



Is “Sexting” a big deal?

If you have been following technology news lately then you have heard about “sexting”. Sexting is when a person sends a nude or partially nude photo or video of themselves to another person using some handheld device (usually a cell phone). Sexting has become a major issue throughout the United States and has led to embarrassment, bullying, and even death.

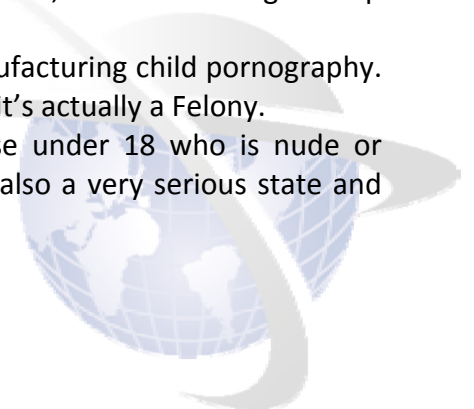
We live in a digital age where images of sex and pornography are readily available to anyone with a computer and Internet connection. This digital sexual age in combination with a disconnect between activity which occurs in cyberspace and normal life has caused kids to become numb to graphic and explicit images.

If you have a child between the ages of 13 and 19 with a cell phone capable of taking pictures or a digital camera there is a 20% chance that they have already sent a nude picture of themselves to someone else. In fact, 39% of teens between 13 and 19 have reported that they have sent sexually suggestive text messages to someone else via a cell phone.¹

Locally we have investigated several incidents of sexting. We have had cell phones submitted to us for forensic examination which have contained everything from full videos of local teenagers involved in sexual intercourse to nude images of teenagers which have been posted on the Internet or used to extort the person in the photograph.

So, beyond the obvious problems with sexting, what are the specific risks to you or your children? Here are some things to consider:

1. Most teens (71% of girls and 67% of boys surveyed) sent these messages to their current boyfriend/girlfriend. When these relationships end, the recipient of the picture or video can maintain that forever and share it with anyone they wish.
2. Once these sexual images are sent electronically, they can never be retrieved. Although your teenager may think it is just going to their current boyfriend or girlfriend, there is nothing to stop the recipient from sharing it with the entire world within seconds.
3. Taking sexually explicit images of someone under 18 years old is manufacturing child pornography. Your teen may think it’s fun to take a picture of themselves nude, but it’s actually a Felony.
4. Transmitting images of yourself (if you’re under 18) or anyone else under 18 who is nude or partially nude may be considered distribution of child pornography, also a very serious state and federal Felony.





5. For those who choose to keep sexually suggestive or explicit images or videos on their cell phone or any other storage device of a minor may be guilty of possession of child pornography, also a Felony.
6. When your child applies for employment or a college, you can bet that social networking websites and other Internet locations will be searched. Any reputable organization that finds images of your child nude or involved in inappropriate or illegal activity is not going to associate themselves with your child.

While most of what I discussed above have criminal penalties, don't forget the civil penalties associated with this kind of activity. Imagine that your child received a sexting message from their boyfriend/girlfriend and decided to disseminate that to a few of their friends. The person depicted in the picture finds out their nude picture is now on the public Internet and commits suicide. If you are paying the bill for your child's cell phone which was responsible for sending the message that ultimately led to the child committing suicide you may find yourself in the midst of a lawsuit.

An example of just how deadly something like this can be is shown in the story of Jesse Logan. Jesse was a high school student in Ohio who sent a nude image of herself to her boyfriend via her cell phone. After she broke up with her boyfriend, he forwarded the image of Jesse to hundreds of other student's cell phone in their school. After relentless bullying, she hung herself in her bedroom in July of 2008, she was just 18 years old.

Parents should add the topics of Internet safety, sexting, texting, and online predators to the other talks they have with their children. Open communications, clear expectations, and being aware of what your child is doing online and on their phone is not only critical, it could be lifesaving.

Sergeant Josh Moulin – CFCE, CEECS
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¹ Sex and Tech: Results from a survey of teens and young adults. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Cosmogirl.com. <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/>

