

Let's get real about sexting



Sensational stories of teen sexting and its consequences have captured media attention, alarming parents, educators, and law enforcement, so it's helpful to get some perspective.

Sexting is defined in many different ways, but here we'll consider it the practice of producing sexually explicit photographs or video using electronic means. While the press focuses on teen sexting, it's important to note that people of all ages sext more than ever. A 2014 study by the Pew Research Center found that 9 percent of mobile phone owners had sent suggestive images and 20 percent had received one; the greatest activity was among those under age 34.

So why do young people sext? Sexting seems to fall into two broad categories: voluntary and coerced.

Voluntary sexting is a form of adolescent sexual activity—to gratify sexual curiosity and as a way of being sexual without the physicality. Some teens use sexting to attract someone they're interested in, and many use it as an expression of intimacy and commitment in a relationship. As one young woman put it: "It's his way of showing he likes me and my way of showing I trust him."

Of greater concern is coerced sexting, which is a form of sexual harassment and carries higher risk. Those who are pressured to sext (even pre-teens) were more likely to be upset about it—and their images were more likely to be shared. Other worrisome behaviors like substance abuse have also been associated with pressured sexting.

That said, young people take some risk with any sexting:

- **It's illegal.** In the United States, for example, sexting is illegal if the image is of anyone under 18, no matter who sends it. In 30 states, sexting can lead to criminal charges of distribution and possession of child pornography; 20 states have passed laws to temper this for teens, often making it a misdemeanor.
- **Kids lose control of images.** A 2012 study by the Internet Watch Foundation found that of the young people's sexts they studied, almost 90 percent showed up on other sites, accessible to anyone on the Internet. Such redistribution can have negative consequences—for example, contact by a pedophile—but that isn't the norm. To put it in perspective, other research shows four times as many young people were coerced by peers than by strangers.

Report child sexual abuse and other illegal content

Microsoft uses cutting-edge technology and highly trained experts to help detect, report, and remove images of child sexual abuse found on its services. You can help by reporting sexual exploitation of a child anywhere in the world: [cybertipline.com](https://www.cybertipline.com).

Get help from technology

Use tools to help keep kids stay safe.

Family safety settings can help block harmful content, restrict personal information-sharing, and manage websites children visit. Microsoft offers free tools like this: go.microsoft.com/?linkid=9835005.

Respect age-participation rules on sites.

The United States and other countries have laws that require parental consent to collect personal information from a child under 13. If a site doesn't know the child's age, it can't apply those protections. Also, children may encounter situations and content they don't have the maturity to handle.

Helpful resources

- The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children helps children who've been abused and finds ways to prevent abuse in the UK and Channel Islands. www.nspcc.org.uk
- Connect Safely offers research-based safety tips, parent guidebooks, and other online safety advice. www.connectsafely.org

Advice for parents: talk with your kids

Lay the groundwork

From the time children are young, get involved in their digital lives. Be curious, not judgmental. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Respect these rare opportunities to peer into kids' online lives.

- Periodically, ask kids to show you around—sites they visit, pages they create, games they play, what they talk about and share, and with whom.
- Negotiate clear ground rules for Internet use that fit the child's age and maturity, and your family's values. Talk about what can and cannot be shared, and agree on limits. Regularly revisit these guidelines as your child matures.
- If you plan to use family safety software for monitoring, let your children know, and explain that it's to help keep them safe.
- Teach kids to trust their instincts, and let them know they can come to you if something feels uncomfortable or alarms them, and you will help. Be clear that you won't take away their phone or curtail privileges for telling you.

Talk about sexting (Even if it feels uncomfortable.)

- Start these conversations early on—even before your child or your child's friends are involved. Discuss why young people sext. If your teen is involved, listen to what he or she has to say.
- Talk about the pressures to sext, listening in particular for any signs of coercion (particularly if your child is not yet in secondary school).
- Let teens know you understand how they can be pressed into sending a photo or video, but that it is a form of sexual harassment, and it is illegal if they are under 18. Explain too that giving in to such pressure is highly unlikely to get them what they want—popularity, love, a boyfriend—and will likely do the opposite.
- Talk about the risks, but keep them in perspective. Know that most sexting never goes beyond the people involved and isn't legally prosecuted.
 - Remind kids that once they send an image, they can't take it back, and they lose all control of where it goes and who may see it—anybody in their school or on the web. Plus, it can be permanent—for example, a future employer might see it.
 - As teens, it's unlikely that they would be prosecuted for sexting, but it's worth mentioning—many places do not distinguish between sexting and child pornography when those pictured are under age 18.

Background information

The True Prevalence of "Sexting." An analysis of sexting studies, April 2011
www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/Sexting%20Fact%20Sheet%204_29_11.pdf

It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens. A leading expert, danah boyd, explains young people's use of social media. Yale University Press, 2015.

