

The Dangers of Teen Sexting

Engaging in sexting is a dangerous activity for teens. It can have adverse side effects and the consequences can be life-long. New research shows that approximately 20-30 percent of teens have sent and/or received a sext. So, just what is sexting, who's doing it, why are they doing it, and what are the consequences?

What is sexting?

Sexting is sending, receiving, or forwarding sexual photos or sexually suggestive messages through text message, email, or social media. Modern technology advances have made sexual exchanges much easier and more powerful than ever before. With a click of a button a picture can be distributed to many people instantaneously—and once it's out there, there's no going back.

Recent Research

Researchers from the University of Utah's Department of Psychology surveyed 606 teens ages 14-18 and found that approximately 20 percent of the teens said they had sent a sexual image of themselves via cell phone. About twice as many teens admitted to receiving a sext. To top it off, of those who reported receiving a sext, well over 25 percent said that they had forwarded it to someone else.

In a second study published in the Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine, researchers at the University of Texas Medical Branch found teens who "sext" may be more likely to engage in sexual behaviors. Here are some of the findings:

- 28% of teens admitted to having sent a sext.
- 76.2% of teens who were propositioned to sext admitted to having had sexual intercourse.
- Girls were asked to send a sext (68%) more often than boys (42%).
- The peak age of sexting is around 16 and 17 years of age.

Why are they doing it?

They may be curious... Sex creates curiosity, which leads to exploration and experimentation—especially with teens. This is not a new thing and it's completely normal. Teens may be curious as to what others look like naked and also easily aroused by nudity.

They may be pressured... Peer pressure to participate in sex could be another reason teens are succumbing to sending racy pics of themselves.

They may be in love... To the love-stricken teen it's easy to cave to the pressure when you think "this is the one." You believe with all of your heart this is the person you're destined to be with for eternity. To them this person is trustworthy and they would do anything for them. For the teen who is in need of this type of attention, love, or acceptance, he/she may give in and do something he'll/she'll later regret.

They may not be thinking... There's a special part of the brain called the prefrontal cortex that is responsible for problem solving, impulse control, and weighing out options. Unfortunately for teens, this area of the brain is not fully developed. In fact, it doesn't fully mature until the early to mid-twenties. So, while we expect our teens to know better, the fact is there are some physiological reasons teens think they're invincible.

What are the emotional and legal consequences?

Emotionally

Emotionally sexting can take a toll on a person, especially if it backfires and gets into the wrong hands. Teens have a unique ability to feel like they're invincible. So, even though they may know that sexting is wrong, they don't think they're going to get caught. Another emotional catch is that sexting may lead to bullying for the teen whose photos have been solicited to others. Oftentimes they don't reach out for help because of embarrassment and disappointment, fear of making it worse, or fear of getting into trouble. Additionally, sexting can also compromise reputations. Not just social reputations but digital reputations can take a hit. Once a photo is out, there's no way of knowing how many people have saved it, tagged it, shared it, etc. Unfortunately the photo could re-surface years after it was taken and posted.

Legally

Unlike states with specific teen sexting laws, Wisconsin punishes teen sexting under its laws against child pornography and related activities. Under Wisconsin's child pornography law, it is illegal to possess or view a visual depiction of a child engaged in sexual conduct—including depictions sent via text message. (Wi. Stat. Ann. § 948.12.)

Teens who sext may face child pornography charges, which may be heard in juvenile court (rather than the adult criminal justice system), where judges have a wider discretion in the kinds of penalties they impose. However, even in juvenile court a conviction for possessing or viewing child pornography may include a fine of up to \$10,000, up to three years and six months in custody, or both.

How do you protect your teen?

It is important that parents are in the loop with what their teens are doing with technology. So many things have Wi-Fi Access nowadays. Devices such as personal computers, video game consoles, hand-held gaming devices, Smartphone's, tablets, e-readers and even digital audio players can connect to a network and create an opportunity for a teen to make a poor decision. Technology has pros and cons. Unfortunately, some of the cons carry some hefty consequences.

Please reach out to your teens and create an environment that allows them to let you into their life. If you have additional questions or concerns about this topic, please contact your child's school social worker or school resource officer.

(Article adapted from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/teen-angst/201207/the-dangers-teen-sexting> and <http://www.criminaldefenselawyer.com/resources/teen-sexting-wisconsin.htm>)