

Parenting for prevention navigating the world online - part 3 sexting and nudes

When
they slide into
your DM's...

wise

Sexting is “sending sexually suggestive or explicit texts, photos, or video messages via computer or mobile devices,”¹ or as young people call it, “sending nudes.” Both teenagers and adults have been known to participate in sending and receiving naked pictures. Despite our own behavior, adult instincts are often to warn young people about all of the terrible potential consequences of sending naked pictures in hopes of discouraging them from participating. However, in a study of 18 year olds, 77% said “the [sexual] picture they sent caused no problems for them.”²



When the message that teenagers receive from adults does not match their lived experiences, they are less likely to listen. It is understandable to have concerns about your teen sending or receiving sexual pictures, just as you might if they were experimenting with any sexual behavior. Smart phones and social media are not going away, so our best bet is to provide young people information and support for navigating their devices. Share your specific concerns and provide information for safe and respectful sexual interactions – just as you would if you were talking about any sexual activity.

Some things to consider when talking about sexting:

- **Consent matters.** Emphasize that we all have a responsibility to make sure no one feels pressure to send pictures or see pictures that makes them feel uncomfortable. Make sure your teen knows that it is not okay to try to convince someone to do anything that they do not want to do. If they are asked for a nude, ask them if they feel like their response is respected.
- **Anything sexual comes with risks.** There are some risks that are unique to sending and receiving nude photos. Anything we send via text, email, or social media can be easily shared with others. Pictures that are sent as a result of social pressure are more likely to be shared with others.³ We do not know whether the person who receives the nude will keep it private. We do not always know who is on the other side of the phone, who else is in the room with the person we are texting, or what might happen to the photo once it is out in the world.
- **Consequences are different for girls.** Girls and boys send sexual texts at similar rates, but for different reasons and with different results. Women and girls typically report that they experience negative outcomes at a higher rate than men and boys do.⁴ Boys are nearly 4 times more likely to pressure girls to send nude photos than the reverse.⁵ A 2018 study found that less than 8% of girls share explicit pictures because they want to; the rest did so because of a desire to please, acquiesce to, or avoid conflict with a boy.⁶ There is limited research on how teens who are LGBTQ experience sexting within their relationships. They may experience the additional threat of being outed as an additional form of pressure.
- **Gender norms are at play.** Our culture grooms girls to believe that their power and worth come from their attractiveness and the approval of men and boys. When girls send nudes, they are often humiliated

1 Champion, A.R., & Pedersen, C.L. (2015). Investigating differences between sexters and non sexters on attitudes, subjective norms, and risky sexual behaviours. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 24(3), 205-214.

2 Rosin, H. (2014). Why kids sext. *Atlantic*, 314(4), 64-77.

3 Ibid.

4 Dir, A.L., & Cyders, M.A. (2015). Risks, risk factors and outcomes associated with phone and internet sexting among university students in the United States. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44(6), 1675-1684.

5 The Foundation for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. (2017).

6 Northwestern University. (2018).

and blamed for any negative outcomes from both their peers and adults. Boys rarely face negative consequences for their nudes, and are often praised by their male friends for acquiring so many naked pictures of their female classmates. Of course, teens who are LGBTQ are also sexting and are also at risk for gender roles and stereotypes to be used against them as coercion or pressure. The best way to understand the pressures your teen may be faced with, regardless of their identity, is to ask them. We see this gender bias play out throughout all sexual experiences. It is not the phone, or the social media platform that is causing the harmful experience, it is the culture they live in.

- **Sexting has unique risks.** “Whether a sext qualifies as a relatively safe sexual experimentation or a disaster often depends on who finds out about it.” We often advise young people to ask adults for help when they need support, but in the case of sexting, sometimes adults make it worse. Students who tell teachers that they are being harassed about a nude may find that teachers are mandated reporters which trigger a response. The school may be required to inform the police and both the school and police launch investigations that the students never wanted and have no control over. Often schools are ill-equipped to find ways of implementing adequate support and accountability to stop the behavior, and many say that what happens outside of school is outside their purview, regardless of the impact on someone’s ability to learn.

Police are restricted in their response to the letter of the law, many of which are written with good intentions to stop child pornography rings, but do not consider the social behavior of teens. In NH and VT, sexually explicit images of people under 18 are considered child pornography. The law does not distinguish between individuals creating images and individuals viewing images. In practice, this can mean that girls who are harassed into providing pictures can receive the same criminal charge and sentence as boys who coerce and distribute images of their classmates.

- **The number one thing you can do is talk with your teenagers.** Students often say that adults do not understand the social expectations and dynamics surrounding their decision to ask for or send pictures, and instead make youth feel shamed, embarrassed or stupid for participating. Your ongoing and proactive conversations about respectful sexual and technological behavior are critical. It is helpful when you understand from your teenager why young people do what they do. Rather than shutting down the conversations and behaviors that make you nervous, you can use it as an opportunity to open up conversations with your teenager. Give your kids the overarching skills and information to navigate relationships and interactions with their peers, while reinforcing that you have their back.

Recommended reading:

[Sexting Panic](#), by Amy Hasinoff

Why Kids Sext, The Atlantic, 2015

Teenagers, Stop Asking for Nude Photos, New York Times, 2018

Resources for teens (and the adults in their lives):

www.teenvogue.com/story/pressure-to-send-nudes

www.scarleteen.com/article/relationships/i_think_he_might_be_using_me_what_should_i_do

www.scarleteen.com/article/abuse_assault/hes_pressuring_me_how_do_i_tell_him

Check out our Instagram posts, @WISEuv, to see some of the common strategies people who are abusive use to try to get nudes.