

What is sexting?

When people send sexually revealing pictures via cell phone text message attachments, it's called "sexting." Recently, the practice has been increasing exponentially. Pre-teens and teenagers are taking revealing pictures of themselves and sending them to other youngsters. Kids try "sexting" for various reasons; to show off, to show interest in someone, or to prove commitment. Someone is now in possession of a highly compromising image that is easily posted to social networking sites or sent to others via email or text.

Why is this important?

In a technology filled world where anything can be copied, sent, posted, and seen by huge audiences, there is no way to control digital images. Even if a photo was taken and sent as a token of love, the intention doesn't matter when technology makes it possible for everyone to see it. Unfortunately, suggestive photos that were intended for only one person may be shared with a more and more people. A boyfriend or girlfriend can become an "ex", and secret passwords that are shared do not remain secret. Computer crime investigators report that when students find an inappropriate photograph of a classmate, the photograph (or the password that allows access to it) often circulates throughout the school. The image may be seen by many students before it comes to the attention of school officials. Widespread distribution of the image causes great embarrassment to the student who is in the photo and usually leads ridicule and harassment. Parts of the photo can be changed or misused by those who have access to it. The original photo and all the versions that contain changes will remain in circulation forever.

There have been some high profile cases of sexting. High School Musical star Vanessa Hudgens, sent a nude picture to her boyfriend that was posted on the Internet. There is a tragic example Cincinnati teen Jesse Logan. She suffered harassment from her classmates and committed suicide in July of 2008 when a nude photo she'd sent to a boyfriend was circulated widely around her high school. Sending nude images of children is abuse and pornography. Sending sexual images to minors is against the law, and some states have prosecuted kids for child pornography or felony obscenity. In addition, law enforcement investigators visit the student's home to determine whether an adult had any involvement in the production or distribution of the photo. As parents it helps to be prepared.

Advice for Parents

Don't wait for an incident to happen to your child or your child's friend before you talk to your kids about the consequences of sexting. Sure, talking about sex or dating with teens can be really uncomfortable, but better to have the talk *before* an incident occurs.

Remind them that once an image is sent, it can never be retrieved and they *will* lose control of it. Ask teens how they would feel if their teachers, parents, or the entire school saw the picture, because it happens all the time.

Talk about pressures to send revealing photos. Let teens know that you understand that they can be pushed or dared into sending inappropriate photos. Tell them that no matter how big the social pressure is, the potential social humiliation will be hundreds of times worse.

The buck stops with them. If someone sends them a photo, have them delete it immediately.

Better to be part of the solution than the problem. Besides, if they do send it on, they're distributing pornography - and that's against the law. For more information contact The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's CyberTipline. Call 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678) or visit www.cybertipline.com. Other sites with information is <http://www.ThatsNotCool.com> and

<http://www.wiredsafety.org/>

