

Various research reports suggests that 10-20% of teens have sent or received a sexually explicit photo in the last 12 months (some studies estimate as low as 4%, some as high as 50% - depending on how you ask the question). If we assume around 15%, this means the average sized secondary school will contain 150 -200 students who have recently sent or received a naked or semi naked picture of themselves. Given the prevalence of this issue, we can't bury our head in the sand. Teenagers everywhere are doing this - if it's not our teens, it's definitely their friends!

Why do teenagers "sext"? Research suggests that most teens do it within a relationship - as a form of flirting or sexual play. However, some send pictures in response to pressure, harrassment or abuse and some send pictures as a form of pressure, harrassment or abuse. The research is mixed in terms of which gender sends the most photos - but we know older adolescents are more likely to do it than younger adolescents.

There are a couple of big problems with sexting. First, Australian laws as they exist today allow teens to be charged with distributing child pornography if they send or receive a sexually explicit text – even if this photo is of themselves. Being charged with distributing child pornography can lead to being labelled as a sex offender and the consequences of this are very serious. This is clearly a ridiculous situation and the laws must be changed. Nevertheless, it is a very real risk for young people, and the police visit hundreds of teens each week.

Another big problem is pictures being sent far and wide without consent. While many of the photos sent and received by teens are originally done so with full consent of the person in the picture, follow up photos are often sent WITHOUT consent.

Here's the kind of story I hear every week:

Tara, 17 came to see me after breaking up with her boyfriend. Tara said that her boyfriend was really upset and angry with her, because she had cheated on him with another guy at a party. Her (now ex) boyfriend had a whole lot of naked pictures of her on his phone, pictures that Tara had taken and sent to him when they were together. He had sent a message to her telling her that he had shown them to his friends. Of course the news of this went around the school in three seconds and Tara was entirely and completely humiliated. She stopped going to school midway through Year 12 and hadn't gone back.

Photos are often copied, shared and distributed to hundreds or people, shared on social networking sites and eventually accessed by adult viewers and senders of child pornography.

How do we help our teens avoid this happening to them?

FIRST – HAVE A CONVERSATION

We need to make sure teens are aware of the dangers of sexting. They need to clearly know that a) they are breaking the law and the consequences of being charged with those offences, and b) that photos sent and received can be forwarded to others without their consent and end up being seen by hundreds of people.

The best way to have a conversation is to start by asking questions. Ask the teen the following questions:

- "Do you know anyone who has sent a naked picture of themselves to someone else via the phone?"
- "What about someone who has received one?"
- "Why do you think teens are tempted to do this?"
- "What do you think can go wrong when teens do this?"
- "Would you be tempted to do this? If not, why not?"
- "What would you do if you received a text like this?"

Asking questions first, means we engage teens in the conversation.

Then, we can tell young people our concerns and worries about this issue. Use news reports, or google situations that have occurred so you have real data and situations to share.

SECOND – SET DOWN CLEAR RULES

We need to tell teens that we know they may well be tempted to send a picture of themselves at some point, but that they absolutely must resist this urge. Remind them again of the reasons. Tell them when they turn 18, if they chose to do this in a relationship, then that will be their business. But until then, and while they live in our house, it is absolutely against family rules to send a photo of themselves or any part of themselves naked. Don't be vague about this, be very specific and clear. Also let them know that if you discover that this has happened, unfortunately you will need to remove their phone for a short period of time to help them avoid the temptation.

THIRD – MONITOR THEIR TEXTING WITHOUT UNNECESSARILY VIOLATING THEIR PRIVACY

This is obviously not easy. However, it's important to say that I don't believe young teens should be allowed 100% privacy regarding what they do, say and hear online and with their phones. While teens are teens - with underdeveloped frontal lobes, and difficulty managing impulsivity and judging risk – they can't have 100% privacy in this potentially dangerous area.

This usually means as parents, we tell them that we must have some level of knowledge of what they are texting. This doesn't mean we will check every text. But it does mean that occasional check ups will happen. It means that phones aren't allowed in bedrooms with closed doors all night. It means that teens can't put locks on their phones that parents don't know and that parents know passcodes. As teens get older (16 and 17 for example) it may be that more privacy can be negotiated. But this should happen gradually.

FOURTH – KEEP THE RELATIONSHIP HEALTHY

Finally, we need to prioritise and continually work on having positive relationships with our teens. In general this means:

- Showing interested in their lives (without being nosy for the sake of it)
- Prioritising one on one time with them
- Trying to speaking respectfully and calmly (as do we to adults) even when they make mistakes
- Showing admiration and thanking them often (even when we need to look hard for things to do this for)
- Understanding pressures, temptations, challenges - and forgiving and allowing mistakes

When we do these things for teens, they are more likely to have a good relationship with us, and we can help them through these kinds of tricky issues that our society now faces.