

## How to talk to your child about the dangers of sexting

[Dr Hayley Van Zwanenberg](#), Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist from [Woodbourne Priory Hospital](#), provides advice for parents who may be concerned their child is affected by sexting...

### What is sexting?

Sexting is when someone sends a sexually explicit photograph or video of themselves via their mobile phone or online. It can also refer to written messages. It has become common in recent years due to easy access to smartphones and camera phones with internet access. Adolescents are texting messages of a sexual nature taken in the privacy of their own homes and there is significant concern regarding the negative effects of this on their mental state.

“OFTEN YOUNG PEOPLE  
HOPING TO START A RELATIONSHIP  
OR TO GAIN + POSITIVE COMMENTS  
ABOUT THEIR BODY IMAGE”



### Why is sexting so common amongst young people?

**SEXTING**  
is normalised  
AMONGST MANY ADOLESCENT PEER GROUPS,  
THEY DO NOT REALISE IT IS VIOLATING UK LAW  
BY SENDING OR BEING IN POSSESSION OF  
SEXUALLY EXPLICIT PHOTOS OF A MINOR.



Teenagers often have unlimited text messaging plans on their own mobiles and it is now very easy to take a sexually explicit photo and send it on without the risk of adults seeing it. Many also believe their photos will self-destruct rapidly if sent using certain apps.. They do not realise the permanency of their actions, (it is easy for people to save these images) and the potential repercussions.

Sexting is normalised amongst many adolescent peer groups, they do not realise it is violating UK law by sending or being in possession of sexually explicit photos of a minor. Young people are impulsive as their prefrontal cortex, which plays a significant role in impulse control, is not yet fully developed. They are struggling with managing a combination of fluctuating hormone levels, emotional and sexual feelings and peer pressure and they have not yet developed the maturity to manage these issues safely or wisely. Often, young people 'sext' hoping to start a relationship or to gain positive comments about their body image to aid their self-esteem. At times they are pressurised into it by a friend or someone older.

### What are the consequences of sexting?

There is a risk that their image will be made available to others. This leads to a high level of distress for a young person, and it can lead to them resorting to 'coping' in unhealthy ways such as self-harming, isolating themselves and restricting their dietary intake. It can also lead to high levels of anxiety and the development, or exacerbation of, depressive symptoms. Young people are often worried about the consequences of their actions too late in the day and will hide what they have done while dwelling on it, not sleeping because of it and not concentrating in class.

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO  
ENGAGE IN **SEXTING**  
ARE ALSO MORE LIKELY TO ENGAGE  
IN OTHER **RISKY** SEXUAL ACTIVITY.



If adolescents do not get the response they wished for from sending the image or video, this can have a negative impact on their self-esteem and body image. They may also experience bullying that further knocks their self-esteem.

Young people who engage in sexting are also more likely to engage in other risky sexual activity which again can have a negative impact on their mental state. Some young people are coerced into sexting, or blackmailed into more sexting, and this can lead to trauma.

Images that young people have sent could reappear on websites years later, leading to yet another deterioration in that person's mental state at that stage and interfere with their future prospects.

## Why should you discuss sexting with your child?

IF AS A PARENT YOU LET YOUR CHILD KNOW  
YOU WILL BE **SUPPORTIVE AND**  
**UNDERSTANDING**  
IF THEY EVER DO FEEL **PRESSURED TO SEXT**   
THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO **DISCUSS IT WITH YOU** WHEN IT OCCURS.

peer pressure. If, as a parent, you let your child know you will be supportive and understanding if they ever do feel pressured to 'sext', they are more likely to discuss it with you when that pressure arises..

It is very important to explain to your child how to stay safe online, however difficult this conversation may feel. If they know the boundaries that you accept as parents, from the moment they first have a mobile phone, they are more likely to accept these rules. If they have the risks of sexting explained to them, it might help reduce their impulsivity and enable them to challenge

## Tips on how to talk to your child about sexting:

1. Select a time when your child is not in an emotional state but is calm and rational and not distracted by other activities;
2. Tackle the issue at a young age. Do not wait until they are in the midst of a group of friends who do 'sext' ;
3. Set out the rules of mobile or internet access when they are first given this in an unsupervised manner;
4. Make sure that your child knows what is not acceptable regarding sending photos and that their body is private and they should never be forced to share it with anyone;
5. Talk to them explicitly about how being asked to 'sext' is inappropriate and illegal for minors and how often young people are pressured into this;
6. Explain to them it is ok to stand out from the peer group and not follow the crowd;
7. Talk to your child about real life examples where private images or videos have been shown to the world and the consequences of everyone seeing a photo that the person in it does not want others to see; for example, it can lead to bullying, have an impact on future career prospects, create the potential for blackmail and so on;
8. Reinforce to your child they can talk to you about any pressure they receive and you will be supportive and non-judgemental.

## What should you do if you think your child is a victim of sexting?

- React calmly if your child tells you this is the case. Listen to them and offer support, validate how distressing it must be for them. Try not to place guilt on your child;
- Find out details of who the image was sent to and keep evidence if you can;
- If the image was shared on a website, contact that website to report it;
- Consider changing your child's phone number;
- If your child was forced into sexting, contact your local Police force;
- If your child shared their image willingly, talk to your child again about the dangers and consider discussing the issue with the parents of the receiving child;
- If the image was sent to an adult, report this to the Police or the [Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre](#);
- Inform your child's school so they can monitor the situation if it involved peers;
- Offer your child support. Let them know of confidential helplines they can talk to such as [Childline](#) or the [NSPCC](#). If you are concerned they are not coping see your GP and consider a specialist referral for mental health input.

**For further details on the full range of Priory Services including Child and Adolescent support, please call 0800 787 0056 or [click here to make an enquiry](#).**