

Sexting: What Parents Need to Know

What Is Sexting?

Sexting (or "sex texting") is sending or getting sexually explicit or suggestive images, messages, or video on a smartphone or through the Internet.

Sexting includes sending:

- nude or nearly nude photos or selfies
- videos that show nudity, sex acts, or simulated sex
- text messages that propose sex or refer to sex acts

Why Do Teens Sext?

Most teens have various ways to get online, Smartphones, tablets, and laptops all can be used in private. It's very easy for teens to create and share personal photos and videos of themselves without their parents knowing about it.

Girls may sext as a joke, as a way of getting attention, or because of peer pressure or pressure from guys. Guys sometimes blame "pressure from friends." For some, though, it's almost become normal behavior, a way of flirting, seeming cool, or becoming popular.

And teens get some backup for that when lewd celebrity pictures and videos go mainstream. Instead of ruined careers or humiliation, the consequences are often greater fame and reality TV shows.

What Problems Can Happen With Sexting?

Teens should understand that messages, pictures, or videos sent via the Internet or smartphones are never truly private or anonymous. In seconds they can be out there for all the world to see.

Even if the image, video, or text was only meant for one person, after it's sent or posted, it's out of your teen's control. Lots of people might see it and it could be impossible to erase from the Internet, even if your teen thinks it's gone.

If a compromising image goes public or is sent to others, your teen could be at risk of humiliation, embarrassment, and public ridicule. Even worse, it could damage your teen's self-image and even lead to depression and other mental health issues.

And there can be legal consequences. In some states, a teen could face felony charges for texting explicit photos or even have to register as a sex offender.

Risky behavior online can haunt a college applicant or job-seeker years later. Many colleges and employers check online profiles looking for signs of a candidate's maturity — or giant red flags about bad judgment.

How Can I Help My Teen?

It can be hard for teens to grasp the long-term results of impulsive behaviors. They might not understand how sharing everything now risks their reputations later.

Talk to your kids about how pictures, videos, emails, and texts that seem temporary can exist forever in cyberspace. One racy picture sent to a crush's phone easily can be forwarded to friends, posted online, or printed and distributed. An image sent to a boyfriend or girlfriend could lead to problems if someone else sees it or it's distributed after a break-up.

So how can you get through to your kids? Talk openly about personal responsibility, personal boundaries, and how to resist peer pressure. Conversations like this should happen often — not just when problems arise.

Explain, early and often, that a sent image or message can't be taken back. It can, and likely will, spread to others who weren't meant to see it. Teach kids to follow the "WWGT" ("What would grandma think?") rule. If grandma shouldn't see it, they shouldn't send it.

And make it clear that there will be consequences if your kids are caught sexting. Be ready to take away devices or set limits to when and how they can use them.

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