

Teen “Textuality” Youth Sexting: A Troubling New Trend

As society becomes increasingly engaged with technology, parents, teachers, and youth workers are struggling to monitor the use of new technologies while teaching children how to use them responsibly and ethically. A risky emerging trend among adolescents is taking of nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves and sending the images to others via text message or email – *sexting*. The autonomy that users often feel when viewing and sending messages on a cell phone makes it easy for teens to overlook the personal, social, and societal consequences of sexting.

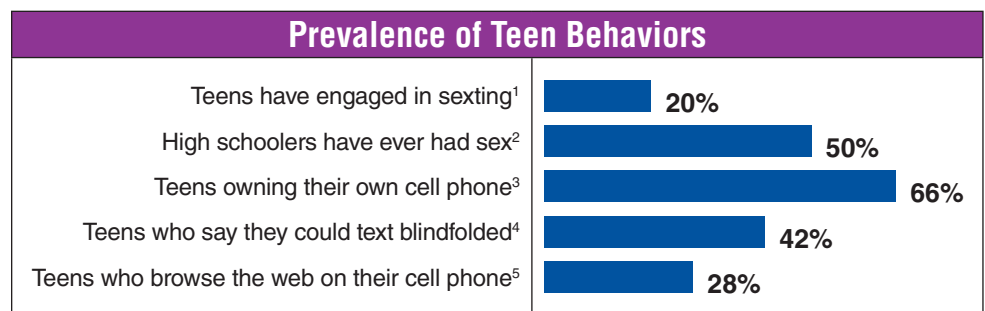
But in a technological world where anything can be copied, forwarded, or uploaded, it has become virtually impossible to control information sent via text or email. The ease of forwarding suggestive content, children’s failure to appreciate the related consequences, and the difficulty of regulating sexting all make the trend especially dangerous to the well-being of today’s youth.

Who Sexts?

While published research on this new phenomenon is limited, recent studies estimate that about one in five teens have sent or received nude or sexually suggestive *images*, and nearly

twice as many report having sent a sexually suggestive *text* message.¹ One study found that while only one in 10 teens have sent a nude or semi-nude picture of themselves, 17 percent have received such a picture, and three percent have forwarded one.²

Gender differences in sexting practices are not yet conclusive. While one study found that boys and girls are equally as likely to be sexters, another contended that girls were more likely to take the pictures and boys more likely to forward them.³ Research has found that 17 and 18 year olds are more likely than younger kids to send or receive sexts, but some respondents said that they started sexting as early as age nine, shortly after the onset of puberty.⁴



¹ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Cosmogirl.com. (2009) Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults. and Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

³ Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

⁴ Harris Interactive. (September, 2008). A Generation Unplugged. Research Report.

⁵ Ibid

¹ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Cosmogirl.com. (2009) Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults. and Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

² Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

³ Lipkins, S., Levy, J.M., and Jerabkova, B. (2009) Sexting... Is it all About Power. Realspsychology.com

⁴ Ibid

Why Teens Sext

Researchers are beginning to ask teens about the intended recipients of their sexts to learn more about the causes of sexting. Studies to date have found that the majority of sexts are sent to a boyfriend or girlfriend as a fun and flirty message or as a “present.”⁵ One sexting researcher suggests that sexting is a reflection, not a source, of teen sexual attitudes and that sexting should be considered in the larger context of the changing sexual and technological attitudes of the next generation.⁶

When considered in that larger context, sexting may be seen as one of many risky teen sexual behaviors. Helping young people develop healthy relationship skills has been found to have a positive impact on teen sexual behavior. Teens who have been taught the healthy relationship skills of confiding, expressing emotions, and constructive conflict resolution are 77 percent more likely to consider the consequences of their decisions about sexual behavior.⁷ Another study found that males with more empathetic relationships – those with the ability to care for and relate to friends – were significantly less likely to be involved in risky sexual behaviors than their peers.⁸

Another theory behind teen sexting behaviors is that

Texting Positives	Texting Negatives
Quick and portable communication	Difficult to establish usage boundaries
Can keep friends and family in close contact	Can be used to bully/humiliate people
Is the “new way” to communicate with teens & tweens	Can quickly transmit inappropriate images/videos/words
Helps parents figure out family logistics	Can be used to chat or cheat in school classes

sexting is a symptom of a series of larger societal trends. For instance, teens have access to more portable and individualized technology and are incorporating it into their everyday behavior. About two thirds of teens own cell phones, and they send an average of 440 texts every week. A quarter of those messages are sent during class.⁹ For teens, the most frequent cell phone uses are calling

(88 percent), texting (74 percent) and taking pictures (64 percent). Almost one in three teens browses the web on a personal cell phone; 57 percent use it for email, and 48 percent view social networking sites.¹⁰ Even adults say that digital technology allows their family life today to be as close, or closer, than their families were when they grew up.¹¹

This rise in technology use by younger children coincides with what some researchers have discovered about “relationships” among today’s youth – that they are increasingly likely to “hook up” rather than “date,” meaning that they have physical relationships with their partners without growing emotionally close.¹² While research has not yet explored whether teens who are having sex are the same ones who sext, it is possible that sexting is simply an extension of the two trends: pervasive personal, autonomous technology use and impersonal sexual relationships.

⁵ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Cosmogirl.com. (2009) Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults. and Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

⁶ Lipkins, S., Levy, J.M., and Jerabkova, B. (2009) Sexting... Is it all About Power. Realpsychology.com

⁷ Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (2005-07) Improving Teen Communication Skills Helps Reduce Pregnancies. and Charles, C.E., and Blum, R.W. (2008) Core Competencies and the Prevention of High-Risk Sexual Behavior. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, no. 122.

⁸ Evans, A., Sanderson, M., Griffin, S., Reiningger, B., Vincent, M. Parra-Medina, D., Valois, R. Taylor, D. (2004). An Exploration of the Relationship Between Youth Assets and Engagement in Risky Sexual Behaviors. Journal of Adolescent Health. 35(5):424.

⁹ Common Sense Media and the Joan Ganz Cooney Center. (May, 2008) Growing Up Digital: Adults Rate the Educational Potential of New Media and 21st Century Skills. Conducted by Insight Research.

¹⁰ Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

¹¹ Pew Internet & American Life Project. (October, 2008) Networked Families.

¹² Manning, W.D., Gjordan, P.C., and Longmore, M.A. (2006) Hooking up: the Relationship Contexts of “Nonrelationship” sex. Journal of Adolescent Research 21(5): 439-483. and Jayson, S. (October, 2005) Teens define Sex in New Ways. USA Today.

“One Dumb Moment Can Last a Lifetime”¹³

Most kids don't realize the severity of sexting-related consequences, which may include anything from humiliation to felony charges. One of the most basic concerns is that the pictures can be forwarded and re-forwarded with the push of a button to anyone with a phone number or email address. In the wrong hands, a sext can be easily uploaded to any website, including personal or school pages, or social networking sites such as Myspace or Facebook. While many of these sites have regulations about posting nude pictures, the time between posting an image and its removal from the site allows the image to be saved and stored indefinitely on any cell phone or computer.

Along with the humiliation that comes from others seeing a private sext, the ability to mass-forward or upload any image or text leaves the door open for teasing, taunting, and cyberbullying. Though cyberbullying can take the same form as sexting – sending nude pictures through email or text – it is inherently different because the pictures are used without permission in order to gain power over, or cause pain to the person pictured. This type of bullying can take many forms, including: forwarding or threatening to send the image to enemies, peers or authority figures, or posting the image on an online message board where peers can comment.

And kids and adults may not be aware of sexting's legal and academic ramifications. “Parents, teachers, and lawmakers are struggling to react appropriately to the phenomenon that puts kids at risk for exploitation, harassment, and felony charges.”¹⁴

Schools often have no rules established for sexting incidents, so educators who encounter the problem must decide what to do: suspension, expulsion, call the parents, or call the police. One Indiana school has addressed the problem by amending its student

Useful Resources

Not sure how to talk to teens about sex?

Check out www.4parents.gov

Can't tell what all those acronyms mean when teens text? Check out

www.netlingo.com/acronyms.php

Want more info on keeping kids safe online? Check out

www.onguardonline.gov/topics/kids-privacy.aspx

handbook to say that students can be suspended or expelled for sending or receiving disruptive or obscene content electronically.¹⁵

Legal issues can arise for sexters, too, and only about half of teens know about them.¹⁶ Because both taking a sexual image of a minor and sending one to a minor are illegal, kids involved in all forms of sexting across the United States are being prosecuted. The charges range from felony obscenity to creating and distributing child pornography (taking the picture or sending it on). And in Indiana, one teen is currently facing a felony charge for sending a picture of himself to his female classmates. In some cases, convicted children will even have to register as sex offenders.¹⁷ In the wake of these charges, some argue that child pornography laws are meant to protect kids, not prosecute them,¹⁸ and that “the real problem with criminalizing teen sexting as child pornography is that the great majority of these kids are not predators.”¹⁹ Several states are now debating how to enact or revise laws to address sexting or whether sexting should be handled by the legal system at all.

¹³ Lithwick, D. (February, 2009) Teens, Nude Photos and the Law. Newsweek Vol. 153, Issue 8, p18.

¹⁴ Garrett, R. (2009) Is Your Child Sexting? What Parents Need to Know. Education.com

¹⁵ Administrators Confront Student “Sexting” (June 17, 2009) Education Week. East Noble School Corporation Superintendent Ann Linson.

¹⁶ Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

¹⁷ Lithwick, D. (February, 2009) Teens, Nude Photos and the Law. Newsweek Vol. 153, Issue 8, p18.

¹⁸ Ibid. and Cumming, P.E. (2009) Children's Rights, Voices, Technology, Sexuality. Carleton University, Ottawa.

¹⁹ Lithwick, D. (February, 2009) Teens, Nude Photos and the Law. Newsweek Vol. 153, Issue 8, p18.

While the consequences of sexting seem weighty and obvious to adults, adolescents often do not recognize them. Sexters are just as likely as their non-sexting peers to think personal information online is unsafe yet no more concerned than their peers about online information having a negative effect on their future. In fact, half of all teens feel that they are old enough to decide for themselves whether it's okay to send nude or suggestive photos of themselves to others, and many think that negative consequences for sexting rarely occur.²⁰ Ninety percent of sext senders say that nothing bad has happened after a sext was sent, and only two percent said the sext was forwarded to someone they didn't want to see it or posted publicly.²¹

Who is Monitoring Sexting?

The recent and growing awareness of sexting serves as another reminder to parents, teachers, and youth workers about the importance of talking with kids about their online communication. However, only one fifth of teens who go online through their cell phone have parents who limit their use.²² And most youth workers would like additional sexual behavior training because they feel uncomfortable answering kids' questions about sexual behavior or sexual health.²³

Tips for Sexting Prevention

Talk to teens about sexual behaviors. The majority of teens (51 percent of guys and 53 percent of girls) believe that parents should start talking with their kids about sex, love, and relationships when their kids are 13 or 14.²⁴ Talking to teens about sexual behaviors and teaching relationship skills will help them decide whether or not to sext.

Carefully evaluate whether your child needs texting or a camera on his/her phone. If so, contact the service provider to make sure you know how to monitor and limit their use. Every major company has child protection options, most of which are free.

Make rules about when and where kids are allowed to text. For example, don't text during meals, family outings, youth programs, in school, or at night. *Hint: Make kids plug in cell phones in a common room or staff room over night.

Establish consequences for phone misuse such as cheating, inappropriate messages, and sexual communications. Make sure the children and staff members know the consequences before misuse occurs.

Seek out instructional materials and lesson plans that incorporate lessons about responsible and ethical use of digital media.

Talk about children's digital media experiences and ask questions like: Do you receive pictures on your phone or through email? Who sends them? Have you ever felt uncomfortable about a picture that you've sent or received?

Try it yourself. Join some of the same social networking sites that youth are on to find out what the climate is like. Request to be your child's "friend" on the site so you can monitor his/her profile without snooping.

²⁰ Cox Communications Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey, in Partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh. Conducted by Harris Interactive. (May, 2009)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Indiana Summit to Promote Adolescent Sexual Health. (2009) Assessing Sexual Health Information and Resource Provision in Indiana Youth-Serving Community-Based Organizations Utilizing Community-Based Participatory Research Methods.

²⁴ Kiss and Tell Survey www.stayteen.org

²⁵ Garrett, R. (2009) Is Your Child Sexting? What Parents Need to Know. Education.com

If You See a Child Sexting

Implement previously discussed consequences and help the child delete any inappropriate messages or pictures posted in electronic public places.

Be real about the risks. Teens are neurologically disposed to be more impulsive and less rational than adults, which makes it more important that they fully understand the dangers of texting.²⁵ Remember, most kids don't think anything bad will happen to them and don't realize how severe the consequences can be.

Ask kids to think about the consequences. Focus on emotional consequences, like humiliation, as well as physical consequences including: losing phone privileges, being kicked off a sports team, getting expelled or suspended from school, and facing trouble with the law.

Tell kids never to take a picture that they wouldn't want EVERYONE to see (grandparents, parents, teachers, employers, classmates). Stress that you cannot keep information private once it is on a phone or computer and that you cannot control where that message will go once it is sent.

Kids who may be model citizens offline can make big mistakes online, so it's important to stress that responsible behavior extends to the world of email, texting, and social networking.

Call the police if the situation involves someone threatening, stalking or harassing a child; refusing to delete inappropriate material; committing a hate crime, or using a picture as child pornography.

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Or visit www.iyi.org/weekly-update/signup.aspx to sign up.

²⁵ Garrett, R. (2009) Is Your Child Sexting? What Parents Need to Know. Education.com

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