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Daily OPINION

STOP USING YOUR CHILDREN FOR CONTENT

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On Sunday evening I saw a TikTok that made me so angry I had to set down my phone and take a deep breath. It was a mother detailing her morning routine and driving her children to school. She was bothering her son — poking him, hitting him, singing in his face — while he pushed her away and made it clear he did not want to be touched. Yet she continued. A mother, for the sake of social media attention, purposely violated her son's boundaries and humiliated him in front of millions.

This is just one example of the social media plague known as family influencers. These people, usually mothers, exploit their children for social media content, usually in the form of "cute" videos or "realistic" vlogs where they detail their daily lives for the internet to see. Family influencers are personifications of everything wrong with social media today. They exploit their children that they are meant to raise and care for, commodifying familial love for likes and comments.

One of the most severe examples of abuse and exploitation online is also one that you've probably heard of — the Franke family, who ran the now-abandoned YouTube channel "8 Passengers." Ruby Franke, the matriarch, was arrested in 2023 and pled guilty for four counts of aggravated child abuse. This came after her 12-year-old son escaped Jodi Hildenbrant's (Franke's life coach) Utah home emaciated, with duct tape around his ankles. Prosecutors looked at Franke's past videos featuring her laughing about her punitive measures that included withholding meals, removing doors and isolation. Her adult children, Shari and Chad, have spoken out about the horrific abuse they experienced at the hands of Franke and the dangers of unchecked "mommy vlogging" and family influencer content. Shari even declared, in front of the Utah legislature, that there is "no ethical or moral family vlogger".

As a result of the Franke case, more states are beginning to pass laws designed to protect the financial rights of children in family influencer channels. Illinois passed its "Child Labor Law of 2024," including language that addresses online personas and family vlogging. California and the Frankes' home state of Utah have also passed laws intended to protect the financials of these child stars, addressing trust accounts and financial transparency.

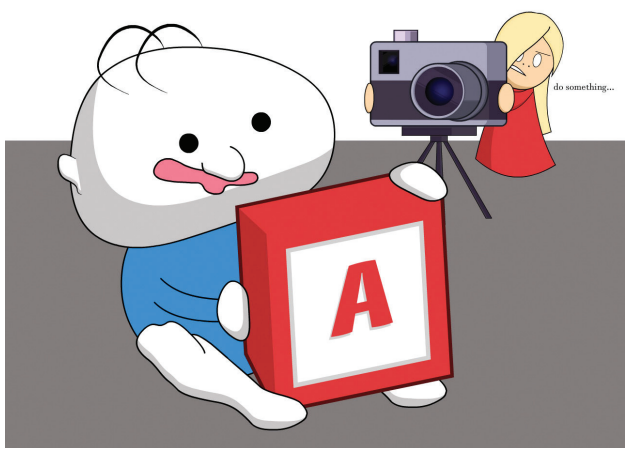


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES CARLTON, CONTRIBUTING ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS

However, these laws only address the financial rights of the child; the children's rights to privacy and control over the content is often addressed inadequately or not addressed at all. In Utah and Minnesota, once the child is 18, they can take steps to delete content they are uncomfortable with. But this only takes effect when they turn 18. Children of family influencers in these states must still live with embarrassing or uncomfortable content until they turn 18. Other states do not even address the non-financial harm that comes with family influencing.

Family influencers expose their children to the evils of the world, sharing intimate details of their lives without their consent for more clicks. For young girls, this is even more dangerous. An investigation by the New York Times found that many parent-managed Instagram accounts of young girls (aspiring models, gymnasts, etc.) were primarily followed by men. Men will constantly sexually harass these girls in their comment sections; parent managers of these accounts are quoted saying that "the first thing they did when they woke up in the morning was block followers and the last thing they did before they went to bed was block followers." There is no safe way to post young girls publicly on the internet — yet these parents post their children anyway, knowing that there are pedophiles actively seeking out their innocuous content for sexual purposes.

Whether a parent is sharing a supposedly cute moment, poking their child's face in the car or uploading a vlog about their day-to-day life, that child's life will be changed forever. They are exposed to the full force of the internet, both good and bad — and the parents will profit, "creating an environment where informed consent is nearly impossible," according to the Chicago Journal of International Law.

While it is my opinion that family content should not exist, restricting family influencers would be impossible under free-speech laws. Considering the financial exploitation of children in family content, children's lack of control over how they are presented on the internet and privacy issues related to information and picture sharing, state legislators should do more to protect the emotional wellbeing of children in family content to make it safer for everyone involved.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF ENGLISH CLASSES?

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The curtains are blue, the wallpaper is yellow and the floorboards have a heartbeat. But why did the author mention it?

Everyone consumes media. We all read, listen to music or watch TV. We exchange text messages and listen to voicemails. There is no escape from consuming stories made by different people. We are influenced by the authors of those stories all the time, so it is important to know exactly what they are saying.

In all forms of media, there are encoded messages. In English classes, we learn how to interpret those messages. We widen our reference bank of media and weave interconnected webs of influences to make sense of how authors see the world. English classes teach you to zoom out and look at both the "what" and the "why" of communication.

As a writer by trade, I have a personal investment in the English education of students across America. I want to be understood without filtering my words. But we are currently in a literacy crisis and America is facing a teacher shortage. Our children who aren't learning how to read are turning into adults that do not know how to read.

In English classes, we learn that there is no such thing as "too deep." We learn to wake up to the world around us and sharpen our observational skills. There is always a hidden meaning behind every author's words, even if the author didn't always intend it. We are taught to consider the meaning behind color choices, plot, narration and setting because they all matter. A good author makes active choices about every single detail of their stories, but a great author also makes subconscious choices that impact their story. Similarly, a good reader skims texts and summarizes for meaning; but a great reader takes a fine-toothed comb to everything that they read and experience. And everyone should aim to be a great reader.

English classes teach us how other people understand reality. They teach interpersonal skills. It may be boring and time-consuming, but it is incredibly necessary. Paying attention to the meaning of the words of the world that spins around you makes you a part of that world. Everyone needs to be taught how to communicate and therefore create community — even STEM students.


Only 31% of U.S. fourth graders read at or above proficiency, and 40% read below the NAEP basic level. Kids with even one book at home are nearly twice as likely to be on track in literacy and numeracy.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @LITPARTNERS ON INSTAGRAM

So what does a STEM student have to do with English? They communicate, too. They read and write emails. They seek to understand the world around them, even if the STEM mindset looks to understand it through a different avenue. It is one of problem-solving, analysis and breaking down the world into smaller, more digestible parts. But are the English mindset and the STEM mindset really that different?

I say no. A well-rounded individual is one who solves problems through both a bottom-up and top-down approach. The best students consider both the big picture and small details. They take the tools that they learn in English classes and apply them to every aspect of their lives. They make art out of science and science out of art.

Alchemy is the precursor to chemistry for a reason. The leaps in logic that are necessary to make scientific discoveries are an art. To create something new, you need to be a creative. And to be a creative is to understand the references; to understand the "why" behind what you do. The scientific method is made up of rigid steps, but the first of those steps is to make an observation. You need to pay attention and to ask questions about the story behind the world around you. The scientific process needs people who want context for what they observe. Well-rounded students are taught to look for the "why" of everything.

When you become a person who looks for the "why", you become more empathetic. You become more self-aware and able to pinpoint your own personal "why"s too. So take English classes. Read and ruminate. Interpret life instead of just living it.

The curtains are blue because a character felt isolated when they picked them out. The wallpaper is yellow in an attempt to make a character feel happy and sane. The heartbeat under the floorboards is loud and all-consuming because a character is surrounded by their choices. We are all characters that make up our reality, so we should learn to pay more attention to our choices through English classes.