

insights

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Reducing the Risks of Teenage Sexting

As more and more students have access to cell phones, more opportunities are created for them to be affected by the risky behavior known as "sexting". Various surveys have found that anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of teens admit to sending and/or receiving sexually explicit images or content via their phones or other electronic devices, and over 25 percent admit to forwarding sexts to someone else. Particularly worrisome given the frequency of this behavior is that pre-adolescents and teens have neither the knowledge nor the judgment to understand the life-long negative consequences that can result.

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Sexting is most prevalent in 16 to 17-year-olds, and is associated with risky sexual behavior, sexually transmitted diseases, substance use, and mood disorders. Teens who sext are more likely to engage in sexual behaviors, with 76% who are propositioned to sext admitting that they did have sexual intercourse. This number sharply contrasts with the 30% of high school students who reported being sexually active within a prior 3-month period when surveyed by the CDC in 2015.

Teens sext for a variety of reasons, including their natural curiosity about sex, succumbing to peer pressure, and feeling that they are in love and have found "the one" who they will be with forever. They rarely consider that once sexually explicit content is transmitted electronically, it is "out there" forever, can be forwarded to others, and can damage reputations and make one vulnerable to bullying.

Likewise, teens rarely understand that sexting violates child pornography laws and can lead to serious legal consequences. Laws vary widely from state-to-state. In New Jersey, for example, minors engaging in sexting for the first time can avoid prosecution under the state's child pornography laws by attending an educational program about the dangers of sexting,

and the penalties associated with it. In Connecticut, violation of the teenage sexting law is a class A misdemeanor, ordinarily punishable by up to one year in prison, a fine of up to \$2,000, or both. Teenage violators, however, are generally prosecuted through the juvenile justice system where punishments may include a warning, a fine, probation, and/or commitment to Department of Children and Families custody for up to 18 months.

One recent study suggests that parents and school personnel can play a significant role in helping to curb this worrisome teen behavior. Researchers found that students whose phones were included on a family phone plan, and whose schools strictly limited or prohibited phone use during the school day, were less likely to receive and send sexts. School personnel can also:

- Encourage parents to learn about the social media platforms used by their children, to institute parental controls, and to monitor usage regularly.
- Educate parents and students about the consequences of sexting, including legal charges, ruined reputations, and bullying.
- Encourage parents to place computers in a common area in the home, to set limits on computer and cell phone use, and to consider collecting phones at teen gatherings. ■

Reference:

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Talking to Kids and Teens About Social Media and Sexting (2013)
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