

## Research Spotlight: Youth Sexting Behavior



We worry about sexting by minors. What it says about their sexual and relationship health. The short and long term effects sexually explicit photographs distributed by cell phone or posted online can have on their lives.

While we should continue to worry and do what we can to prevent such behavior, a new national study suggests that the behavior is significantly less prevalent than was previously estimated.

A study funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, US Department of Justice, and published in *Pediatrics* [1] reports on a national cross-sectional telephone sample of Internet users age 10 - 17 (n=1560). Its careful sampling, detailed interview protocol, and nuanced questions provide a more accurate picture of youth (minors?) involvement in sexting than was previously available.

**Contrary to the earlier estimates of 20%, this study found just under 10% of youth reported appearing in, creating, distributing, or receiving nude or nearly nude images:**

- Sexting (appearing in, creating, or distributing sexually explicit photos): 1.3%
- Receiving sexts: 5.9%

If we broaden the definition of sexting to include sexually suggestive photos (photos that do not show breasts, genitals, or someone's bottom), the numbers increase somewhat:

- Sexting (appearing in, creating, or distributing sexually explicit or sexually suggestive photos): 2.5%
- Receiving sexually explicit or sexually suggestive photos: 7.1%

## **Beyond the numbers, what is important about these findings?**

- Youth in these photos (sexually explicit or sexually suggestive) tended to be older girls (age 16-17)
- They most often took their own photo
- The photo was intended for a romantic partner, or they were joking around
- 21% of those who sent and 28% of those who received the sexts were very upset or embarrassed by the sext
- 28% of those who sent and 28% of those who received the sexts either informed someone in authority (a parent, teacher, or police) or a person in authority found out about the sext
- Very few of those receiving the sexts forwarded them to others or posted them online
- Usually, the person in the photo was someone they knew
- Bullying, harassment, revenge, and blackmail were rare or nonexistent reasons for sexting

## **What insights for youth programming can be drawn from this research? What messages should we give to youth? How can we take advantage of the media attention on this issue?**

- Despite the media coverage, sexting is not the norm. Few youth participate, and a number of those who do are embarrassed or upset after the fact.
- Most youth respond to sexts by hitting the delete button. They do not forward or post it online.
- Having sexually explicit photos of a minor is a criminal offense.
- If it isn't something you would say or show in public?in front of your parent, teacher, friends, and enemies?then don't send it or post it.
- One caveat about the study: because the sample relied chiefly on land line phones, subpopulations who rely primarily on cell phones (e.g., Hispanics, families who move frequently, etc.) are underrepresented.

### **Common Measure:**

Parenting [2]

Technology [3]

### **Year published or updated:**

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### **References & Resources:**

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### **Outcome Age Category:**

School Age (K-8) [4]

Teen [5]

Parent/Family [6]

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**Links**

[1] <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/>

[2] <https://cyfar.org/resource-cyfar-topic-area/parenting>

[3] <https://cyfar.org/resource-common-measures/technology>

[4] <https://cyfar.org/resource-outcome-age-categories/school-age-k-8>

[5] <https://cyfar.org/resource-outcome-age-categories/teen>

[6] <https://cyfar.org/resource-outcome-age-categories/parentfamily>