

UNDERSTANDING THE ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVE ON SEXTING: A CALL TO ACTION

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While digital technology produces relatively positive experiences for youth, e.g. communication with friends, surfing the web, etc.,¹ a subset of behaviors remains an issue of great concern to youth and the adults in their lives. Sexting is one of these issues. Definitions of sexting vary in research and can include the electronic sending of nude pictures, the sending of pictures depicting semi-nudity, or the sending or posting of sexually explicit pictures or writing. The variability between these definitions may be one reason why research has failed to provide a clear and reliable picture of the frequencies, risk factors, contextual concerns, and consequences associated with these behaviors.

As a professional educator and trainer working with adults and adolescents on the issue of sexting, I speak regularly with teenagers. These experiences have consistently pointed to several key issues. Firstly, adolescents' perceptions of the social normalcy and prevalence of sexting seem inconsistent. Teens are uncertain about whether sexting is common, expected, or abnormal among their peers. Similarly, in the research literature, estimates on the prevalence of sexting vary widely, although studies are beginning to approach a general consensus, with 30% of teens reporting that they have sexted.^{2,3,4} While not an epidemic (as is often implied by the media), there appears to be a significant minority of teens who engage in this behavior. In addition, research has found that older teens sext more frequently than their younger counterparts.^{2,3,4} However, further clarification of these findings could be helpful in beginning to form a truly broad social consensus about how common sexting really is.

Secondly, my experience working with teens in the field has led me to believe that very often they are aware of some types of consequences but remain completely oblivious to others. Many teens who I have worked with seem aware of the negative consequences (i.e. having a photo passed around) due, in large part, to the tendency of adults to emphasize those negative consequences. While this message may be an important one, in reality, it is only a subset of sexting behaviors that seems to be correlated to such negative outcomes, namely, those sexts that

are sent as a result of pressure or coercion.² It is important to note that pressured sexting, and the negative outcomes associated with it, may be of greater concern for females, as some evidence suggests that they are at greater risk of experiencing pressure to sext.^{2,5}

While there is evidence suggesting that pressured sexting leads to more negative outcomes,² further examination is necessary to explore the various forms such pressure may take and the individual and situational factors that play a role in responding to such pressure.

As mentioned, there may be some areas of particular concern regarding sexting behaviors among females. Studies have reliably found that females engage in sexting more frequently than males and are significantly more likely than their male peers to report feeling pressured to sext.

^{2,3,6,7,8} In my work with teens, other gender differences, not yet fully explored in the literature, have also emerged as potentially important. For example, in my experience delivering educational programs about sexting to teens, females tend to demonstrate stronger reactions and appear to experience higher levels of discomfort relative to their male counterparts. It is not uncommon to see female audience members' faces turning red, hushed conversations begin, and the exchange of nervous looks at the outset of this discussion. While interpreting these reactions is, at best, an informed guess, my years of experience working with teens lead me to believe that this topic is of greater concern to females. There are many possible explanations for the heightened responses among females. Are they embarrassed by the discussion? Is it simply that the higher frequency of sexting among females makes their discomfort more apparent? Or, it may be simply that sexting is experienced as more upsetting by females. In fact, this is a view that has been supported by some research, which has found that more girls report feeling worse after engaging in sexting relative to their male counterparts (30% and 12%, respectively).² It could also be interpreted to mean that females are simply viewing these behaviors as more significant or pertinent to their lives, but neither perspective has been fully explored in the research literature.

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With regards to prevention efforts, it is also imperative that our discussions focus on the realities of sexting for teens. As it stands, many of our current prevention efforts overemphasize the statistically unlikely legal consequences or the possibility of photos being widely passed around. Contrary to media hype, a few studies suggest that it is unlikely that teens will be charged with crimes⁹ unless they are engaging in pressured sexting, and it is also unlikely that photos will be shared without consent.^{2,10} The behavior of students in the field suggests the inefficacy of emphasizing dire, but unlikely, consequences. As soon as the mention of (relatively) extreme risks is broached, the eye rolls begin, and students seem to “tune out.” Student responses suggest that scare tactics are an ineffective method for addressing sexting behaviors.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the greatest lesson I have learned in my experience working with teens is that no matter what aspect of sexting is being examined, it is vital that we suspend our own judgments about sexting behaviors and seek to understand this phenomenon from their perspective. Many of our current prevention efforts appear to be undermined by our stubborn refusal to listen to teens’ voices and by our own feelings about these behaviors. Thus, it seems that the most pressing concern of those working in the field should be gaining a

better understanding of students’ perspectives and voices, with special attention paid to female voices. Questions must be posed to the students themselves so that their perspectives can guide prevention and intervention efforts (especially regarding adult decisions about consequences and legal ramifications). A deeper understanding of these issues from the perspectives of teens and adolescents will help to ensure that the adults working with them can meet their needs more effectively and is likely to result in the creation of more effective programming.

Take Home Summary

Current research suggests that a significant minority of adolescents are engaging in sexting behaviors. While this is a topic that has received much media attention, there are many issues that have yet to be examined in the research literature. Firstly, a deeper understanding of pressured sexting and the related contextual factors is necessary. Gender differences should also be explored. Most importantly, research efforts need to begin examining sexting from the adolescent perspective. A better understanding of these issues will help guide prevention efforts and ensure that those working with teens are able to meet their needs.

About the Author

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