

Parental connection, not restriction, discourages teen sexting

January 24 2014, by Jared Wadley



(Medical Xpress)—Parents who wish to shield their children from exchanging sexually explicit images and texts on cell phones should make sure they, themselves, stay connected to their kids through mobile communication, says a University of Michigan researcher.

Rather than imposing heavy-handed supervision of [cell phone](#) use,

parents and other family members can help curb children's exposure to "[sexting](#)" by incorporating themselves into the flows of a teen's texting and talking. Also, parents may be better off if they pay for their kids' [mobile](#) service, rather than having children pay for their own.

"The findings suggest that explicit restriction is not effective," said Scott Campbell, the study's lead author who is an associate professor of communication studies and the U-M Pohn Professor of Telecommunications.

Campbell and colleague Yong Jin Park, an associate professor at Howard University, found that teen sexting was positively predicted by connectedness to peers through [mobile communication](#).

The researchers interpret the opposing roles of mobile phone use with peers and parents through the lens of social emancipation—a framework for understanding how [teens](#) develop a sense of self as they experience new freedoms and responsibilities, many of which are now mediated through mobile communication.

These new experiences include accruing and managing personal finances, developing a sense of style and integrity, navigating relationships, and dealing with issues of sex and sexuality.

"Teens are testing the boundaries of what is acceptable," said Campbell, whose research seeks to explain mobile communication behaviors and consequences in key areas of social life.

Teen sexting seems not only to be an expression of sexuality, but also the development of social identity. As teens become more connected to their peers and less connected to family through the technology, the balance is tipped toward peer influence, he said.

The study focused on 552 teens, ages of 12-17, who outlined their cell phone- and text-related behaviors with peers and [family members](#). Some additional highlights include:

Older teens are more likely to send and receive sexts than younger teens. However, if the younger teens pay for their own service, they are more likely to receive a sext.

White teens are less likely to receive a sext than nonwhite teens.

Girls who do not use a [mobile phone](#) as a family resource are notably more likely to receive a sext than girls who frequently do.

In addition, the frequency of text messaging is associated with the likelihood of receiving, but not sending, a sext. Heavy texting only increases exposure to these images, Campbell said.

"It is plausible that intensive texting leads to contact with a broader array of characters, making it more likely that the user will encounter a member of the small subset of teens who distribute these types of messages, thereby increasing their chance of receiving a sext unintentionally," he said.

"On the other hand, it may be that heavy texters are more likely to actively solicit these images from others because they have become accustomed to this channel as a safe venue for intimate exchanges."

Provided by University of Michigan

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