

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Talking about Sexting with Children and Young People

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Introduction

If one searches the word, "sexting" in Google, one instantly finds over 30,000,000 results ranging from guides such as: *How to Sext—The Ultimate Sexting Guide* to *Emoji Sexting Tricks*. Although the word sexting seems to have been around for quite a while, it was only in 2012 that sexting was first defined by *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* as the sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cellphone.

In their *NetSmartz* online safety program, the *National Center for Missing and Exploited Children* organization defines sexting as the sharing and receiving of sexually explicit messages, and nude or partially nude images or video via a cellphone. The sexts can be sent as regular text messages or through a variety of online apps.

Unfortunately, sexting images or videos with a smartphone or tablet is a very dangerous technology-facilitated activity for children, teens and even some adults.

Background

In the past, online child molesters would typically ask a potential victim for innocuous photos such as those from home or taken at a school event. For example, as the grooming process continued, the molester would send sexually explicit photos of himself or would expose himself to the victim using a webcam. At this point, the molester would tell the victim that he loved her and would suggest that as an expression of her love, she should return sexually explicit photos of herself; or, if she truly loved him she should expose herself to him in real time using a webcam.

Today, children and teens taking selfies with a smartphone and utilizing the numerous social media apps such as *Snapchat*, *Kik* or *WhatsApp* have made this type of risky activity much easier. Unfortunately, young people do not comprehend that once a digital image has made its way onto the Internet, it is often floating around there forever.

Reasons Teens Sext

Teens engage in sexting images for different reasons. Girls often feel pressure from friends to sext and are more likely to do so than boys. Some girls are trying to impress a boyfriend, show off or just be funny. Other girls have been manipulated by an offender into sending multiple nude images of themselves, which is referred to as the online blackmail crime of *sextortion*.

Boys feel more peer pressure to collect the sext images and are more likely to receive sexts than girls. Oftentimes boys will then share the sext images with their friends or even post them online.

According to the FBI, the perpetrators of sextortion employ gaming platforms, social media, and dating and video chat applications to reach their young victims. They use any number of ploys-from



pretending to be a romantic interest, giving flattery and attention, offers of money or other items of value, or threats to coerce the child to produce an explicit image. Once the youth has produced or sent a single image or video, the perpetrator will use threats of exposure or other means of coercion to make the child produce more and more images, and even more explicit material.

A Discussion about Sexting

A caring adult today must be proactive. For example, a parent cannot wait for a sexting incident to happen to their child or a child's friend before having an open discussion regarding the dangers of sexting images or distributing them.

Some of the indicators that a young person may be sexting images with a cellphone can include:

- Being secretive, overprotective or anxious about the cellphone or images within it
- Overreacting when a parent or a caring adult picks up the cellphone
- Deleting histories on the cellphone
- Observing that whenever a young person receives a text or is sending a text, the young person will turn their back or will leave the room so they can text in private

Children and teens are understandably reluctant and often embarrassed to disclose any information to their parents regarding sex. Additionally, many young people believe that anything they want to do with their cellphones is strictly their own personal business. That being the case, a discussion about sexting should first begin with a parent clarifying the family rules, expectations and consequences regarding all cellphone usage.

Following that conversation, the parent should initiate a two-way discussion regarding the dangers of sexting images. Start by asking a question such as:

- Has anyone ever sent you a nude photo of a young person? (Follow-up question: What did you do or what would you do?)
- Do you think it's ever ok to forward a nude or sexy image of a young person? (Follow-up question: Why?)
- Has anyone ever asked you or dared you to send them nude pictures of yourself? (Follow-up question: What would you do or what did you do?)
- What do you think are the consequences of someone taking, sending or forwarding a nude picture of a young person?

Unfortunately, most young people do not seem to understand, nor are they even aware of the fact that producing or distributing nude images of a minor (a person under eighteen years of age), may constitute the serious state or federal crime of child pornography.

A parent should conclude the discussion about sexting images by explaining what the basic conditions of consent, respect and trust are in a healthy and safe relationship.

Reports regarding sexting images can always be made to a local police department. Additionally, the *National Center for Missing and Exploited Children* takes reports on online sexual exploitation 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at www.cybertipline.org.

Conclusion

A parent should not expect the discussion about sexting images to last very long. During the discussion, the parent must always try to remain calm and supportive. Lastly, a parent must try to be respectful of how a child or teen responds during this challenging conversation. It should not only be communicated once, as these types of conversations are best revisited over time.

Technology continues to rapidly change. Parents and all of us who are charged with protecting children must continue our efforts to stay abreast of the many new devices, software programs and the latest apps that may be used by young people and child molesters seeking to manipulate and sexually abuse children.

References:

1. Dangerous Connections, Youth Faces a Risk of Sextortion Online, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, 5/30/19

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