

Teen Sexting

A QUICK-GUIDE FOR PARENTS & TEENS

ConnectSafely

➔ What is sexting?



"Sexting" usually refers to the sharing of nude or semi-nude and sexually provocative photos via mobile phones, but it can happen on other devices and the web. First of all, research shows most teens don't "sext." And most of those who do experience no negative consequences. But for teens who do sext, there are both psychological and legal risks, especially if coercion is involved and the images wind up being distributed beyond their intended audience. Sexting is certainly not just a teen issue, but these tips are specifically for parents and teens.

Reasons why ↵

The reasons teens "sext" vary widely. In some cases it's a form of flirting or a way of showing affection for a romantic partner or someone the teen is interested in dating. Sometimes it's impulsive behavior, perhaps at a party or when under the influence of drugs or alcohol. There are also cases where the teen is responding to peer pressure, bullying or even threats. In rarer cases, adults solicit images from teens. Some teens view sexting as a form of "safe sex" because, unlike physical sex, there is no risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.



➔ Possible consequences

The consequences of sexting can range from nothing at all to extremely serious. In most cases, according to a 2018 analysis in the Journal of the American Medical Association, the image is never shared beyond the person it was sent to, so it's unlikely that anything bad will happen. That doesn't mean there's no risk, because there is the possibility the image will be shared later, e.g., after a breakup or seen by someone else who has access to the phone, accidentally forwarded or even accessed and distributed as the result of a hack. And as you know, digital photos are easy to copy and paste onto the web, where they can be archived and searchable pretty much forever.



Severe consequences ↵

In cases where the images have been seen by others beyond the intended person, the consequences can be quite severe in terms of possible criminal prosecution, trouble with school authorities or serious social and psychological consequences including increased bullying, social isolation, shaming and severe anxiety, fear and depression. Experts caution never to assume that any single incident or event is the cause of a suicide, but there have been a few tragic cases where teens have killed themselves after nude images have been widely distributed.



Advice for parents

Legal issues.

It's very unfortunate and rare, but there are cases where minors have been prosecuted for violating child pornography laws even though they were originally written to protect children from being exploited by others. The owner of a phone or computer with nude photos of anyone under 18 stored on it could be charged with possession. If the photos go to someone in another state (which can happen really easily), there could be federal felony charges.

Talk with your kids about sexting.

Ask them what they know about it. Express how you feel in a conversational, non-confrontational way. For one thing, help them think about what it might feel like to have intimate photos of themselves forwarded to any number of peers by someone they thought they liked or trusted. A two-way dialog can go a long way toward helping your kids understand how to minimize legal, social and reputation risks. If they want to avoid the conversation, that's OK, have it anyway. Just don't expect it to last very long and be respectful of how they respond.

Ask teen to delete images.

If your children have received any nude pictures on their phones, have them delete the photos. Your family doesn't want to run the risk of having what could be deemed "child pornography" on any of its devices.

Think before calling authorities.

Consider very carefully whether or not to involve school authorities or law enforcement. Sometimes you need to get authorities involved, especially when there is coercion or if an adult is involved. Sometimes these issues can be worked out without risking the possibility of official sanctions.

Advice for teens

Don't share it.

The safest way to avoid a picture getting into the wrong hands is to never take it or share it. Sadly, there are cases (sometimes called "revenge porn") where someone shares pictures meant only for them — sometimes after a breakup.

No pressure. Period.

Never take and send an image of yourself under pressure, even from someone you care about. And never pressure anyone to send you an image.

Scam alert.

If a stranger asks you to take a revealing picture, it could be a scam that could lead to further demands and threats ("sextortion"). Do not respond and consider reporting it to the police, your parents and the CyberTipLine (800) 843-5678). If the picture is from a friend or someone you know, then someone needs to talk to that friend so he or she is aware of possible harmful consequences.

If the photos won't stop...

If the photos keep coming, you and a parent might have to speak with your friend's parents, an attorney, school authorities or law enforcement.