



Talking to Teens About Sexting: A Resource for Parents

Sexting is defined as sending and/or receiving sexually suggestive messages, images, or videos electronically. Among young people, sexting is often referred to as “sending nudes.” Sexting is a common way for people to explore their sexuality, without the risk of sexually transmitted infections or pregnancies. However, there are aspects of sexting that parents of teens should be aware of. The following resource includes effective practices in talking to teens about sexting in an informative, judgment-free way.

FACTS ABOUT SEXTING

According to a 2018 study by JAMA Pediatrics, about 15% of teens had sent a sext, while 27% had received one and 12% had forwarded one without consent. This data shows that most teens aren't sexting. However, this study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is theorized that sexting has become much more popularized in recent years.

Some studies have shown that teenage girls were more likely to send a sext than teenage boys, while other studies have not definitively shown differences in sexting practices by gender. However, girls and nonbinary youth are more likely to be pressured into sexting than their male counterparts.

LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to engage in sexting than their non-LGBTQ+ peers. For many LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth alike, sexting can be a source of validation, especially for teens who may be lacking in positive self-esteem. The need for validation can be especially important for LGBTQ+ youth, who may not be able to explore in-person due to possible safety concerns.

WHY DO TEENS SEXT?

Teens might sext because they find it fun. They may want to show interest in someone, or have someone express interest in them. Or they may want to seek affirmations about their body.

But, sometimes teens sext because they feel pressured to do so. Many teens sext because they think their peers are doing it. In fact, research shows that high schoolers who believe popular kids are sexting are more likely to sext themselves.

Some teens may sext because someone is threatening or coercing them. Others may sext because they're worried their partner/prospective partner may lose interest in them if they don't. Some teens, especially boys, believe having nude images of others gives them status among their peers.

SEXTING LAWS IN WASHINGTON STATE

In Washington State, it is legal for adults to privately exchange sexts, as long as the images are of adults. For minors (people under 18 years old), it is illegal to send or possess sexual images of another minor. This includes a minor taking and saving a nude photo of themselves.

The legal risks of sexting for minors can affect both the person sending the sext, and the person receiving it. However, most teens who have sent or received sexts do not face legal consequences, especially from consensual image sharing.

It is illegal for anyone to share or post intimate images of someone without their consent. This is called non-consensual porn, and the legal consequences can range from a gross misdemeanor to a Class C Felony.

It is illegal for anyone to send unsolicited nude images of themselves to others. This is considered digital-based sexual harassment.

TALKING TO TEENS ABOUT SEXTING

Although it's important to know the laws around sexting, only talking to teens about the possible legal consequences of sexting may feel like a scare tactic. Learning about the best practices of sexting when and if teens decide to sext when they reach adulthood is equally as important. Here are some tips for talking to teens about sexting:

1. Avoid coming from a place of judgment.
2. Talk to teens about consent. Consent is important both in real life situations, and in online spaces. No one should be sending someone a sext without asking if it's okay first.

3. Talk to teens about never sharing a private sext someone sent them with others.
4. Ask them open-ended questions. What do they think could happen if a private sext became public? How do they know the person they're sending a sext to is who they say they are?
5. Tell them they have the right to say no. No one should feel pressured into sexting.
6. Talk to them about their options if someone sends them an unsolicited sext. Deleting the photo and telling the person who sent it to not do it again is a good option. But sometimes online harassment should be reported to the police. Talk to your teen to see if reporting the harassment is a good option for them.
7. Normalize sexual curiosity. It's perfectly normal for teens to feel curious about sexting.

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT TEENS

- [Take It Down](#) is a resource for people who have had online nude, partially nude, or sexually explicit images or videos of them taken before they were 18 years old.
- [THORN](#) helps victims of sextortion (someone threatening to share/expose someone else's nude images).

SOURCES

- Prevalence of Multiple Forms of Sexting Behavior Among Youth, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2018).
- Sexting at an Early Age: Patterns and Poor Health-Related Consequences of Pressured Sexting in Middle and High School, *National Library of Medicine* (2022).
- Sexting Laws for Minors (Washington State): [RCW 9.68A.053](#)