



Teen Sexting

A Brief Guide for Educators and Parents

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CYBERBULLYING
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Sexting is “the sending or receiving of sexually explicit or sexually suggestive images or video via mobile devices” [1:50]. Most commonly, the term has been used to describe incidents where teenagers take nude or semi-nude (e.g., topless) pictures of themselves and distribute those pictures to others using their phones (although it is also possible to distribute such images via social media, email, messaging programs, video chat, and on the Web). The images are often initially sent to romantic interests or partners but can find their way into the hands of others, which ultimately is what creates the problems [2]. While the public is most concerned about these behaviors as they occur among adolescents, there is evidence that many adults are participating in sexting as well [3-6].

High Profile Incidents

It may appear that sexting is exploding in frequency because of the attention it has been given in the media [7, 8]. In particular, the suicides of Jessica Logan and Hope Witsell catapulted adolescent sexting behaviors to the forefront of the national social conscience. Jessica Logan was an 18-year-old girl from Ohio whose ex-boyfriend circulated nude pictures of her to a large number of their high school peers, leading to extensive and unrelenting cruelty. Two months later, she committed suicide after suffering scholastically and relationally as a result of the humiliation and abuse she received from classmates.

Hope Witsell was a 13-year-old girl from Florida who sent a topless picture of herself to a boy she liked. The image quickly found its way onto the phones of other students. Her journals indicated the vicious name-calling (e.g., “slut,” “whore”) she endured for weeks before it became too much for her to handle. She ended her life two weeks into her eighth-grade year.

More recently, in the spring of 2022 17-year-old Jordan DeMay shared an explicit image of himself with a pretty girl online who ended up not being who she said she was. Shortly after he sent the photo, the “pretty girl” demanded \$1,000 or the image would be sent to all of his online friends. Jordan didn’t have that much money, but agreed to send \$300. After the blackmailer received the money, they said that wasn’t enough and pressured him for more. Not knowing what to do, Jordan replied “you win, I’m going to kill myself.” The criminal responded, “go ahead.” Within just a few hours of the initial online contact, he did.



While these cases are referenced as tragic consequences that can potentially occur as fallout from sharing explicit images, they are very rare and cannot be generalized. We shouldn’t ignore the worst-case scenarios that could occur as a result of sexting, but should also be mindful of the most common situations. Below we consider the research that we and others have done to learn more about the nature and extent of sexting among middle and high school students.

Review of Sexting Research

Over the last fifteen years, a number of surveys have explored the frequency of sexting among youth and young adults [9-13]. The first known study was conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy [14], and identified that 19% of teens (aged 13 to 19) had sent a sexually suggestive picture or video of themselves to someone via email, cell phone, or through another form of online interaction, while 31% had received a nude or semi-nude picture from someone else. Soon after, Cox Communications and the National Center

for Missing & Exploited Children [15] released survey results which found that 9% of young persons between 13-18 had sent “sexually suggestive text messages or emails with nude or nearly-nude photos,” while 17% had received such content. In 2022, Camille Mori and her colleagues reviewed 28 studies of youth sexting that were conducted between 2016 and 2020 [16]. Across all of these studies (with varying samples and definitions of sexting) they found that approximately one in five youth (19.3%) had sent a sext while about 35% had received a sext.

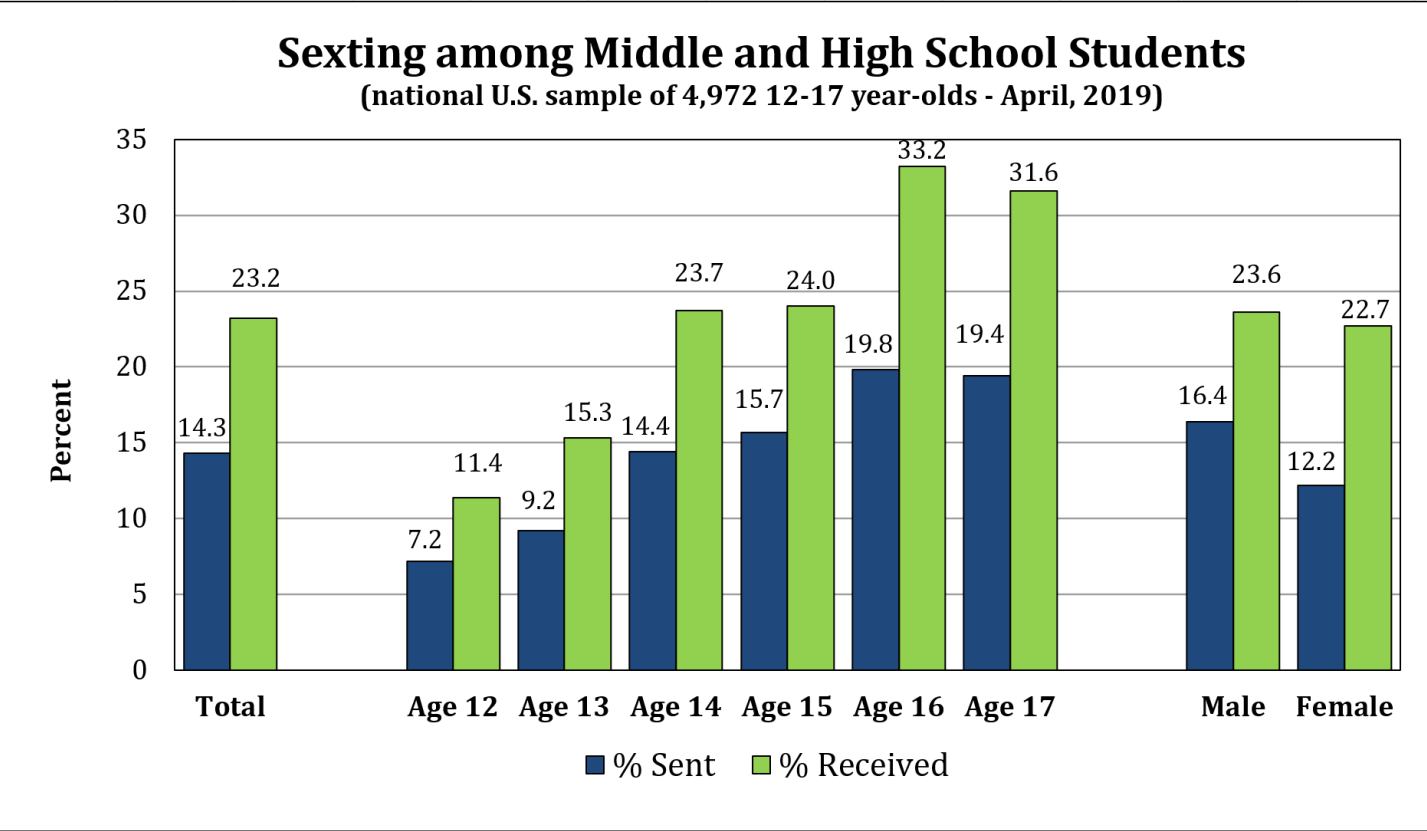
At the Cyberbullying Research Center, we first explored sexting behaviors systematically in the spring of 2010 in a sample of approximately 4,400 randomly-selected students between the ages of 11 and 18 from a large public school district. We found that 12.9% of youth had received a naked or semi-naked image of someone from their school. Moreover, 7.7% admitted that they sent a naked or semi-naked image of themselves to someone else. We also noted that boys and girls were equally as likely to send naked images, while boys were significantly more likely to report receiving them.

In the fall of 2016, we once again surveyed students on the nature and extent of their sexting behaviors [17]. This time we used a nationally-representative sample of nearly 5,600 American middle and high school students. In this study, we defined sexting as “when someone takes a naked

or semi-naked (explicit) picture or video of themselves, usually using their phone, and sends it to someone else.” About 12% of students had sent a sext image of themselves to others and about 19% had received a sext from someone else.

With regard to gender differences, males were significantly more likely to have received a sext from a romantic partner (16.2% compared to 11.6%), though there was no difference between males and females with regard to receiving a sext from someone who was not a current romantic partner. Females were slightly more likely to have received an image from someone who was not a romantic partner than someone who was (13.6% compared to 11.6%) while males were more likely to have received the sext from a current romantic partner (16.2% compared to 13.4%).

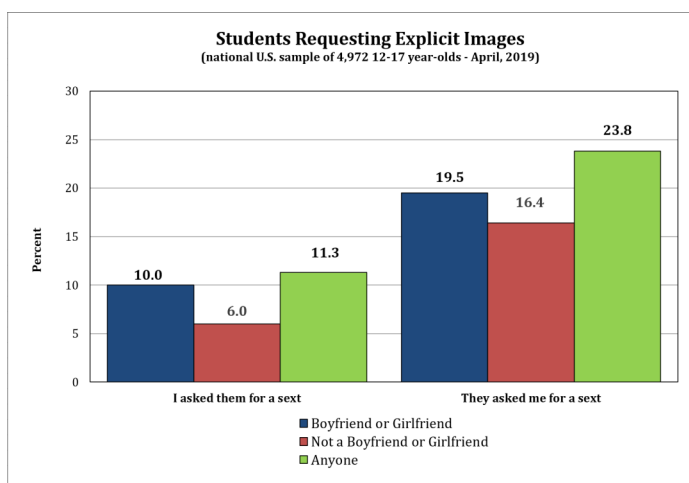
We asked these same questions among our student sample in 2019. Generally speaking, we found comparable results. Relatively few students were exchanging sexually explicit images (14.3% sent; 23.2% received), with older students and boys more likely to participate. Among 15-17 year-olds in our sample, 18.3% had sent a sext (compared to 10.3% of 12-14 year-olds). When comparing more directly our 2016 and 2019 data, we found that all sexting behaviors had increased during that period (though not dramatically).



Requests for “Nudes”

In addition to asking students about whether they had sent or received sexually explicit images from others, we also asked if they’d been asked to share images (or if they’d asked others). Overall, in our 2019 study, 23.8% of students said they had been asked to send an explicit image. More specifically, about 19.5% said they were asked by a current boyfriend or girlfriend and 16.4% were asked by someone who wasn’t a current significant other. Only about 11% said they had asked others to send them naked images (10% had asked a significant other and 6% had asked someone else). When we broke the numbers down by sex, boys were significantly more likely to ask for a sext (14.6% compared to 8%), though girls were more likely to report that they had been asked for one (25.9% compared to 21.7%). In short, most students are not asking (or being asked) for nude photos. Of note, however, most of the students who were asked by a current boyfriend or girlfriend to send a sext complied. Specifically, of those who said they were asked by a boyfriend or girlfriend to send a sext, nearly two-thirds (63.9%) of those actually did.

Not only had more students sent and received sexts from 2016 to 2019, but more had asked others for sexts, been asked for sexts, and shared sexts without permission.



Sextortion

We have been interested in the problem of sextortion since we learned about Amanda Todd, a 15-year-old from British Columbia, Canada, who posted a heart-rending video back in 2012 describing her experience being harassed, threatened, and stalked after exposing herself via video to a stranger online. The primary aggressor in the case made life miserable for Amanda, even tracking her down when

she changed schools so that he could continue to torment her. Others online piled on. It all became too much, and she ended her life.

We define sextortion as “the threatened dissemination of explicit, intimate, or embarrassing images of a sexual nature without consent, usually for the purpose of procuring additional images, sexual acts, money, or something else” [19]. The U.S. Justice Department has labeled sextortion as the most important and fastest-growing cyber-threat to children, with “more minor victims per offender than all other child sexual exploitation offenses” [18]. We have been formally researching sextortion since 2016. Here’s some of what we know from two national studies of youth (in 2016 and 2019) [19]:

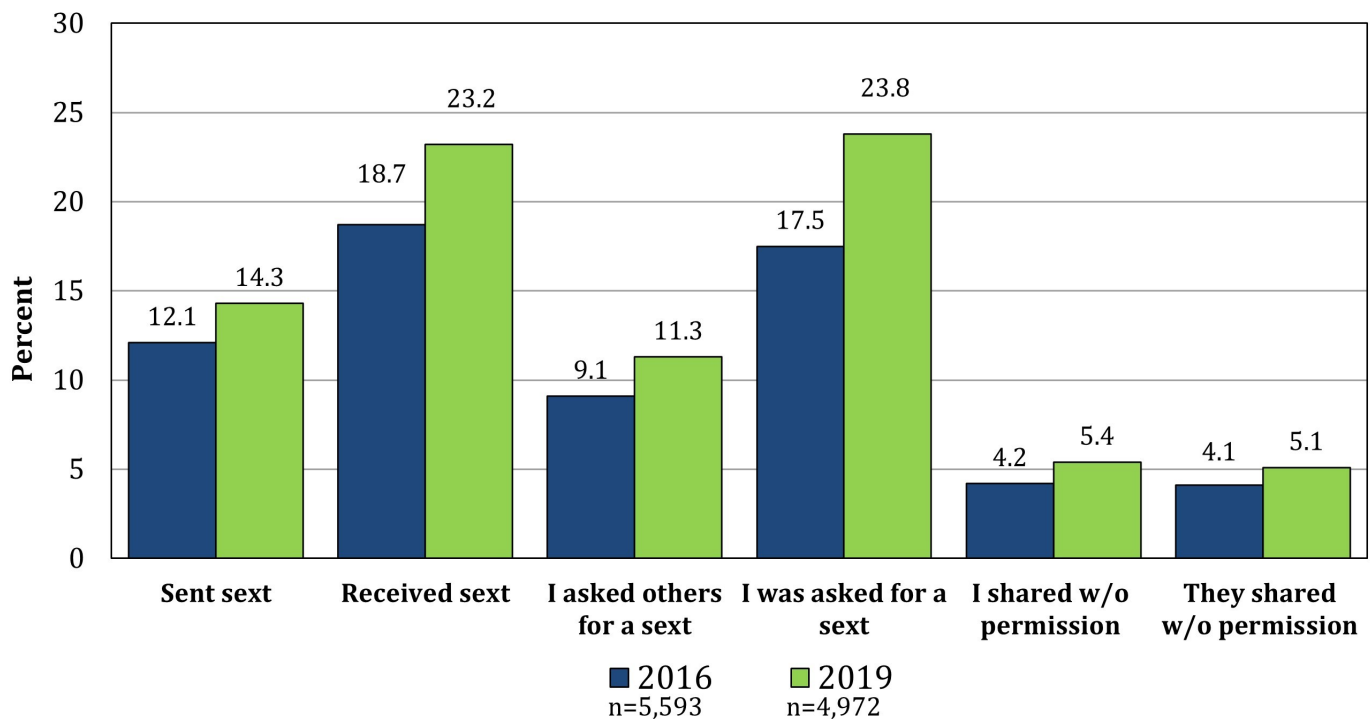
- At least 5% of teens have been the target of sextortion
- Non-heterosexual students are more than twice as likely to be victimized
- Targets are most likely to be pressured by current or former romantic partners, or someone else they know
- Extorters typically demand more images, a sexual act, or money

In the spring of 2022, the FBI warned of an increase in sextortion cases targeting young boys [20]. Our research confirms that boys are more likely than girls to be the victim of sextortion, even though we often hear about more cases involving young girls. We’ve also learned that boys are significantly less likely than girls to report their experiences to the authorities – perhaps because of shame and embarrassment, a belief that they should be able to handle their problems without assistance, or a feeling that others are unable to help them.

Responding to Sexting

Recently, attention has been given to cases of criminal prosecution against teens who engage in sexting, with charges including: “disorderly conduct,” “illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented material,” and felony “sexual abuse of children... criminal [use] of a communications facility, or open lewdness” [21-23]. It could be argued that these prosecutions overstep appropriate bounds, and are outside of the original intention of legislators who formulated the laws to prosecute adults who prey on youth [24-26]. Others, however, suggest that such strict interpretation of the law (where it is a felony to take, send, or keep any sexually explicit image of a minor) is necessary to prevent victimization and tragedies like the suicides of Jessica

Sexting among Middle and High School Students (2016 to 2019)



Logan, Hope Witsell, Amanda Todd, and Jordan DeMay. As of July of 2022, twenty-seven states have enacted specific legislation to address the sexting of minors, with penalties ranging from educational programming for first-time participants to felony charges for more serious violators. (See <https://cyberbullying.org/sexting-laws> for an updated list of state sexting laws.)

To be sure, some legal and political authorities have recently retreated from a hard-nosed stance and are factoring in the age of participants and the relational context in which the sexting incident occurred [27-29]. The vast majority of instances seem to occur as part of adolescent courtship rituals during an era where cell phones, texting, sending digital pictures are mainstays in youth culture [30-32]. As such, the growing sentiment is that youth should not be prosecuted using laws that were intended to protect them from adults [22]. We agree with this perspective. Teenagers who engage in this behavior should not be placed on sexual offender registries as that will largely ruin their life potential. Ultimately authorities charged with investigating sexting need to determine whether the sharing of images was consensual or exploitative. Clearly romantic partners exchanging images voluntarily is much different than one person manipulating or threatening another for images.

What Schools Should Do

Many adults find themselves ill-equipped to deal with sexting and its consequences [33]. It is important that any adult who is made aware of naked or semi-naked images of minors act quickly to limit the extent of harm that may result. Educators are generally considered mandatory reporters and therefore may be required to report any suspicion of child exploitation to law enforcement or another social service agency. Educators should know what their responsibility is (e.g., when and to whom they are required to report) prior to confronting a sexting situation.

Educators should never forward, copy, transmit, download, place on a USB thumb drive or SD card, or show any non-law enforcement personnel any evidence collected from a personal digital device, cell phone and/or computer after the initial discovery of sexual content, or at any other time during the investigation. This may lead to criminal child pornography charges, even if actions were made in the best interests of the student(s) involved [34]. To avoid legal liability in instances of sexting, it is highly recommended that school administrators only confiscate the devices, and let law enforcement search its contents and messaging logs given their level of legal immunity.

Next, we suggest contacting the students involved, as well as their families. With regard to the child who is featured in the images, the situation must be addressed in a delicate manner since emotional and psychological harm most likely has occurred (especially if by now the incident has come to the school's attention). The student should be encouraged to meet with a counselor or another mental health professional if the circumstances warrant (e.g., if images were distributed beyond their original intent).

When dealing with student(s) who shared the image(s), contacting parents is mandated in some school districts prior to the onset of an investigation. Then, it is critical to identify the motivations behind the behavior. For some, the picture or video was sent without forethought and betrays their developmental level of immaturity and the belief that such a practice is harmless, funny, normative adolescent behavior, or somehow necessary to gain attention and validation from another student (or their peer group). For others, the images were distributed in order to intentionally humiliate or otherwise inflict harm on another person – and can be considered cyberbullying, sexual harassment, blackmail, extortion, stalking, or the dissemination of child pornography [1, 19, 35, 36].

Informing parents may also motivate them to speak with and discipline their child in the way they see fit. It should also induce them to pay stricter attention to what their child is doing with their phone, and may lead to restrictions placed on texting, messaging, social media, and general Internet use. Parents who remain informed and vigilant can then continue to educate their children about the consequences of such behavior.

In addition to these steps, it is crucial to control the distribution of the problematic images as soon as possible. After checking logs and records with the help of social media and related platforms, law enforcement can inform school administrators as to who else may have sent and received the images. This should prompt one-on-one meetings with those students to determine the extent of image dissemination. Confidentiality should be promised, and warnings (or discipline) should be given when necessary to deter further broadcast of these images.

Finally, schools should consider adopting a comprehensive sexting prevention and response policy comprised of certain key elements [37, 38]. First, the policy should clearly state that the mere possession of sexually explicit images of minors on any device is prohibited regardless of wheth-

er any state laws are violated. Second, it should indicate that all involved in sexting, unless they immediately deleted the content, could be subject to discipline. Third, the policy should inform students that their parents and the police may be contacted to investigate. Fourth, it should put students on notice that phones will be searched if there is probable cause that a criminal violation has occurred, and may be searched if reasonable suspicion exists that the phone contains evidence of a violation of school policy. Fifth, consequences must be clearly stated but should include wording that allows administrators to use discretion to determine an appropriate punishment on a case-by-case basis. Finally, the policy should explicitly prohibit harassment and bullying related to sexting incidents, and include provisions for increased punishment where threats are made regarding the distribution of explicit images [39].

Strategies for Parents

It is critical that parents talk to their children about sexting much like they would talk to them about sex. It's not easy, but what about parenting is? Their teen's natural desire to be intimate with others isn't going to go away just because they are physically separate from each other. In fact, it is probably more likely these impulses will only become more intense with distance. Without guidance they may be inclined to satiate their urges in ways that may create significant problems later on. Teens aren't wired to carefully consider the long-term consequences of their actions [40], so the adults in their life need to regularly remind them of what could happen if they aren't careful.

Teens need to realize that once they send an image or video to another person, they have lost complete control over who might see it and where it might end up. Sure, most adolescents think they can trust their partner not to share the content with others, but you never can be fully certain that they won't. Our research shows that at least 5% of the time images are shared beyond their original target. Ask your child how they would feel if a nude or nearly nude image they sent ended up being shared with others (or worse, posted online).

Remind your child that most students do not engage in sexting. As noted above, fewer than 15% of teens have sent a sext to someone else. That means that 85% have not! Results from our research do not match the rhetoric in some media articles that teen sexting is a widespread, out-of-control problem. Messages like that actually serve to



encourage more than discourage the behavior. If teens think that sexting is more common than it actually is, they may be more inclined to participate themselves: “Everyone is doing it!” The truth is that most teens are not doing it. Stressing this reality can help empower teens to say no when asked for a sext, and might make it less likely that someone would ask for one in the first place.

Ultimately, it is important to cultivate the kind of relationship with your child that they feel comfortable turning to you if they do make a mistake and run into trouble. Heavy-handed threats of serious long-term consequences for engaging in sexting may even increase the possibility of harm. For instance, if those who sext feel as though their options for moving on after sharing an explicit image are limited, it might foster a vulnerability to extortion [19, 41] or suicide [42]. Offering unconditional support and guidance can not only reduce the likelihood of participation, but it can allow a softer landing should things get bad.

Safe Sexting: From Risk Reduction to Harm Reduction

We been discussing the best ways to address sexting behaviors among youth for many years, including whether

there should be some form of safe sexting curriculum, to teach youth about the consequences of participation, and how to mitigate those. In general, we believe that just like with the evolution of sex education in the United States, we need to move from the exclusive goal of risk reduction [43] to the inclusive approach of harm reduction [44].

Risk reduction focuses on the possible vulnerabilities and dangers that youth might face, and attempts to eliminate them if at all possible. Harm reduction, conversely, begins with the assumption that some youth are going to engage in certain risky behaviors, and with that in mind informs policies and practices designed to reduce the negatives that may occur.

To be sure, some kids are not going to heed the advice and do some experimenting on their own. If that is going to happen, it seems critically essential to share advice that can preempt the most serious harms from occurring. Education not only involves describing dangers and attempting to deter immature and unwise choices, but also how to make sure the backlash from those choices is not fatal.

Box 1—Safe Sexting Strategies

- 1. If someone sends you a sext, do not send it to—or show—anyone else.** This could be considered non-consensual sharing of pornography, and there are laws prohibiting it and which outline serious penalties (especially if the image portrays a minor).
- 2. If you send someone a sext, make sure you know and fully trust them.** “Catfishing” – where someone sets up a fictitious profile or pretends to be someone else to lure you into a fraudulent romantic relationship (and, often, to send sexts) – happens more often than you think. You can, of course, never really know if they will share it with others or post it online, but do not send photos or video to people you do not know well.
- 3. Do not send images to someone who you are not certain would like to see it** (make sure you receive textual consent that they are interested). Sending unsolicited explicit images to others could also lead to criminal charges.
- 4. Consider boudoir pictures.** Boudoir is a genre of photography that involves suggestion rather than explicitness. Instead of nudes, send photos that strategically cover the most private of private parts. They can still be intimate and flirty, but lack the obvious nudity that could get you in trouble.
- 5. Never include your face.** Of course, this is so that images are not immediately identifiable as yours, but also because certain social media sites have sophisticated facial recognition algorithms that automatically tag you in any pictures you would want to stay private.

Adapted from “It is Time to Teach Safe Sexting” by Justin W. Patchin and Sameer Hinduja, published in the Journal of Adolescent Health (2020, 66, 140-143)

In 2020 we published an article in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* which advocates for safe sexting education [45]. It outlines ten specific harm reduction strategies, all focused on minimizing the worst-case scenarios associated with sexting (e.g., public dissemination and humiliation, criminal prosecution). See Box 1 for some examples.

A Call for Expanded Education and Outreach

Based on our experience working with youth, and having been teenagers ourselves, we don’t believe that formal law and policy is the panacea – because adolescents tend not to be deterred by rules and laws [46]. Of course, this does not mean that schools should not develop well-informed policies which include the elements described above. Policies are a necessary, but not sufficient, component of a comprehensive prevention and response plan. We don’t want the presence of law and policy to take the place of purposed educational efforts to teach teens about the responsible use of technology. This sometimes happens

when laws or policies are passed as a way of quickly “dealing” with an issue, without understanding its fundamental causes [47]. Rather, schools must implement creative educational strategies to raise awareness among students on the shortsightedness and foolishness of sending or receiving sexually explicit images of themselves or someone else [48, 49].

This can take the form of in-school assemblies for youth, professional development for staff, and workshops for parents and other community members [50]. Additionally, information and resources can be shared through take-home memorandums, student handbooks, electronic mailing lists, letters to the editor in local newspapers, town hall meetings, and automated phone calls to the families of students. Overall, the goal is to constantly raise the issue so that it is in the forefront of everyone’s mind, and to change perceptions across the student body related to what they may consider normative behavior [51]. This should send the message that sexting is on the school’s

radar and will be immediately addressed, and also hopefully lead to wiser choices by youth who slowly but surely learn from the messaging strategies.

Such efforts are critical in order to change prevailing mentalities regarding what is acceptable and unacceptable in the minds of youth. Our prevention and response efforts are going to be less than ideal if we cannot effectively counter what society is hammering into the minds of adolescents. Cultivating in youth a deeper measure of self-respect, for example, is one such way to insulate them against being pressured to participate in sexting and help them to stand firm when faced with very strong peer and cultural influences.

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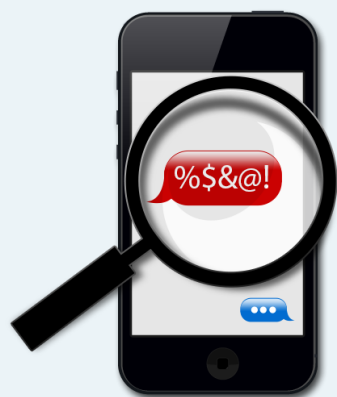


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Note: This is an updated version of a guide originally published in 2010.



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The **Cyberbullying Research Center** (cyberbullying.org) provides research findings, stories, cases, fact sheets, tips and strategies, current headlines, quizzes, a frequently-updated blog, and a number of other helpful resources. It also has downloadable materials for educators, counselors, parents, law enforcement officers, and other youth-serving professionals to use and distribute as needed.

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