

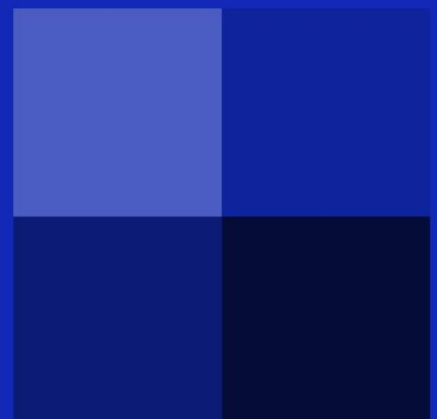


Sexting

A Parent and Carer's guide

E-Sussex, E-Safe

Safeguarding all children in East Sussex all the time



This is not the most comfortable of subjects, but that is no reason to ignore it. Sexting not only happens, but recent research indicates it is happening far more frequently and the age range seems to be spreading.

What is it?

Sexting is a relatively new behaviour involving mobile phones or the internet. It is when (usually) two people exchange intimate and usually sexually explicit messages or pictures online or via a mobile phone texting facility. It is not limited to mobile phones, however, and the behaviour can happen in chat room environments, especially those with video capability.

What are the risks?

If either child/young person is under the age of 16, it could well be a criminal offence. Sexually explicit language may well give rise to an offence under the Telegraphy Act, Computer Misuse Act, Child Act or other legislation. Also, once a young person's image is out there, it is out there for good and its owner has no control over it. There is ample evidence to suggest that images are often shared or published on the wider internet, and examples of blackmail as a result of sending a sexual image are not unknown.

A typical scenario?

A & B are boyfriend and girlfriend. A is a 15 year old girl and B is a 17 year old boy. A sends B a topless photograph of herself at his request. B is at risk of being charged for a) Inciting a minor to commit a sexual act, b) possessing an indecent image of a minor. If B then moves that image from his mobile phone to his computer and from there to his Facebook account, he could also be accused of distributing an indecent image of a minor.

But let's consider the case of B sending A a compromising image of herself that he did NOT ask for. The image just arrived. He likes it. So he shares it with his best friend, who then shares it in a much wider audience.

Your kidding? Young people do this?

Recent research from the UK Councils for Child Internet Safety indicates that this is a widespread practice among young people, and growing. Youngsters think that this is normal behaviour, that they will not be caught and that their images are safe. It is not confined to girls taking photos of themselves, boys do it too.

There is also some evidence to suggest that it is a rite of passage similar to having ear piercings done. Young people are beginning to say "Everyone does it."

What can I do about it.

Embarrassing though it may be, you should discuss this activity at home. Young people should know that parents/carers are aware of it and the risks the practice brings. Photographs may be distributed, boyfriends and girlfriends do break up. Give them a chance to come to the right decisions themselves....and give them a chance to tell you if they have done something they now regret.

Sometimes it is hard for a teenager to have an eye-to-eye conversation even in the most loving and caring homes. Having an old shoebox in the kitchen when a teenager can drop in a slip of paper can prove surprisingly effective, even if you have an only child!

Should I go through my son/daughter's mobile phone? No. There is little point in this. It is unlikely that the images will be stored on a mobile phone for longer than necessary. But there is no harm perhaps in asking!

There are some apps available that will email parents a copy of every image taken by their child's mobile phone. One such app is "Selfiecop". It seems to be effective, however it is also something of an invasion of privacy too.

I am totally shocked. (Disgusted even!)

Well, think back. Those of us who are old enough to have been at school before computers and mobile phones might remember that we looked up rude words in dictionaries. Well, now they use Google and Google images. This is just an extension of that, albeit one with significant risks.

Children are every bit as curious about growing up as we were – the difference is that they have a vast array of information (and misinformation) only a click or two away.

Can you summarise the risks for me?

- Naked, or even semi-clothed pictures can be illegal if the subject is under 16.
- Any attempt to engage an under 16 years (18, in some circumstances) old in any kind of sexual activity is illegal, even if it is with consent.
- Images can be published on the internet where they can be altered and enhanced.
- The Police take a very serious view of this offence and are acting whenever evidence is put before them.
- Many young people who have taken images of themselves to please a boy/girlfriend often regret it later and report it in an attempt to recover the images.
- Reputational damage can occur if a young person's image becomes widely known about.
- Publication of such images, especially if tagged with social networking or email address information is a gift for paedophiles.

All I wanted was for my youngster to stay in touch now they are in secondary school.

That is the wish of most parents! However, no matter what the sibling/peer pressure, perhaps asking yourself "Does my child need the latest iphone?" is a good start. Youngsters may want all the latest applications and gadgets, but there are still many basic mobile phones out there.

The Facts

- Your child may want the latest top of the range mobile phone, but the question may be "Do they *need* it?"
- **Young people today are very confident and outgoing. They really do believe they are "in control" and that it "Won't happen to me".**

- It is important to let your youngsters know that **you** know of this behaviour. It is also important that you do so in such a way that it does not frighten them or put them off telling you if they have engaged in it and now regret it.
- **If your youngster has already sent pictures of themselves, you should try to find out who the recipient was and from there, where those images are now.**
- This can and should be done calmly. It is far better that both parties understand the dangers, both physical and legal involved and with mutual co-operation, the images can be securely deleted, and lessons learned.
- **Recent research from the UK Council for Child Internet Safety indicates that 25% of the sample group thought that there is “No such thing as an inappropriate image.”**

Further information

Sexual experimentation is a normal part of puberty. Children used to look up rude words in dictionaries – now they use Google and YouTube – and more! Children may use technology to experiment sexually – having conversations – sending images.

They need to know:-

- **Once a text or image is sent, it can never be retrieved.**
- **Boyfriends and girlfriends often show their best friends images and texts received.**
- **There can be legal complications where one party in the relationship is under the age of consent and the other is over. It is NOT ok for an 18 year old boy to have sexual images of his 15 year old girlfriend.**
- **It takes mere seconds for an image to be seen, copied and reposted.**
- **When relationships fall apart, there are often revenge attacks using images sent and received**
- **Once an image is sent, it takes mere seconds for it to be seen and copied. An image sent to ONE person can quite easily find itself all over the internet.**