

The Sexting Generation

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Photo Illustration by Saed

Hindash

Jane, a North Jersey teen,* knows posting nude pictures on Facebook is inappropriate. She knows she can get into deep trouble and cause embarrassment for herself and her family.

The problem is kids like Jane don't care.

Their behavior is called "sexting" -- sending sexually suggestive messages or images to others via cell phone, or posting them on social websites such as Facebook and MySpace. And as a new school calendar begins, parents and officials are hoping to get teens to understand the kind of serious trouble they can get into by sexting.

At the least they're hoping kids don't pick up where they left off at summer break.

Last spring, two 14-year-old girls in separate cases, in Glen Rock and Clifton, were caught transmitting nude pictures -- something that technically is a violation of child pornography laws under the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, passed in 2006.

In the Glen Rock case, however, police told students who had received a nude picture of the female student on their cell phones to delete it. The district then held assemblies on cyber awareness for middle and high school students.

The Clifton girl caught sexting was ordered to complete six months of counseling.

In other parts of the country, however, teens caught sexting have been charged with possession and distribution of child pornography. Some are facing years on sex offender registries, which make it impossible to continue attending school or even get a job.

In a Pennsylvania sexting incident involving pictures of two girls in their underwear, the American Civil Liberties Union intervened, arguing the images were not child pornography but an expression of freedom of speech under the First Amendment.

"We think this is more appropriately addressed within the family structure," says Edward Barocas, legal director of the ACLU of New Jersey.

Surveys show that between 20 and 40 percent of teenagers admit they have sexted.

Cynthia Lam, 15, of Westfield, thinks teens are more likely to text sexy messages than send erotic pictures. "What's more common is seductive text messaging as a flirty thing. They can be very promiscuous while texting, but not nude pictures," says Lam, who writes for Sex, Etc., an educational newsletter by teens and for teens published by Answer, a national sexuality education organization for adolescents based at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

"But putting up pictures of yourself (on a social networking site) in a bikini or exposed clothing is pretty common. You want to look good; it's your profile," she says. Elizabeth Schroeder, executive director of Answer, says it's not the behavior, but the technology that's new.

"Technology is much more far-reaching and permanent, and teenagers are not consequential thinkers. . . They are pushing boundaries around sexuality. Years ago they would flash someone or moon someone or write notes or start rumors," says Schroeder, who has a doctorate in human sexuality education.

Now, they can use cell phones and computers to act out sexually.

"I guess it's our new way of trying to get attention. It's a measure of your confidence. And the easiest way to display it is how confident you feel in your body," says Anita Modi, 17, of South Brunswick.

Modi also believes the preponderance of sexy images of young actresses and models fuels teens to exhibit their sexuality more openly.

"I see a lot of young girls, tweens, teens, college age," says Susan Lipkins, a New York psychologist who works with children and adolescents. "About four to five years ago I saw a shift in the way they think about their bodies and sexuality."

Today, boys and girls alike are interested in no-strings-attached sex because, she says, "they think having a relationship is too much work."

"One 13-year-old girl told me, 'I've always been told I am equal, and I am equal to have sex, too.' For young people, sexting is part of their everyday communication system -- it's a mating call, a form of gossip," she says.

Teens also use revenge sexting, or malicious sexting -- in which someone sends compromising pictures of another -- as a form of humiliation.

Ruth, who asked to be identified only by her middle name because she is a high school teacher in Essex County, says she has seen male students distribute inappropriate pictures of female students as revenge after the break up of a relationship.

Last year a student at her school was suspended for revenge sexting, she says.

According to a non-weighted survey Lipkins conducted, 66 percent of 323 people questioned between ages 13 and 72 say they had engaged in sexting. She presented her findings last May at a conference on the internet and mental health held at McGill University.

The most cited survey on sexting, however, was commissioned by CosmoGirl.com and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Twenty percent of teenagers, and one third of young adults 20 to 26 say they had electronically sent or posted online nude or seminude pictures of themselves.

Also, nearly 40 percent of teens and 60 percent of young adults said they had sent sexually suggestive messages via text, e-mail or instant message. "Is it upsetting? To a lot of us older folk, this is fundamentally a question of public behavior versus private behavior, which seems to be at least a moving target for young people. The notion that you'd share nude pictures over the Internet just doesn't compute for an older person," says Bill Alpert, a spokesman for the campaign.

While parents should be aware of what their kids are doing with their cell phones and computers, the findings aren't cause for panic, he says. After all, about 80 percent of teens say they were not transmitting nude pictures, he says.

Maria Concilio, of South Orange, a mother of three -- including two girls ages 12 and 14 -- says she has heard of sexting, but is certain "my kids won't do it."

Why? Because Concilio says she is vigilant about checking her daughters' cell phone texts and Facebook accounts. The same with Katie McGrath, of West Orange, a mother of three sons who are 15, 22, and 24. "I'm always on his phone," she says of her youngest. And she'll continue to monitor it "if he wants me to keep on paying for it."

The CosmoGirl.com survey also found that slightly more girls than boys said they sexted. And while most said it was a "fun and flirtatious activity," about half of the girls said they were pressured by a guy to send sexuality suggestive content.

Only 18 percent of the boys say their girlfriends pushed them into it.

"We need to talk to boys to never pressure anyone into it, and girls shouldn't feel pressured," says Schroeder. "That said, it's true that many girls will do anything to get and keep a boyfriend."

Lipkins rejects that argument, however. Her survey found that only two percent of girls said they felt pressured to sext. The concern over girls may well be a societal double standard about female sexuality, says Peter Cumming, a professor of children's studies at York University in Toronto who has written about sexting.

"I think the hysteria has it backwards. I've seen articles that say technology fuels youth sexuality. I like to think that would happen to two people left on an island together if we forgot to give them cell phones."

John Shehan, director of the Exploited Child Division of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, doesn't share the opinion that sexting is harmless. He believes it's risky behavior that can have serious consequences beyond getting in trouble at school. A teen's erotic image can end up on the screens of pornographers.

"These people collect these images like your average citizen collects baseball cards. They save them and redistribute them," says Shehan. "The content can live out there forever."

Sometimes teen boys will try to collect images of girls in their school, he says. "It's a power play; the boys will threaten to use the image if they don't get more for their collage."

Shehan says communication, not monitoring keystrokes, is the way parents should deal with their kids. The center runs a help desk for parents on internet safety. They can ask questions about specific situations at netsmart411.org. Ideally, parents should be talking to their children about issues of sexuality, privacy and appropriate boundaries long before they come across seminude pictures on their kids' social networking pages, says Schroeder.

And there should be consequences for bad behavior, she says. "A cell phone is a privilege, not a right. So the consequence should be immediate and should be tied to the technology." She advises parents to take the cell phone away for awhile. But Lipkins believes there is little adults can do, and young people know it. Her sexting survey seems to support that opinion.

About half say they posted suggestive or erotic images even though they already realized the material could get them in trouble in school or at work. Most also say they were aware it could cause personal and family embarrassment. Says Schroeder: "They think we're dinosaurs and we don't get it, and they're right. This is a cultural shift, a piece of a puzzle in a larger picture."

* Jane is a real North Jersey teen. Inside Jersey is not using her actual name to protect her privacy.

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Comments

Alice21 says...

I'm an 18-year-old girl that has never taken part in the whole □sexting□ craze. My parents are careful to monitor my cell phone and internet use □ if I did something inappropriate online, they would be sure to find out about it quickly. I have a good relationship with my parents, and I would never want to do anything to ruin the trust they have in me. I think that another reason why I have

never taken part in the "sexting" craze is my involvement in extra curricular activities and my community. These activities are a positive use of my time, and I really enjoy them.

I believe the best way to make sure teens avoid sexting is building strong relationships between parents and their children. If you're a parent that would like to have a stronger relationship with your child, the website www.justsayyes.org is an excellent resource - check it out!

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