

Teenagers and sexting

Sexting is using a mobile phone to create, upload or distribute sexual material. Teenagers sometimes try sexting as a way to experiment with sexuality, but there are ways you can help your child make more sensible choices.

The basics

Sexting can take several forms:

- using a mobile phone to create or download sexually explicit material
- posing for or taking sexually explicit photos – such as naked people or body parts – using a mobile phone
- passing on or showing sexually explicit images or photos to other people (just one person or lots of people)
- storing sexually explicit images on a mobile phone
- sending provocative text messages.



Sexting is different from looking at porn magazines, because sexting is not anonymous. Teenagers can share images of people they know well. Also, images can be shared with a very large audience very quickly.



Creating, sending and possessing sexually explicit images or video of people under 18 is a criminal offence. It can have serious legal consequences for those who create the images and those who forward them. Sexting exposes your child to the possibility of being charged with child pornography.

Why sexting is a serious issue

Getting an occasional suggestive text message can be uncomfortable and unpleasant if your child doesn't want this kind of attention.

Sexting can also be humiliating and embarrassing. It can harm friendships and social networks. It can make your child uncomfortable about taking part in everyday activities such as going to school or playing sports. Encourage your child to stop and think before creating or sending sexually explicit material.

A photo or video of your child passed around by mobile phone could end up being posted online. Once an image is put online, it can be very difficult to remove. If not removed, it becomes part of

your child's online reputation or '[digital footprint](#)' and remains in the public domain. Or it could 'go viral' by being emailed to friends of friends, and then to people your child doesn't even know.

What to do if your child is sexting

The first step is to talk openly with your child about relationships, attitudes to sex and media use. This means that you might be able to find out early if sexting is an issue for your child. If so, you can offer your support in dealing with it.

Learning to deal with things like sexting is part of the transition to adulthood. You can help your child by talking to her about ways of responding to such messages:

- Will the messages be ignored?
- Will your child reply?
- If replying, what might your child say?
- What might the consequences be of replying?

Try to avoid monitoring your child's mobile phone, because this can seem like you're intruding.



Research shows that when parents put a limit on phone use or the number of texts their child's phone can send, the likelihood that their child will be involved in 'sexting' decreases. Many phone plans offer the option of disabling MMS messages, which reduces the opportunity for sexting.

Talking about media use

- Talk with your child about how mobile phones and the internet work. For example, where does an image go when you send it by text message? Can you control where an image of you or others ends up?
- Ask your child to show you how to use the technology.
- Encourage your child to stop and think before sending material, especially if it's being sent after receiving an upsetting SMS or MMS message.
- Talk to your child about the viral nature of mobile phone communication. Hitting send means that it goes to a friend. But then it might also be sent on to that friend's friends and their friends, including people your child doesn't know.
- Talk to your child about being a [good cybercitizen](#), and consider setting some ground rules for online behaviour. You can offer reminders about the rules from time to time. This sends a clear message to your child that you care.

Talking about relationships

- Talk with your child about his friends – get to know them if possible.
- Take an interest in and encourage your child to talk about crushes or romantic relationships.
- Have ongoing conversations with your child about sexual health and sexuality. If your child has a good understanding of sex and its part in adult relationships, she'll be better able deal with sexting.
- Talk about what goes into positive relationships, including appropriate behaviour. A

good starting point for these conversations is relationships on TV and in movies.

- If someone is pressuring your child to participate in sexting, talk with your child about the relationship. Is it one he wants to be in? Why?

Talking about managing a public profile

In this era of [social networking](#), your child needs to learn how to manage her online profile. Talk with your child about the messages she's sending about herself through her profile. Here are some talking points:

- What kind of public image do you want to have? How do you want people to think about you?
- What kind of photos and video of yourself are you happy for others to see and possibly copy, edit and upload onto different websites? Why?
- Would you be happy if those images ended up being seen by your friends at school, teachers, boss at your part-time job, or parents?

Talking about consequences and legal implications

You can use news stories or anecdotes to explore the short-term and long-term consequences of sexting with your child. Talking points might include the following:

- What are the consequences of taking, sending or sharing sexually explicit images or video of someone who is underage?
- Do you know you're considered responsible, and that it is potentially illegal, if you simply forward a message that someone sent to you?
- What do you think is a fair legal response to sexting?
- What would happen to your friendships if you or friends send sexually explicit images?
- What do you think you can do to keep yourself safe?



If sexting is used in an unwelcome and ongoing way, it can become bullying. If you think your child might be being bullied online or be engaging in bullying behaviour, read our article on [cyberbullying](#) to see what you can do to help.

Sexting: facts and stats

Teenagers can sext as part of normal adolescent sexual experimentation:

- 20% of US teenagers have sent nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves to other people. Most of these photos or videos are sent to boyfriends or girlfriends, but some are sent to people they know only online.
- 39% of US teenagers have sent a sexually suggestive text message.
- 48% of US teenagers have received a sexually suggestive text message.
- 75% of US teenagers say that sexting can have 'very negative consequences'.



A quarter of female teens and almost a third of male teens say they have been shown nude or semi-nude photos that were originally meant for someone else.



Rated ★★☆☆ (4 ratings)

More to explore

- ▶ Teenagers and mobile phones
- ▶ Teenagers creating online content
- ▶ Teenage risk-taking: how to handle it
- ▶ Social and emotional changes in adolescence
- ▶ Teenage friendships
- ▶ Adolescent bullying, schools and building your child's resilience
- ▶ Creating a sexually healthy family
- ▶ Raising sexually healthy children

Web links

- ▶ Australian Communications and Media Authority – Media and communications in Australian families 2007 (PDF doc size: 247kb)
- ▶ The Line
- ▶ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy – Sex & Tech: Teen Voices
- ▶ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy – Sex & Tech survey results

GLOSSARY

digital footprint

The data trace or trail left by someone's activity in a digital environment (such as a computer network or the internet).

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