

Teenagers and “Sexting”

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“Teenager”—a word that conjures up a thousand images, fears, joys, frustrations, moments of pride, and moments of extreme anxiety—almost all at once. The teen years are a challenge to all of us, but young people must find their way through the teen years to adulthood. In today’s high tech world, new opportunities and obstacles can complicate that journey in ways we can hardly imagine.

One of the newest activities prompting a great deal of controversy and worry for parents, teachers, law enforcement, and other caring adults is the phenomenon commonly referred to as “sexting.” The term has been used by the media to refer to a broad range of communications through texting, cell phones, and other electronic media that is sexual in nature. Teens who have been participating in this activity have sometimes found themselves in court charged with crimes associated with the creation and distribution of child pornography.

Knowing more about this activity can help parents speak intelligently to teens about it and stop it from happening with their young people. A recent article attempts to identify and clarify types of sexting events in an effort to help both adults and law enforcement respond appropriately based on the real nature of the activity and the reason it happened.

To accomplish this objective, the authors looked at only one type of sexting message. They focused on pictures created by minors that depict minors in poses that could, under traditional definitions, be deemed “child pornography.”

In one way, the study is heartening for parents. Media attention focused on this activity among youth has led many to believe that sexting is widespread, involving as many as 20 percent of youth, the best available research study indicates that only about 4 percent of teens are involved in the activity. Although that study also had some major flaws it was more reliable than other reviews as to the prevalence of this activity.

In the meantime, researchers want parents to know that there are some serious problems with sexting that parents need to attend to when talking with their children about it. First and foremost is to remind them that the communication is not private even if they think it is. Once it is available through electronic media, it is there forever for others to see. So, a romantic communication to a boyfriend or girlfriend could suddenly end up on the Internet or surprisingly show up years down the road as one is being considered for an important, or sensitive job, or when meeting the parents of “the one.” Teens have a hard time understanding that something that they consider to be so ordinary could have such long-term consequences.

Teens need also to realize that some people who interact with them online are not who they represent themselves to be. According to the recent study, there are two categories of sexting cases. “Experimental” cases involved teens creating and sending images to other

teens with no apparent intent to harm anyone or engage in reckless misuse. These might be “romantic” episodes involving communications between teens and not intended for viewing by anyone else, or they could be sexual images posted and shared to attract attention.

Other, more risky or “aggravated” sexting incidents include youth acting with intent to do harm or behaving in a malicious way towards another youth. Additionally, a variety of incidents involve adults. Most of these cases involve criminal activities including, in some cases, allegations of child pornography. For parents and other caring adults both of these types of activities present serious problems.

“Sexting” is new territory with unique challenges for everyone. Addressing concerns about this behavior with teens is the smart thing to do. Reinforcing the messages about valuing their own bodies and respecting others is the starting point. Letting them know the dangers of sexting and the risks they take when posting pictures of any kind to the Internet is simply good parenting.

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