotional abuse. The following assessment criteria help workers determine when online content constitutes maltreatment:

Emotional Harm Indicators

- Does content depict the child in humiliating, degrading, or shaming situations?
- Is the child visibly distressed, crying, or begging for the recording to stop?
- Does the parent laugh at, mock, or encourage others to ridicule the child?
- Is the content designed to punish the child through public humiliation?
- Would a reasonable person recognize the content as emotionally harmful to the child?

Pattern Recognition

- Is there a pattern of shaming content over time?
- Do multiple videos show the same child being subjected to humiliation?
- Has the severity or frequency of shaming content escalated?
- Do online comments encourage or celebrate the child's humiliation?
- Is there evidence of other abuse or neglect in the content?

Privacy Violations

- Does content expose private moments (bathroom use, changing clothes, medical situations)?
- Are children's identities, locations, or schools disclosed in ways that endanger them?
- Is sensitive information (diagnoses, therapy details, family conflicts) shared publicly?
- Does the parent refuse to remove content when asked by the child or other adults?

Impact on Child Development

- Has the child experienced bullying, harassment, or stigma due to posted content?
- Does the child show signs of anxiety, depression, or trauma related to being filmed?
- Has school performance or peer relationships deteriorated after content was posted?
- Does the child express fear or distress about future posting?

The following patterns may suggest potential abuse and warrant careful evaluation:

- Parents describe shaming videos as "deserved punishment" or claim children "need to learn a lesson"
- Content shows children begging parents to stop filming or delete videos
- Parents post content immediately after disciplining to "make an example" of the child
- Comments on videos contain threats, ridicule, or encouragement of further punishment
- Children appear coached, fearful, or exhibit concerning behavioral changes
- Parents defend posting despite concerns raised by schools, relatives, or other professionals
- Content reveals other concerning parenting practices (withholding food, excessive physical discipline, isolation)
- Pattern of escalating severity in shaming content over time

Documentation Best Practices

When social media content is relevant to an investigation, workers should:

- Capture screenshots and archive videos immediately (content is often deleted once investigations begin)
- Document URLs, posting dates, view counts, and comment content
- Note children's visible reactions and any statements they make on camera
- Preserve evidence using methods admissible in court proceedings
- Consult with legal counsel regarding evidence collection and use

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE AGENCIES

Immediate Actions

1. Update Emotional Abuse Definitions

It would be helpful if State child welfare agencies include digital shaming and public humiliation in their definitions of emotional abuse. Policy language should clarify that:

- Publicly posting content intended to shame, humiliate, or punish a child constitutes emotional abuse
- The permanence and accessibility of online content amplifies harm
- Children's inability to consent to public shaming is a critical factor in assessment
- Documented patterns of digital shaming may support removal or legal intervention

2. Develop Specialized Training

CPS workers need training specifically addressing digital abuse, covering:

- How to recognize emotional abuse in social media content
- Distinguishing between acceptable family sharing and abusive shaming
- Proper evidence collection from social media platforms
- Interviewing children about their experiences with being filmed and posted
- Collaboration with law enforcement on cases involving digital evidence

3. Establish Platform Partnerships

Child welfare agencies could develop reporting relationships with major social media platforms to:

- Report content depicting child abuse for expedited review and removal
- Preserve evidence before parents delete concerning content
- Coordinate on high-risk cases involving multiple jurisdictions
- Educate platform safety teams about child welfare concerns

4. Mandate Reporter Education

Teachers, counselors, physicians, and other mandated reporters need guidance on:

- When social media content could trigger a child abuse report
- How to document and preserve digital evidence for reporting
- Supporting children who are experiencing bullying or harassment due to parental posting
- Distinguishing between typical family sharing and harmful public shaming

Long-Term Systemic Changes

Public Awareness Campaigns

State and county agencies could develop public education campaigns addressing:

- The long-term psychological harm of public shaming
- Children's rights to privacy and dignity
- Alternative, healthy discipline approaches
- The permanence of online content and its impact on children's futures
- That digital shaming can constitute criminal abuse

Research and Data Collection

Federal agencies could support research examining:

- Long-term outcomes for children subjected to digital shaming
- Prevalence of social media-documented abuse in CPS caseloads
- Effectiveness of interventions addressing digital abuse
- Correlation between online shaming and other forms of maltreatment

Federal-Level Considerations

As states grapple with digital abuse cases, federal leadership could support consistency through:

- Clarifying how existing emotional abuse definitions apply to digital contexts
- Sharing emerging best practices for social media evidence
- Providing frameworks for balancing parental rights with children's privacy
- Facilitating interstate cooperation protocols

CONCLUSION: THE UPHILL BATTLE CONTINUES

The 2017 CPS worker I interviewed concluded: "The issue of public shaming via social media will continue to be an uphill battle and has revealed itself as one of many layers wrapped within the larger issues of child abuse and neglect faced by vulnerable children every day."

That assessment remains accurate in 2026. The uphill battle continues, but we now have documented evidence that what began as questionable discipline tactics has, in some cases, escalated into criminal child abuse. While case law is still developing, criminal prosecutions in cases like Ruby Franke and DaddyOFive demonstrate that courts will hold parents accountable when public shaming crosses into documented abuse.

Since 2017, we have gained: criminal precedents establishing legal accountability, documented harm to children, platform mechanisms for reporting and removing abusive content, and emerging awareness that digital shaming raises serious child welfare concerns.

The interviewee's call for "work to be done at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels" has never been more urgent. At the micro level, individual caseworkers need training to assess digital abuse. At the mezzo level, agencies need updated policies explicitly addressing social media evidence. At the macro level, we need federal guidance clarifying that public humiliation of children—whether occurring in a living room or broadcast to millions—constitutes emotional abuse.

As a child welfare expert committed to protecting vulnerable children, I urge agencies to recognize that technology has created new avenues for abuse. The children whose humiliation goes viral are suffering documented emotional harm. The permanence of online content means their trauma is replayed endlessly, accessible to peers, future employers, and strangers.

We should act with the same urgency we bring to any form of child maltreatment. The uphill battle continues, but we now have the evidence, legal precedents, and professional understanding to win it. Child welfare agencies should meet this moment with updated practice, evidence-based training, and unwavering commitment to protecting children from abuse—whether that abuse occurs behind closed doors or broadcast to the world.

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Note: This white paper is based on the author's 2017 article "Gaining Global Attention, Parents Publicly Shaming Using Social Media" and incorporates analysis of developments from 2017-2026. The 2017 interview with a CPS worker is reproduced without edits to preserve historical perspective.



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