

Many teens believe that anything they want to do with *their* bodies and *their* phones is *their* business. They enjoy the privacy and freedom that cell phones give them from their parents and guardians, but what happens when they use their cell phones to explore their sexuality?

Sexting is the sending or distributing of nude or partially nude images. Scary headlines may lead you to believe this is a common practice among teens with extreme consequences. Although the actual numbers vary, many researchers agree that most teens are not sexting, and those who are usually aren't subjected to harsh penalties. However, there are still risks to consider for teens who sext. These tips will help you talk about sexting with your teen so you're both prepared if it ever becomes an issue.

Psychologists like Dr. Abigail Judge advise parents to make discussions about sexual behavior, including sexting, a regular occurrence so teens will be better prepared.

"...research suggests that parents should address the topic of sex with their children—and by extension, digital media and its use in the home—not through a one-time conversation, but through an ongoing dialogue that should begin early and occur often, across developmental time."

Dr. Abigail Judge,
Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 2012



THE RISKS

- Teens who take, send or forward sexting images may face:
- Embarrassment if their picture is shown to family, friends, classmates and even strangers.
- Bullying or harassment from peers who judge them for sexting.
- Trouble at school if they have violated a school policy. Some teens have been kicked off of athletic teams or suspended from school.
- Future consequences if the image follows them for a long time. It may be seen by college admissions officers or even potential employers.
- Trouble with the police. In extreme cases, kids can be charged for sending or forwarding nude images of minors.

HOW TO TALK ABOUT IT

- Ask questions to make it clear you're comfortable discussing it. "Has anyone ever asked or pressured you to sext? Have you ever received a sexy picture from someone?"
- Discuss what characterizes a healthy relationship. "Any person pressuring you to sext isn't someone you should trust. Boyfriends and girlfriends come and go, but a sexual image of you can stay around forever."
- Explain how quickly images can spread online. "Once the photo is sent, it's out of your control."
- Emphasize the importance of not forwarding sexts they receive. "You do not have the right to decide who should see someone else's body. Forwarding images is a major violation of trust and exposes the person in the picture to potential ridicule. Imagine how you would feel if someone betrayed your trust by sharing a nude photo of you."

IF YOUR CHILD'S IMAGE IS ALREADY OUT THERE

- Help them report it to CyberTipline.org, then visit MissingKids.org/GetHelpNow to learn about contacting various websites/apps to request removal of the explicit content.
- Talk to school officials so they can help limit the spread of the image and stop any harassment that may be happening.
- Contact the police if your child is being blackmailed, harassed or if it involves an adult.
- Above all, offer support. Consider seeking professional counseling if they need help coping.