

Sexting



Sexting” is defined as sending someone sexually explicit photographs or messages,

Whether or not you are aware of your teen sexting, the fact is that many teens are doing it. Eye-opening research among 39 studies reveals that 1 in 4 teens *admit* to sexting.¹ So it’s safe to assume there are far more teens sexting who don’t admit to it. And many parents are generally unaware of whether or not their teen is a sexter.

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE SEXT?

- They’re seeking attention/approval.
- They’re responding to peer pressure.
- They’re responding to bullying.
- They want to satisfy some other need.

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IS THERE ANY HARM TO SEXTING? YES.

- If the sender or receiver is underage, a sexter can be charged with possessing and/or distributing images of child sexual exploitation (or ICSE, formerly known as “child pornography”) for sending or receiving sexts, even if both sexters are minors. In addition, an underage sexter might also be required to register as a sex offender.
- Images/messages follow the sender; they can’t be deleted once they’re sent.
- Sexting typically sexually objectifies the sender – they become a sexual object instead of a real person.
- Images are can be shared with others besides the receiver.
- The sender’s reputation and future opportunities could be at risk.

A teen who receives a sext can easily share it or forward to others, and those images can ultimately end up on third-party websites. All of this usually occurs without the sender’s knowledge or consent. (The individual asking for explicit messages or photos will often try to make the sender feel special, but all they really want is the sext. Unfortunately, the sender of the photo or message loses all control over the materials once they have been sent.)

Many tragic stories of children being forced into prostitution or sex trafficking begin with the “pimp” using sexts as a means of coercion to get the youth to comply with their demands. This phenomenon is often referred to by industry professionals as “sextortion.”

Due to the current sexting epidemic, it’s essential that parents talk frequently to their kids about sexting if they are to keep the teen from participating in it.

► **When** should you talk to your kids about the perils of sexting?

To prevent your teen from sexting, take the initiative. The first discussion should commence before your child even gets a cell phone or any device capable of sending a sext (computers, tablets, etc.). Once a child receives such a device, they are susceptible to the influences of sexting. After your child has a device, have frequent open discussions on the topic. This approach will make your child feel comfortable in approaching you and talking to you about sexting.

► **How** should you talk to your child about sexting?

Sexting is a difficult topic to approach and requires sensitivity and caution. You don't want to appear too judgmental or forceful, but at the same time you want to be firm about where you stand on the subject; you must help them see the dangers and consequences.

Here are a few concepts that can help you when talking with a youth in your life about sexting:

- **Take a moment to remember what it was like to be a teenager – that deep longing to be loved and accepted. Consider whether you might have been tempted to engage in sexting if it had been popular when you were a teen. Putting yourself in your teen's shoes could help you approach the conversation in a cooler, calmer, and more collected manner.**
- **Accept that this will likely be an awkward conversation. If you feel it's appropriate, addressing the awkwardness at the beginning of the chat could help break the ice a bit.**
- **Don't be alarmist. Even if a teen or tween in your life is not engaging in sexting themselves, they probably know someone who is. In other words, they might not see sexting through the same scary lens you do. They might actually see sexting as a normal part of relationships and dating. It's important not to approach the conversation with a "Can you believe this is happening?" attitude. Instead, try an attitude of "I know this is happening, and I understand why, but I think it's important that we talk about how it could be harmful."**
- **Remember that teens and tweens have the potential both to send nude photos and request nude photos from others. In other words, make sure to chat with your child about why it could be harmful to either sext photos or coerce someone else into sexting such images to them or others.**
- **When in doubt, stick with the facts. It might be helpful to research your state's laws on sexting so you can discuss knowledgeably the possible legal repercussions for your teen. Or look up local news stories detailing how sexting has negatively affected youth in your area. If children understand that sexting can be a real threat to their hopes, dreams, and future accomplishments, they will be far less likely to engage in it.**
- **Ask questions, listen, and engage with the answers. This may seem obvious, but remember – sometimes when we're having difficult and uncomfortable conversations like these, it's easy to forget the basics.**
- **Remember to end the conversation with encouragement. Tell your teen/tween the things that are valuable and laudable about them, things that have nothing to do with their appearance or sexuality. This will help them feel more confident in who they are as a lovable individual.**

¹ Madigan, Sheri; Ly, Anh. (2018). *Prevalence of Multiple Forms of Sexting Behavior Among Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis*. JAMA Pediatrics, American Medical Association