

SEXTING

When teenagers ask for cell phones, they usually want the coolest, trendiest cell phone on the market. These days, that phone will have photo and video capabilities. Put that together with the unlimited text messaging plan that your teen is sure to beg for and here comes possible trouble. Silly photos and embarrassing videos aside, cameras and texting have given young people a new and potentially dangerous way to explore their curiosity: sexting.

WHAT IS SEXTING?

Sexting is the exchange of sexually suggestive messages or images between minors via cell phone. For example, a girl might take a nude photograph of herself and send it to her boyfriend. Her boyfriend may forward the photograph to one or two friends, who then decide to forward the photograph to others. In this way, the girl's photograph could travel all over the Web, amassing countless viewers in a very short period of time. Please note that sexting does not include situations in which young people are coerced or blackmailed into sending sexually explicit images of themselves to adults. These adults are predators and the incident should be reported to law enforcement immediately.

UNDERSTANDING TEENS AND SEXTING

The majority of teens are actually not sexting: according to a study from the Pew American Life & Internet Project, only 4% of cell-owning teens (12-17) say they have sent nude or partially nude images. Teens who are sexting often do so within the context of a relationship. A teen may send a sexual image to someone to indicate his or her interest in starting a romantic relationship. Or teens already in romantic relationships may sext each other as a prelude to or as part of a sexual relationship. Teens may also use sexting as a way of exploring their sexuality.

Some teens have been coerced into sexting when a boyfriend or girlfriend makes it a requirement for continuing their relationship. Others have been blackmailed into sharing nude photos by threats to expose previously taken nude photographs. When discussing sexting with your children, talk to them about the importance of bringing any such threats to you rather than trying to handle them on their own so that you may get law enforcement involved immediately.

SEXTING CONSEQUENCES

When teens sext, they may not think about the consequences of their images becoming public. If an image surfaces at school, its creator and anyone caught distributing or possessing it may face removal from athletic teams or student groups and suspension. If a sexting incident involves harassment, coercion or images passed around without the creator's permission, law enforcement may become involved. Teens are unlikely to be charged with a serious crime for sexting, but they may be ordered to attend educational programs or complete community service. In addition to these consequences, the image's creator may face additional emotional and psychological stressors, such as bullying and harassment by peers and judgment by friends and family. Some teens have moved schools or started attending home school to try to get a fresh start; unfortunately, sexting images can easily follow teens, victimizing them again. Sexting photos may even resurface years later during online searches by college admissions officers, employers, friends and significant others. The images may also find their way into the hands of online sexual predators and be passed around for years after the teen has become an adult.

TIPS

Help protect children from sexting

- Before buying your child a cell phone, set rules for its use, including what sort of information and images are appropriate to share via text.
- Know what safeguards are available on your child's phone, such as turning off and/or blocking texting and photograph features.
- Talk to your child about the possible social, academic, and legal consequences of sexting. They could face humiliation, lose educational opportunities and get in trouble with the law.
- Encourage your child to not be a bystander or an instigator. If he or she receives a "sext," discuss why it is important that he or she not forward the image to anyone else.
- Remind your child that they can talk to you if they receive a nude photograph on their cell phone.
- Talk to your child's school about its policies on cell phones, cyberbullying, and sexting.
- Report any nude or semi-nude images that your child receives to law enforcement or contact www.cybertipline.com.

Discussion Starters

Start a discussion with your child:

- Have you ever received a sexual message or naked photograph on your cell phone?
- Has anyone ever asked or pressured you to send a nude or sexual photograph?
- Do you think it's OK to send "sexy" images? Why?
- What could happen to you if you send or forward a naked photograph?
- How likely is it that images and messages intended for one person will be seen by others?

The above information was obtained from an article on the website of National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Excellent resources for parents and young people for information on a wide variety of crime prevention and personal safety topics are the websites www.NetSmartz.org and www.NetSmartz/kids.org. These websites allow the user to select specific topics and interact with computer characters to learn crime prevention and personal safety tips.