

Sexting & Nude Photographs

Although there are very real, serious consequences associated with sexting, it's important to also focus on the motivations behind it and the risks associated with the behavior. Understanding the phenomenon can help us prevent kids from using poor judgment and engaging in self-destructive behavior. Sexting is increasingly prevalent among kids — no longer something we can assume only happens to other families. Yet, it also confuses and angers many parents who can't imagine digitally sharing something so intimate.

- **Remind your kids that sexting has long-lasting consequences. It's important to communicate that sexting can hurt everyone involved.**

In many states, sending nude photographs is illegal — particularly when minors are involved. Taking, possessing, or distributing naked images of minors can have significant legal consequences for the sender and the recipient. Second, many schools are still figuring out how to react to sexting, and consequences may range from suspension to expulsion. Regardless of the school's action, students themselves may feel pressure to change schools after such pictures get out, as the social ramifications can be devastating.

- **Remind kids that any private messages can be made public online.**

Even if your kids insist that they completely trust the recipient, once they press Send, they lose control of the message. Help kids think through the “what-ifs”: A recipient loses his or her phone; a friend scrolls through another's messages; a parent checks a kid's phone; the recipient changes his or her mind; the relationship circumstances change. Any message or photo can be copied, screenshot, or forwarded. Sexts can be used for bragging rights or even for revenge. Emphasize that there are just too many real risks that they can't control.

- **Explain to your kids that sexting is not a normal or common behavior.**

Boys tend to believe that other boys are readily receiving sexts from their female peers. We've heard stories about teenage boys keeping naked images on their cell phones that they found online as evidence of “sexts they've received.” Often this idea can pressure boys to ask for sexts as a marker of masculinity and sexual desirability. Kids also may be tempted to engage in sexting because they desperately want to experience and “prove” their closeness with others — and they are still learning how to navigate these close relationships and express their feelings appropriately. *Take this as an opportunity to talk about other ways to communicate attraction and closeness.* Explain that it's normal to want to show someone that you care about them — and even to want to impress a crush — but there are far less risky ways to do it than sending a sext. And anyone who asks for one does not have your best interests at heart.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

Prove you trust me

Devon opened his cellphone and saw a picture of a girl without a shirt on. He couldn't see her face, but saw the text message sent with the picture: "Fwd if you think Rachil is a slut!" Rachil was in Devon's Spanish class and he immediately cringed, imagining how ugly this was going to be for Rachil at school tomorrow. Rachil had sent the picture to her ex-boyfriend because he promised they would get back together if she proved she trusted him. She sent it to him and they got back together, but a few days later they got into another fight and broke up. Jose forwarded the picture to his friends. Then, the picture spread like wildfire.

- ❓ What is your gut reaction to this story? What parts of the story seem most realistic to you?
- ❓ Why do you think Rachil decided to send the picture? What could she have done differently if she really wanted to get back together with her boyfriend?
- ❓ What is a misconception you think adults have about sexting?
- ❓ What would you have done in this situation if you didn't know Rachil? If you were Rachil's friend? If you were Rachil herself?