



A PARENTS' GUIDE TO SEXTING

By Walt Mueller

Introduction

There are multiple threads in the fabric of today's youth culture that are combining in a mix that's led to a new and frightening practice among children and teens. These threads include pornography, decreased sexual boundaries, bullying, technology, mobile devices and the loss of a moral compass. What's resulted is phenomena known as "sexting." The practice is becoming so widespread the *Oxford English Dictionary* added "sexting" to the lexicon in 2010, defining it as "the sending of sexually explicit photographs or messages via mobile phone."

As part of our Digital Kids Initiative at the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, we are working to raise your awareness of new realities related to life on the Digital Frontier. What follows is an introduction to sexting that we trust will serve you as you endeavor to lead your children into a healthy online experience.

DR. WALT MUELLER, *President, The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding*

What is Sexting?

Sexting is the sending or receiving of a sexually-suggestive text message, photo, or video via a cell phone or other mobile device. Sexting is becoming more and more widespread among children, teens and adults who take nude or semi-nude photos of themselves, and who then distribute those photos via text-message, instant-message, social networking sites or through email. While many impulsively take and then send the photos to a romantic interest, many sexts go viral as they are forwarded on from person to person or posted on the Internet for the entire world to see.

A purple rectangular box with the text "txt msg" in a white, sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a small black square icon.

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How Prevalent is Sexting?

Loosened sexual standards along with 24/7 access to smartphones and digital technologies have combined to create an environment where sexting is far more prevalent than we may like to think or acknowledge.

- As many as 39% of teenagers admit to sexting
- More than 1 in 4 adolescents have sent a nude picture of her/himself through electronic means
- 48% of all teens have received sexually suggestive messages
- Half of all adolescents have been asked to send a nude picture of themselves
- One-third of adolescents have asked for a nude picture to be sent to them
- Boys are more likely to request a sext. Girls are more likely to have been asked for a sext.
- 51% of teen girls say they feel pressure to take and send explicit photos of themselves
- Teens who send and receive sexts are more likely to be and/or become sexually active than their non-sexting peers

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The Most Common Sexting Scenarios

Pew found that there are three main scenarios for sexting:

1. An exchange between two romantic partners that serves as a part of, rather than a prelude to, sexual activity. The sext is between the couple exclusively.
2. Between two romantic partners, but shared with others.
3. Exchanges between two people who are not yet romantic partners, but where at least one person hopes to be. The sext is sent as a way to show interest.

Why Do Kids Sext?

- To look cool and sexy to someone they find attractive
- To try to date someone
- To get noticed, to attract attention and to feel special and good about one's self
- To engage in "slut shaming" – a practice where a girl or girls share sexual images of other girls in an attempt to cause them shame and harm
- As a "safe" alternative to sex (justified because you can't get pregnant from it and you can't contract an STD)
- To make someone jealous
- To answer a request
- To have fun
- As a joke or to answer a dare

Legal Issues and Concerns

Because sexting is a relatively new phenomena, law enforcement officials and the judicial system are working hard to sort out the best way to classify, prosecute and punish the behavior. Children and teens need to know that not only is sexting immoral and wrong, but the legal fallout can be very severe. Teenagers who have engaged in sending and receiving sexts have been involved in cases of criminal prosecution with a variety of charges, including disorderly conduct, illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented material, and felony sexual abuse of children. Because children and teens are highly impulsive and lacking in adult judgment, parents are encouraged to speak openly and directly regarding the moral and legal concerns related to sexting.



Sexting Prevention “Talking Points”

Here are some suggested topics to cover as you discuss the reality and dangers of sexting with your children and teens:

- *Ask them if they've heard of sexting, if they know how widespread it might be in their peer population and if they know anyone who has either sent or received a sext.*
- *Sexting is an impulsive behavior that is especially prevalent among the adolescent population. Be aware that both you and your friends can and will be tempted to sext either pictures of you or of someone else.*
- *Do not take or allow others to take a picture of you in a nude or semi-nude state. In addition, do not take pictures of yourself or anyone else in a nude or semi-nude state.*
- *If you receive a sext, do not forward the sext. Instead, inform a parent or other authority.*
- *Understand that once a digital photo is posted in cyberspace or sent to someone else, it is going to be out there and accessible forever.*
- *Discuss how sexting violates high standards of character and virtue while objectifying and demeaning others.*
- *Do not make fun of, harass or bully a person who has been victimized by sexting.*
- *Discuss standards and parameters for safe cellphone use, along with the consequences that will follow any violation of those standards and parameters.*

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A Word on "Sextortion"

Sextortion occurs when a person uses manipulation, knowledge of a secret, power or guilt to force another person to provide sexual favors, sex or sexually explicit photos. Sextortion is nuanced in today's world of technology and social media as individuals get a hold of a sexually explicit photo and then threaten to expose or distribute the photo via sext or email unless the person in the photo agrees to provide a sexual favor. Parents should raise the awareness of their children and teens regarding the ugly reality and threat of sextortion.



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For additional information on the digital world of kids, visit the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding's Digital Kids Initiative at digitalkidsinitiative.com.

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