Sexting is defined as the sending or receiving of nude or seminude images or sexually explicit text messages and can happen when one person pressures another to send a nude or seminude photo.

For teenagers, this scenario can happen between people who are dating or those who just started to like each other and one teenager is asked to "prove" they like the other person. Sexting can also happen when one person sends a nude or seminude photo to another without asking for consent first. Sexting can lead to the spread of the photos or messages such that other people see them or distribute them. For teenagers, this can happen if a dating relationship ends; the couple gets in a fight; or a friend borrows the teenager’s phone, sees the photos, and sends them to others.

Thus, it may not be surprising to learn that sexting has many risks. These risks include emotional distress for those who are pressured to send these photos as well as those who receive these photos. Sexting can also cause harm if photos are distributed widely, causing increased distress or embarrassment. Sexting can trigger legal consequences. However, sexting is not rare. Surveys have shown that approximately 12% to 16% of youths aged 10 to 19 years have sent a sexual photo to someone else.

Why do adolescents engage in sexting? Adolescence is a time of life in which teenagers are learning about their own bodies, how to take risks, and about romantic attractions. For some teenagers, engaging in sexting may feel like a way to explore their attraction to someone. It is recommended that rather than having one big talk about sexting, have several small talks over time to check in on your child’s understanding, see if there are questions, and reinforce key messages.

Talking with your adolescent about sexting

- Start discussions about sexting early
- Discuss sexting risks, including unwanted distribution of photos or messages and possible legal consequences
- Emphasize that it is not ok to pressure someone into sexting or to be pressured
- Check in with your child regularly to answer questions and be supportive

Remind Your Teenager of Their Own Worth

Let your child know that being pressured to send a sext is not okay, nor is it a way to "prove" their love or show attraction. Let your child know you understand it is hard to be pressured or dared to do something but that they have the power to stand up for themselves. Remind your teenager that they are worthy of respect.

Use Examples Appropriate for Your Child’s Age

For tweens with cell phones, let them know that text messages should never include images of anyone without clothes. For teenagers, be specific about what sexting is and that it can lead to serious consequences. For all ages, remind them that once an image is sent, it is no longer in their control and they cannot get it back. What is online or sent via text can exist forever and be sent to others.

Tips for Talking With Your Child About Sexting

Start the Discussion Early
Start the conversation with your child by asking broad questions such as, “Have you heard of sexting? Tell me what you think it is.” You can then frame your conversation around how much your child does or does not know. Seeing a story in the news, community, or at your child’s school is a good prompt to check in again. Emphasize the consequences of sexting as shown by situations in the news where it has gone badly.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For parents, Commonsense Media’s Sexting Handbook:

For teenagers, to help resist cyber peer pressure:
https://www.thatsnotcool.com

Author: Megan A. Moreno, MD, MSeD, MPH
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