BC Centre for SAFE SCHOOLS & COMMUNITIES

FACT SHEET

Sexting

What is sexting?

Sexting is the "act of sending, receiving, or forwarding nude photographs or sexually suggestive messages via cell phone".[1] Often, these messages are intended for private viewing; however, there have been cases where 'private' photos have become public. This publication of private affairs has serious social and legal implications. There are a growing number of stories involving teens who have unintentionally become internet sensations due to sexting.[2] Unfortunately, what often accompanies this fame is embarrassment, degradation, and legal penalties.

How common is sexting?

The BC Centre for Safe Schools and Communities surveyed BC high school students in 2008 about sexting related behaviours. Nearly 20% of students said they had participated in spreading sexual rumours, including notes and sexual graffiti, about others. In contrast, 14% said they had been the target of this type of behaviour. A 2009 study through the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in the United States found that 20% of 13-19 year olds had sent sexually suggestive photos or videos of themselves.[5] A 2011 study done by the University of New Hampshire found that 2.5% of youth aged 10-17 had created nude or nearly nude pictures or videos. However, when students were asked about their participation in creating provocative poses without nudity, the numbers rose to 10%.[6] A reasonable explanation for varying statistical discrepancies could be due to age differences in sample groups. Older youth would not only be more likely to be in possession of a phone, but also participate in sexting behaviour. In addition, given that cell phone use and ownership has grown exponentially, the aforementioned figures are most likely conservative indicators.

Laws relevant to sexting

Along with the more obvious undesirable social implications, there are legal implications to sexting. The act of sexting becomes illegal when it involves persons who are under the age of 18. Section 163.1 of the Canadian Criminal Code outlines the existing laws regarding child pornography. According to section 163.1(2), a person acts against the law when they print, publish, or possess child pornography for the purpose of publication. Section 163.1 explains that to access child pornography or to personally possess child pornography are also violations of the law. Violations of this law result in being added to the sex offender registry, which has long-term consequences. Youth who engage in such behaviour are at risk for having a criminal history that may affect future relationships, employment, and other opportunities.

Things Students Should Know

1. Appearing 'anonymous' may not protect you.
People can find you if they try hard enough.

2. Before sending something, carefully consider the reaction of all who might view your posting.

The impression you make online contributes to how others view you in non-virtual situations

3. Never assume that your postings will remain private.

4. If peer pressure is guiding you to do something that you are uncomfortable with, listen to your feelings and don't do it!

5. Once a photo is in cyberspace, it will never truly be deleted.

This list is adapted from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen &d Unplanned Pregnancy.

Resources for Students

Youth Online Chat:
www.youthinbc.com

Cybertip: 1.866.663.9122
http://www.cybertip.ca/app/en

Resources for Educators, Law Enforcement and Parents

Curricular:
Media-Awareness Network' http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/index.cfm

Canadian Centre for Child Protection, Kidz in the Know http://www.kidsintheknow.ca/app/en/

NetSmartz (US-based) http://www.netsmartz.org
Curriculum Materials: http://www.netsmartz.org/educators.htm

Policy :
Cyber safety - SAMPLE from Seattle Schools.

Social Networking :
Centre for Safe and Responsible Internet Use http://www.csriu.org/

10 Quick Steps for Staff/Students/Parents to Stay Safe on Facebook, Twitter, ETC: Here

CyberSmart Parent Resources Multi-languages: Click here

Connect Safety – Parents' Guide to Facebook

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Why is sexting happening?

Media has raised considerable attention to the problem of sexting while psychologists are attempting to explain why this occurs. Some suggest sexting may be an attempt to gain approval from others. A 2011 study involving 128 college students in the U.S.[3] viewed sexting through the lens of attachment theory. Students who had anxious tendencies were more likely to engage in sexting than those with avoidant or secure dispositions. In addition, those with anxious dispositions were more likely to engage in sexual activity to reduce feelings of insecurity, increase emotional intimacy with their partner, reduce tension in relationships, and find self-validation and reassurance from their partner.[3] A 2012 study also found that sexting occurred more often in the context of an existing relationship than when attempting to attract someone new.[4] Because cell phones have become a vital communication tool, those who are more anxious may also be more vulnerable to abuse in this area.

How can parents or other adults intervene?

Undoubtedly, sexting is concerning for parents. Adults can be influential in preventing children and youth from abusing or being victimized by sexting. Adults and parents should:

1. learn about the actual dangers of sexting from the perspective of sending, receiving, or forwarding nude or sexually suggestive messages.

2. in a respectful manner, engage their child in a discussion about the risks and privileges of mobile device ownership. This should include a discussion of what sexting entails.

3. aim to understand why teenagers may be engaging in sexting

4. establish a plan to consistently monitor their child's mobile phone built on mutual respect.

CSSC Resources:

- Call for assistance, referral or research services 1-888-224-7233
- CSSC Library On-line Catalogue - for ordering resources, click here
- CSSC Speakers Bureau – for training and workshops, click here

This fact sheet was co-authored with Jeremy Doiron, an undergraduate student in the school of Criminology and Criminal Justice at UFV. Jeremy has volunteered with various youth organizations and plans to pursue a career working with youth at risk.