

Ask the pediatrician: How can parents talk to teens about sexting?

September 19 2022, by Yolanda (Linda) Reid Chassiakos



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Q: My daughter is on her cellphone a lot. How do I talk to her about sexting and other privacy concerns?

A: Sexting is the sending or receiving of sexually explicit images, videos or text messages using a smartphone, computer, tablet, [video game](#) or digital camera. It's not something any parent wants to think about their child doing, and it may be uncomfortable to talk about. But the fact is that sexting is something kids will find out about at some point.

This is why it's important to talk about sexting with your child early, so they have the information they need to make healthy decisions.

There has been a significant jump in the number of kids and teens with access to smartphones. According to a 2021 Common Sense Media survey, an estimated 88% of 13- to 18-year-olds and 43% of 8- to 12-year-olds have smartphones.

It's not too surprising, then, that sexting is more common among kids and teens these days. A 2021 study on sexting among youth found that 19.3% had sent a sext, 34.8% had received a sext, and 14.5% had forwarded one without consent.

There are many risks of sending and sharing sexts that you should be aware of.

Mental health and sexual behavior

Young people who sext are more likely to:

- Have depression and/or anxiety.
- Commit minor crimes.
- Use alcohol, drugs or cigarettes.
- Engage in sexual activity and sex with multiple partners.
- Not use contraception.

Younger adolescents who sext may be even more susceptible to these

risks because of their lack of experience and immaturity. They also tend to be more vulnerable to digital dangers such as bullying or "sextortion." This is a type of blackmail used to get people to send sexually explicit photos or money so that their [private information](#) isn't posted online.

Legal risks

There's also the potential legal trouble that kids can get into, whether they're sending or receiving sexts. Some states will even prosecute minors. Minors may also be permanently placed on sex offender lists.

There are other risks with sexting too, risks that [young people](#) may not think about, including:

- Not having any control over the video or picture once it's sent. People may forward it to others.
- Bullying from peers who see the sext.
- Regret for sending a sext, especially if it's shared with others. This can lead to emotional distress.
- If the sext is posted online, adolescents can be vulnerable to attention they don't want, including from sexual predators.

It's best to talk to your child as soon they are old enough to have a cellphone. Keep giving age-appropriate guidance as your child or teen matures. Some tips:

- Start the discussion, even if you don't think sexting has affected your child or your community. Ask your child if they've heard of sexting and what they think it is. It's important to first learn what your child's understanding is of the issue. After that, you can add age-appropriate information as needed.
- Use examples that fit your child's age when giving them information and guidance. For [younger children](#) with cellphones

who may know little about sex, let them know that text messages should never contain pictures or videos of people—kids or adults—without their clothes on, engaged in extended kissing or touching private parts. For older children, use the term "sexting" and ask if they've been exposed to nude or semi-nude images or sexual activities.

- Be very specific, especially with teens, that [sexting](#) often involves pictures or videos of a sexual nature. Some sexts can be considered pornography or child pornography. Depending on the state, both senders and receivers could be charged and prosecuted.
- Inform your children that texts, images and videos on the internet can remain there forever. This is true even if they're posted on apps that delete after a short duration. These posts can be shared with others, often without the consent of the sexter, and some can even go viral. Sexters who may have intended their sexts to be viewed by only one person may find that their photos have been seen by everyone at school.
- Be on the lookout for excessive texting. If you suspect [inappropriate behavior](#), monitor your child's smartphone and talk with them about who they're texting.
- Teach your kids and teens digital citizenship. This includes respect for others and themselves and how to reject cyberbullying. Invite and welcome your children's questions and conversations. Help them be safe and kind online.

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