Commentary

It is Time to Teach Safe Sexting

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Sexting is “the sending or receiving of sexually explicit or sexually suggestive images” (photos or video) usually via mobile devices [1]. Contrary to common belief, most teens are not participating in the behavior. Our 2016 research found that just 12% of middle and high school students across the U.S. had sent a nude photo or video of themselves to someone at some point in their lifetime [2]. About 19% said they had received a nude photo from someone else. These numbers approximate a recent review of 39 other studies (involving more than 110,000 participants), which found that 14.8% of youth had sent and 27.4% had received sexually explicit content [3]. It is also uncommon for adolescents to actively solicit others for “sexts.” Our 2016 research found that fewer than 10% of youth had asked someone for a nude image, and only about 18% said they had been asked [2]. In short, sexting is not the epidemic that the media generally portrays [4].

That said, some teens are exchanging nude images. In addition, recent data suggest that the number is increasing. Our newly collected (unpublished) data from a national sample of nearly 5,000 youth aged 12–17 years in April 2019 found that 14% had sent and 23% had received sexually explicit images. These figures represent an increase of 13% for sending and 22% for receiving from what was found in 2016 [5]. Research suggests that participation in sexting is associated with an increased risk of cyberbullying victimization [6] and participation in risky behaviors [7], including those of a sexual nature [8,9]. These concerns, along with fears of exploitation by predatory adults [10] and a general moral panic over the thought of children sharing nudes [11], have resulted in a quagmire for youth who participate in these behaviors.

Legal Responses to Teen Sexting

Some of those who participate in sexting have found themselves in significant reputational, educational, and legal trouble. Depending on police and prosecutorial interpretation of child pornography statutes, minors who participate in sexting could be charged criminally [12]. For example, an 18-year-old in Florida is now a registered sex offender for sharing explicit images of his 16-year-old girlfriend with his friends [13]. In 2018, a prosecutor in Minnesota charged a 14-year-old girl with felony distribution of child pornography when she shared an explicit image of herself with a romantic interest [14]. He then shared the image with others (without her consent), but she was the one charged.

Against the backdrop of these extreme examples, some legislators in the U.S. [15,16] and abroad [17] are beginning to recognize the futility in deterring teen sexting via threats of severe criminal punishment [18], as well as the long-term consequences of being labeled a sex offender [19]. A few progressive commentators have even begun arguing for the decriminalization of teen sexting [18,20] or have (rightfully) advocated for a more nuanced treatment, which recognizes the developmentally normative nature of the behavior [21–25].

Nevertheless, children still commonly receive fear-based information from mostly well-meaning adults trying to discourage sexting. The over-arching theme of these instructional messages is as follows: if you sext, you will be caught, arrested, and labeled a sex offender. Not only is this outcome highly unlikely [26], research has shown that such instruction does not decrease sexting [18,27,28]. What is more, heavy-handed threats of serious long-term consequences for participation 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 [29,30] or suicide [31]. That is, they may feel trapped, unable to reach out for adult help, fearing significant irreversible damage. Emphasizing the worst-case (if improbable) outcome, without providing viable options for remediation, does little to help youth who find themselves in a difficult situation as a result of injudicious behavior.

Safe Sex and Safe Sexting

Generally speaking, emphasizing avoidance of risky sexual behaviors via abstention has proven ineffectual. Studies have consistently demonstrated the failure of abstinence-only sex
education [32]. It has failed to delay the initiation of sex, prevent pregnancies, or stop the spread of sexually transmitted infections [33]. Although it continues to be offered across the U.S. [34], individual states vary in how they promote abstinence-only versus a more comprehensive safe sex curriculum (which could include an abstinence message but also education about contraception and sexually transmitted infections). Analyzing data from 48 of the U.S. states, Stanger-Hall and Hall found results contradictory to expectation [35]. Namely, “The more strongly abstinence is emphasized in state laws and policies, the higher the average teenage pregnancy and birth rate.”

The truth is that adolescents have always experimented with their sexuality [36,37], and some are now doing so via sexting. Recognizing this, it is time to move beyond abstinence-only, fear-based sexting education (or, worse yet, no education at all). Instead, we should give students the knowledge they need to make informed decisions when being intimate with others, something even they acknowledge is needed [38]. Similar to safe sex education, “safe sexting” education would involve teaching youth about the possible consequences of participating while equipping them with the knowledge to minimize harms that may result. This is not about encouraging sexting behaviors, any more than sex education is about encouraging teens to have sex [39]. It simply recognizes the reality that young people are sexually curious, and some will experiment with various behaviors with or without informed guidance.

What follows are some suggested themes encapsulated in 10 specific, actionable messages to share with adolescents in certain formal (educational and therapeutic) or informal (familial) contexts after weighing their developmental and sexual maturity. The most effective means of conveying this information to young people should be subject to further scrutiny, but most likely will occur in a small group environment, perhaps in conjunction with broader sexual health education [40]. Deviating from conventional academic writing, we offer these as a list, delivered as if speaking directly to a young person.

1. If someone sends you a sext, do not send it to—or show—anyone else. This could be considered nonconsensual sharing of pornography, and there are laws prohibiting it and which outline serious penalties (especially if the image portrays a minor) [41–43].

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 [44,45]. 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.

6. Make sure the images do not include tattoos, birthmarks, scars, or other features that could connect them to you. In addition, remove all jewelry before sharing. Also consider your surroundings. Bedroom pictures could, for example, include wall art or furniture that others recognize.

7. Turn your device’s location services off for all of your social media apps, make sure your photos are not automatically tagged with your location or username, and delete any metadata digitally attached to the image.

8. If you are being pressured or threatened to send nude photos, collect evidence when possible. Having digital evidence (such as screenshots of text messages) of any maliciousness or threats of sextortion [29,30] will help law enforcement in their investigation and prosecution (if necessary) and social media sites in their flagging and deletion of accounts [46].

9. Use apps that provide the capability for sent images to be automatically and securely deleted after a certain amount of time. You can never guarantee that a screenshot was not taken, nor that another device was not used to capture the image without you being notified, but using specialized apps can decrease the chance of distribution.

10. Be sure to promptly delete any explicit photos or videos from your device. This applies to images you take of yourself and images received from someone else. Having images stored on your device increases the likelihood that someone—a parent, the police, a hacker—will find them. Possessing nude images of minors may have criminal implications. In 2015, for example, a North Carolina teen was charged with possessing child pornography, although the image on his phone was of himself [47].

Future Directions

These are just a few of the messages conveyable to youth at a developmentally appropriate age. To be sure, additional thought and research needs to be put into considering the precise information necessary to minimize the behaviors and possible resultant harm. As radical as the idea to teach safe sexting might seem, it has been introduced elsewhere (especially internationally) [48–50], and yet it has not caught on beyond a small group of progressive scholars. Our intent was to further develop this line of thinking and to encourage subsequent thoughtful consideration of its merits and potential pitfalls.

We need to prioritize additional research to explore more fully these complicated issues. For example, in our 2016 study, we found that about 40% of those who had sent someone a sext said that they believed the recipient showed it to someone else without their permission (19% of those who received a sext admitted to sharing it with others without permission) [2]. Does unauthorized sharing occur more often within a long-term relationship or a casual online encounter? Furthermore, it is not clear why most youth choose not to sext. In short, instead of asking “Why do youths sext?,” we should attempt to illuminate the reasons that keep most from doing so. Learning more about the mindset of the youth when confronted with an opportunity to engage in sexting might help us better formulate effective prevention mechanisms in classrooms, homes, and communities. Moreover, identifying which resistance strategies work could
provide teens with tools to avoid sending images when pressured. Finally, solid empirical data on the nature and extent of sexting behaviors among youth is important. If prevalence rates are as low as most empirical research shows (more than 75% of middle and high school students have not participated), social norming strategies can be used to further reduce their incidence [1,51]. But if the current trend of increased involvement continues, effort should be taken to provide teens who sext with information they can use to minimize the potential harm that may result.

Conclusions

Youth who engage in sexting open themselves up to possible significant and long-term consequences, such as humiliation, extortion, victimization, school sanction, reputational damage, and even criminal charges. Still, the developmentally normative desire to be intimate with others in middle and late adolescence persists. Resolving these conflicting realities requires thoughtful consideration of actual risks and rewards of sexting. Most harms could be minimized if teens reduce the likelihood that images will be distributed beyond their original target and if it were more difficult to identify who is depicted. Although it would no doubt be safer if minors did not engage in sexting at all, we know that some will participate; indeed, our data suggest that those numbers are increasing. As such, parents, educators, and medical professionals should provide teens who choose to sext with information they can use to mitigate the potential fallout. This harm reduction philosophy provides a pragmatic set of principles to curtail the worst of the potential consequences of sexting. A more comprehensive, research-informed curriculum covering sexting motivations, complications, consent, and deflection strategies when pressured is also necessary [52]. Although participating in sexting is never 100% “safe” (just like engaging in sex), empowering youth with strategies to reduce possible resultant harm seems prudent at this time.

References


