

Stay clear of sexual relationships

“Sexting” is the act of sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photos, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital device. These messages, photos, and images are then often being further disseminated through email and internet-based social networking websites well beyond their original intended recipients.

[The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com](#) commissioned a survey of teens and young adults to explore electronic activity in 2008. The survey polled 1280 teens and young adults between the ages of 13 and 26 about their cell phone, computer and digital device behaviors and attitudes.

20% of teenagers polled have sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves while 39% have sent a sexually explicit message. 71 % of teen girls and 67% of teen guys who have sent or posted sexually suggestive content say they have sent or posted this content to a boyfriend or girlfriend.

However, worryingly, 44 % of both teen girls and teen boys say it is common for sexually suggestive messages to get shared with people other than the intended recipient. It is illegal for anyone, with lascivious intent, to knowingly encourage, cause, coerce, solicit, or entice a person under 18 years of age – male or female – to pose or be shown in a state of nudity (or semi-nudity) for the purpose of photographing them.

So, in many circumstances, encouraging a person, even a friend, who is under 18 to take a photo of themselves nude, or of body parts considered sexual in nature, with their cell phone or digital camera, breaks this law. It is also illegal for anyone, with lascivious intent, to knowingly send out or disseminate pictures of a person under 18 (1) in a state of nudity (or semi-nudity) or (2) engaged in a sexual act.

Therefore, for example, a sixteen year old who photographs him or herself nude, and sends it to their boyfriend or girlfriend, breaks this law. A person who receives such a picture attached to an email, for example, and who knowingly forwards it to another person, may also be in violation of this law. It is illegal for anyone to knowingly possess photographs (in any format) which depict a person under the age of 18 posed with a lewd exhibition of genitals, buttocks, breasts or engaged in an actual or simulated sexual acts. This is child pornography.

So, how aware are young people that they could be breaking the law at the click of a button? All of the young people Headliners spoke to were aware of the child pornography law but were shocked to discover that what their peers may consider a joke or a 'sexy' present for their partner could be a violation of the law. Some young people had never heard of the actual term 'sexting' but when it was explained to them they knew people who did it.

All young people spoken to understood that the consequences of sexting could be depression or even worse, suicide. The majority of the young people interviewed thought schools and the media had a responsibility to help stop it happening while one boy thought the less it was publicised the better.

Young people were very aware about what could influence people to sext: Thomas (18) said: “Its peer pressure from other young people.” “Pressure from your friends if they send an image to you and think its funny then there’s pressure on you to send it on,” said (Shannon, 16). Robert reckoned that people did it for a laugh, “Sometimes its funny or sometimes they don’t like the person so they just do it. Lauren (16) added: “I think media like the TV and internet influence people to do stuff or other people like friends might do it so you do it to fit in and all.”

Young people were very aware of how serious the consequences could be of sexting. Mark (16) said: “Depression could happen. They might seclude themselves in the house because they don’t want to face further embarrassment and this leads to further depression and this could lead to suicide. Emma (16) agreed: “It could lead to suicide and depression and all.” Caithal (17) was aware that some people would laugh it off but stressed that he couldn’t: “Some people could just laugh and others could be disgusted. Can I just say I wouldn’t be too happy to see any of this stuff round my school. If it happened to me I just wouldn’t go out anywhere or do anything so that I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone or see anyone.”

Robert (18) wouldn’t laugh it off but he would try to ‘get on with it’: “If it happened to me personally I would just keep going I wouldn’t try to stop them because you can’t stop them.” None of the young people spoken to have been tempted to sext. Tola (16) stressed: “Well I just think if you’re going to send pictures around like that it’s just sick.” Young people had their own ideas about who or what should take ownership of putting a stop to sexting. Fiona (17) said: “There should be workshops and information given out on how it affects people. Someone needs to make sure people think about it because if you don’t have a second thought about it you could do something you regret.”

Julie (17), called for: “More information out into the media about how bad it is and how it affects people.” Niall (18) is wary of giving sexting any sort of attention in the media or elsewhere: “I just don’t think it should be something made public. The only thing I can think of is to get schools to ban mobile phones and people don’t listen to that already.”

Brushing this problem under the carpet or pretending it isn’t happening is not the answer according to school Principal Kathleen Gormley: “I don’t think we are going to turn back the time and not have modern technology. I think what we can do is to teach people how to use it better. We have considered for example putting a block in the school on text messaging and blue-toothing here but it is impossible to ban everything. You are it is better to teach people on how to use it and use it well. There are always those people out in society that whatever the rule is they will want to break it.”

A spokesperson from the PSNI Public protection Unit G District also encourages more information about it to be made public in order to control it and ensure that less young people break the law or fall prey to it in the future: “I think its really up to the education board to do some sort of education campaign within the schools telling the young people that this is an offence and they shouldn’t be doing it and there are consequences for them if the do.”

The [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre](#) (CEOP) has been set up to deal with this problem. If you have been affected by this issue you can contact CEOP on Tel: 0870 000 3344 E: www.ceop.gov.uk About this article This story was written by Tola Stewart (17) and Emma O’Deorain (17)

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