

Sexting

“Sexting” occurs when one person sends another person (or group of people) sexually explicit photographs, videos, or messages. You might have also heard it referred to by teens and tweens as “sending nudes.” Whether or not your child is sexting, the fact is that many teens are doing it. Eye-opening research among 39 studies reveals that 1 in 4 teens *admit* to sexting.¹ So we think it’s safe to assume there are far more teens sexting who don’t admit to it. And many parents are generally unaware of whether or not their teen is engaging in sexting.



WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE SEXT?

- They’re seeking attention or approval from a crush.
- They’re responding to peer pressure.
- They see sexting as a normal part of modern-day romance.

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IS SEXTING DANGEROUS? YES.

- Depending on where you live, it can actually be *illegal*. If the sender or receiver is underage, a sexter can be charged with possessing or distributing images of child sexual exploitation (commonly referred to as “child pornography”) for sending or receiving sexts, even if both sexters are minors. If prosecuted, an underage sexter might even be required to register as a sex offender – depending on where the crime took place.
- Images can be shared with others besides the receiver. Just about every teen has heard a horror story about someone at their school or in their community who has had sexual photos of them leaked by an angry peer and sent to countless recipients. This is called *revenge porn*, and there are laws against it almost everywhere in the U.S. Despite its illegality, there are still websites on the mainstream web entirely dedicated to sharing these types of images in order to humiliate or exploit the sender.
- Sadly, some people take revenge porn even further and use those images to extort the sender into giving them sexual favors, money, or even more graphic, violent, or humiliating images. This is known as *sextortion*.

Unfortunately, the crimes of revenge porn and sextortion aren’t just committed by hurt and angry peers in a fit of rage. They are also some of the most common tools used by sex traffickers and online predators.

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demands. Others begin with traffickers using sexting as a means to break down their victim’s sexual boundaries.

Due to the current popularity of sexting in our world, it’s essential that parents talk frequently to their kids about sexting if they are to keep their teen or tween from participating in it. You must help them understand that sexting is dangerous and not worth the risk.

▶ **When should you talk to your kids about the dangers of sexting?**

To prevent your teen from sexting, take the initiative. The first discussion should commence before your child even gets a cell phone or any device capable of sending a sext (like smartphones, laptops, tablets, or even video game consoles). Once a child receives such a device, they are susceptible to the influences of predators who might approach them there. If your child has a device, have frequent open discussions on the topic. This will make your child feel more comfortable approaching you and talking to you about the subject in the long run.

▶ **How should you talk to your child about sexting?**

Sexting is a difficult topic to approach and requires sensitivity and caution. When your child is younger, this conversation is probably going to be a bit more cut-and-dried. You can tell them that they are never to show their private parts (in person or online) to anyone other than their parents or doctor. But when kids age into teens, the conversation can be a lot more awkward and complicated. You don't want to appear too judgmental or forceful, but at the same time you want to be firm about where you stand on the subject; you must help them see the dangers and consequences.

Here are a few tips we hope will help you when talking with a youth in your life about sexting:

- **Take a moment to remember what it was like to be a teenager – that deep longing to be loved and accepted. Consider whether you might have been tempted to engage in sexting if it had been popular (or available) when you were a teen. Putting yourself in your teen or tween's shoes could help you approach the conversation in a cooler, calmer, and more collected manner.**
- **Accept that this will likely be an awkward conversation. If you feel it's appropriate, addressing the awkwardness at the beginning of the chat could help break the ice a bit.**
- **Don't be an alarmist. Even if a teen or tween in your life is not engaging in sexting themselves, they probably know someone who is. In other words, they might not see sexting through the same scary lens you do. In fact, they might actually see sexting as a normal part of relationships and dating. It's important not to approach the conversation with a "Can you believe this is happening?" attitude. Instead, try an attitude of "I know this is happening, and I understand why it might be tempting to engage in, but I think it's important that we talk about how sexting could be harmful."**
- **Remember that teens and tweens have the potential both to send nude photos and request nude photos from others. In other words, make sure to chat with your child about why it could be harmful to either sext photos or coerce someone else into sexting such images to them or others.**
- **When in doubt, stick with the facts. It might be helpful to research your state's laws on sexting so you can discuss knowledgeably the possible legal repercussions for your teen. Look up local news stories detailing how sexting has negatively affected youth in your area. If children understand that sexting can be a real threat to their hopes, dreams, and future accomplishments, they will be far less likely to engage in it.**
- **Ask questions, listen, and engage with the answers. This may seem obvious, but remember – sometimes when we're having difficult and uncomfortable conversations like these, it's easy to forget the basics.**
- **Remember to end the conversation with encouragement. Tell your teen or tween the things that are valuable and laudable about them, things that have nothing to do with their appearance or sexuality. This will help them feel more confident in who they are as a lovable individual.**

Information and links provided in this resource are solely for educational and informational purposes and do not constitute legal advice.

¹ Madigan, Sheri; Ly, Anh. (2018). *Prevalence of Multiple Forms of Sexting Behavior Among Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis*. JAMA Pediatrics, American Medical Association