

What is “Sexting” and What Can I Do About It?

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“Sexting” means sending nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of oneself to others via cell phone text messaging. According to recent surveys, 20 percent to 25 percent of teens admit that they have electronically sent or posted such photos of themselves and approximately 28 percent of teens say that they have received this type of message on their cell phone.¹ Sexting is not only inappropriate, it is dangerous, and as concerned adults we must do all we can to educate teens about why it is a bad idea.

Sexting by its very nature can easily lead to child exploitation. Although most teens presumably do not intend for their photos to be widely distributed, it is a fact that electronic messages of all kinds are often forwarded to others. Those in receipt of risqué pictures or videos can do with them what they wish, such as post them on a Website or alter them. Recent media reports have focused on teens who became the victims of extreme harassment from peers after sending out inappropriate pictures of themselves that were in turn forwarded to others. One Ohio teen, Jessica Logan, spoke about her experience publicly and warned others not to repeat her mistake, but ultimately took her own life in the wake of bullying and isolation by peers.

Most adults are concerned about sexting because they’ve heard about it in the news, but they are not sure what to do about it. Caring adults need to communicate with teens about this topic. Talking with teens about sexting does not need to be difficult; it can be a continuation of discussions you have already begun with them about morality, values, personal boundaries, and modesty.

Here are some points you can mention:

¹ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy as cited on icarecoalition.org and commonsensemedia.org

Anything you text can be forwarded to others. This can result in extreme embarrassment as well as harassment by peers.

Once a text message is sent, it cannot be taken back. You no longer have any control over it. Think: Do you want this photo showing up on Facebook?

You could be in trouble with the law. If inappropriate photos involve underage teens, those who send --and even those who *forward* them-- could be charged with possession and distribution of child pornography, a very serious crime.

Other consequences may include disciplinary action at school or work. Often, if a school learns that students have been involved in sexting, the teens are expelled from sports teams and honor societies. This can impact a student's future.

Parents should also:

Keep abreast of technology. This means trying out texting, social networking, and other potentially intimidating electronic devices so you can have informed conversations with teens.

Pay attention. Let teens know that you will check their cell phones periodically to monitor what is being sent and received.

Consider installing blocks on your children's cell phones so that pictures and/or Internet links cannot be viewed. For more information about installing parental controls on cell phones, see the booklet *Cell Phones and Parental Controls: Protect Your Children*, available on the Diocese of Manchester website at <http://www.catholicnh.org/child-safety/> .

Keep the lines of communication open. Encourage teens to tell you or another trusted adult if they receive any electronic messages or photos that make them feel uncomfortable.