Common Sense on Talking About "Sexting"

That picture's not as private as you think

Most teens today are comfortable with documenting their lives online. Posting photos, updating their status messages, sharing rapid-fire texts, and being a click away from friends are the new normal for teens. But this "always on" culture also creates an environment where teens can make impulsive decisions that can come back to haunt them. One example of this has been in the news a lot lately: sexting.

Some facts

22% of teen girls and 20% of teen boys have sent nude or semi-nude photos of themselves over the Internet or their phones.

22% of teens admit that technology makes them personally more forward and aggressive.

38% of teens say exchanging sexy content makes dating or hooking up with others more likely.

29% of teens believe those exchanging sexy content are "expected" to date or hook up.

(All of the above are from *CosmoGirl* and the *National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2009*.)

What Is "Sexting"?

When people take and send sexually revealing picture of themselves or send sexually explicit messages via text message, it's called "sexting." While experts differ on statistics, a 2010 study conducted by Pew Internet & American Life Project confirms sexting is a teen reality that's here to stay. Kids "sext" to show off, to entice someone, to show interest in someone, or to prove commitment.

Sending these pictures or messages is problematic enough, but the real challenge comes when this content is shared broadly. As far too many teens have found out, the recipient of these messages is in possession of a highly compromising image or message that can be easily posted on a social networking site or sent to others via email or text.

Why sexting matters

In a technology world where anything can be copied, sent, posted, and seen by huge audiences, there's no such thing as being able to control information. The intention doesn't matter — even if a photo was taken and sent as a token of love, for example, the technology makes it possible for everyone to see your child's most intimate self. In the hands of teens, when revealing photos are made public, the subject almost always ends up feeling humiliated. Furthermore, sending sexual images to minors is against the law, and some states have begun prosecuting kids for child pornography or felony obscenity.

There have been some high profile cases of sexting. In July 2008, Cincinnati teen Jesse Logan committed suicide after a nude photo she'd sent to a boyfriend was circulated widely around her high school, resulting in harassment from her classmates.

Fortunately, networks with large teen audiences — MTV, for example — are using their platforms to warn teens against the dangers of sexting. And the website That's Not Cool.com uses teen-speak to help resist cyber peer pressure. Hopefully, these messages will get through.

Advice for Parents

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

» **Remind your kids 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 that happens all the time.

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

» **Teach your children that the buck stops with them.** If someone sends them a photo, they should delete it immediately. It's 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.

» **Check out ThatsNotCool.com.** It's a fabulous site that gives kids the language and support to take texting and cell phone power back into their own hands. It's also a great resource for parents who are uncomfortable dealing directly with this issue.

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