

Parent Information/Trusted Adult Information

Sexting



At least 1 in 4 teens are receiving sexually explicit texts and emails and at least 1 in 7 are sending sexts, according to a 2018 study in JAMA (Journal of American Medical Association) Pediatrics. In this study, researchers reviewed the data on 39 previously published studies, in which participants ranged in age from 12-17. It is increasingly clear that sexting is becoming more common among adolescents. This letter will help you better understand what sexting is, the potential impact of sexting, and provide some ideas for talking to your child about it.

What is sexting?

Sexting is when someone sends or receives sexually explicit words, images or pictures via text or other electronic medium.

There are several reasons that teens say that they engage in sexting. Sexting among teens is frequently done to be funny, or to get attention or flirt. Some teens cite that they feel peer pressure to participate in sexting, and others cite that they enjoy thrill or risk involved. This makes sense given teenage brain development and increased risk-taking during adolescence. Young people tend to see sexting as “adult” and they also think it is the norm.

What are some potential impacts of sexting?

- Once the digital images and messages are out there, there is no way of “taking them back.” Control of the images has been lost.
- Sexts can then be passed on to anyone and the data shows that they often are. According to that same JAMA survey, more than 1 in 10 teens are forwarding sexts without consent and about 1 in 12 teens have had sexts they’ve sent forwarded without their consent.
- Someone may be blackmailed and told to send more sexts or their original sext will be posted online. This is called sextortion. This can leave someone feeling helpless and hopeless.
- Sexts can have legal consequences. In some states it is considered child pornography.
- Sexts can impact future goals and plans including school, work and relationships.

How to talk to your child:

If you are giving your child a smartphone soon, then it is time to start talking about sexting if you haven't done so already. Young people need guidance on how to stay safe online. It is best if a conversation about sexting happens before an incident occurs. Here are some suggestions for getting that conversation started:

- Start by asking your child what they have heard about sexting. What are their thoughts about it?
- Share your values. Let your child know where you stand on this topic.
- Be sure to talk to them about why pressuring someone to sext is wrong.
- Use news stories (there are plenty to be found online) or real-life examples of what has happened when people sext.
- Reinforce that you care about their safety. Use this time to discuss online safety planning. Here is a sample online safety agreement that you can review as a family. Many similar contracts can be found online.
- Remind your child to always pause before sending a text or posting on social media and ask themselves the following questions:
 - Why are you wanting to post or share this information?
 - What is your gut telling you about what you are about to post or send?
 - Could this come back to hurt me or someone else?
 - How would you feel if your family saw it or if your classmates saw it?