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School leaders target 'sexting'

By [Christopher O'Donnell](#)

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Oftentimes it is meant to be a private moment -- when a young boyfriend and girlfriend share an explicit photo via cell phone.

But trouble arises when the relationship fizzles and suddenly the explicit picture is being shared with classmates or even posted on the Internet.

Welcome to the world of "sexting," the latest technological challenge facing school administrators, including those in Sarasota and Manatee counties.

As many as 1 in 5 teenagers say they have sent revealing pictures on their cell phones, according to recent studies.

What may sound like a teenage prank can have serious consequences. An Ohio teenager hung herself after nude photos of her were sent to other girls at her high school. Students in several states, including Florida, have faced charges of possessing child pornography, with some being registered as sexual offenders after sharing photos online or via cell phone.

Now, the Manatee County School District is following Sarasota in cracking down on the practice.

Manatee school officials have drafted new rules banning the practice and warning that students sending explicit pictures may be committing a felony.

"We want to bring it to their attention that they could be expelled from school; they could also be charged with possessing child pornography," said School Board Attorney John Bowen.

But it is not only students that could end up in legal trouble.

School administrators that confiscate cell phones with explicit pictures of minors could get in trouble if they fail to report incidents to child protection agencies, Bowen said.

"If they don't call the hot line they could be in trouble, or if they show it around the office," he said. "Once you see the one picture, turn it over to law enforcement."

But school officials and parents face an uphill battle to curb the practice.

One in five teenagers said they had sent nude photographs or videos of themselves, according to a recent study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

A third of those surveyed said they had received explicit pictures from others.

"It's happening far more often than parents and law enforcement understand," said Parry Aftab, an Internet privacy and security lawyer at Wired Safety, a national nonprofit that advises parents on technology.

Aftab said that many girls send revealing photos of themselves to please boyfriends. Boys typically send photos of themselves as a joke or to flirt, she said.

But almost always they are unaware of the possible consequences, she said.

"The moment they take these pictures, they've lost control and they never know where it's going to go," Aftab said. "You could be charged as a registered sex offender even though you're the one in the picture."

Even if explicit pictures are not discovered by authorities, they can resurface years or even decades later, warned Corinne Gregory, founder of SocialSmarts, a national public and private school program that teaches children good behavior.

"Pictures posted on the Internet may be 'discovered' by a future employer, spouse or other individual," she said in an e-mail. "You just never know when this stuff may surface or whom it may end up hurting."

The Manatee County School Board will consider the new rules at its meeting tonight.

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