

Sexting



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What is ‘sexting’?

‘Sexting’ means sending sexually explicit photos or videos electronically (e.g. by mobile phone, app, chat, social networking or email).

With modern technology this can be done instantly, but it can have serious and lasting consequences.

What are the possible consequences of ‘sexting’?

Once digital images are sent, there is no way to get them back. They are not private, and they are permanent. They can resurface again when least expected, such as during a job application. They can be published and found by anyone, including friends, family members, complete strangers, and sexual predators. Images can be used to bully and harass.

Possible legal consequences

For people under 18, sexting is illegal. It is a criminal offence to take, possess, or transmit a naked image of a person under the age of 18 years. It doesn’t matter how you came to possess the image. It doesn’t matter if you took a photo of yourself and willingly sent or published it. It doesn’t matter if the person in the image is your girl or boy-

friend or if you are the same age. You cannot ‘give someone permission’ to break the law. Penalties for these offences are very serious and can result in being placed on the sex offender’s register.

What are the reasons for ‘sexting’?

Young people are naturally curious and interested in exploring sexuality. They are also exposed to a wide range of sexual imagery, in songs, video clips, movies, advertising and online. This can promote the idea that sexual behaviour has no repercussions. Unfortunately the reality is more complicated and young people often only become aware of this after the event.



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The Pew Internet Project and the University of Michigan (2009) conducted six focus groups with middle and high school students in three cities as part of a wider study. In this study teens described the pressure they feel to share sexually explicit images. One high school girl wrote:

When I was about 14-15 years old, I received/sent these types of pictures. Boys usually ask for them or started that type of conversation. My boyfriend, or someone I really liked asked for them and I felt like if I didn't do it, they wouldn't continue to talk to me. At the time, it was no big deal but now looking back it was definitely inappropriate and over the line.

Talk with your child.

Ensure that you regularly talk with your children about their experiences with communications technology. Ask them what they have seen or done, and if they have had any problems.

Make sure that you continually reinforce to your children that nothing is so bad that they can't talk to you about it. Let them know that they should come and tell you when they have any problems, if they see something that they know is wrong, or anything that upsets them.

Children often fear telling a parent an issue as they think this will result in blocking access. Don't threaten to disconnect your child – this will only cause them to keep problems hidden from you.

What do I do if I find explicit images of my child?

- Don't yell, scream or panic. Try to remain calm. It is really important to be able to speak rationally to your child about this issue.
- Talk to them about your concerns or suspicions and allow them time to respond.
- Try to work out how/where this has happened and who else may be involved. Where are the images now? Who may have them?
- Make an appointment to speak to someone at the school such as a counsellor, teacher, or principal, and let them know what has occurred.
- Be aware that in some instances, police may need to be involved and schools have certain obligations in relation to the reporting of incidents. Please don't withhold information from the school because you are concerned about police involvement. Police are very well placed to deal with these issues and have tools to minimise the impact. They have the ability to retrieve data and trace electronic communication. The important thing is to act as soon as you are aware.
- If you believe that the 'sexting' is a result of your child being the victim of an online sexual predator rather than adolescent naivety, please notify the police immediately.