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Parents, are your teens "sexting"?

Parents may have never heard of it, but surveys show that 20 to 60 per cent of teens are doing it: "sexting". While this troubling trend continues full speed ahead, parents, teachers and lawmakers are struggling to react appropriately to the phenomenon that puts kids at risk for exploitation, harassment, and even charges.

Sexting usually refers to teens sharing nude photos via cell phone, but other devices and the Web is used too. The practice can have serious legal and psychological consequences.

- **It's illegal:** Don't take or send nude or sexually suggestive photos of yourself or anyone else. If you do, even if they're of you or you pass along someone else's - you could be charged with producing or distributing child pornography.

- **Non-legal consequences:** Then there's the emotional (and reputation) damage that can come from having intimate photos of yourself go to a friend who can become an ex-friend and send it to everyone you know. In some cases, kids are responding to peer pressure in a form of cyber bullying or pressure from a boyfriend or girlfriend (they break up, and sometimes those photos get sent around out of revenge). Sometimes it's impulsive

behaviour, flirting, or even blackmail. It's always a bad idea.

Parents talk with your kids and express how you feel in a conversational, non-confrontational way. A two-way dialogue can go a long way toward helping your kids understand how to minimize legal, social and reputation risks.

Stay alert when using digital media. People aren't always who they seem to be, even in real life, and sometimes they change and do mean things. Critical thinking about what we upload as well as download is the best protection.

- **Parents:** If your children have sent any nude pictures of themselves, make sure they stop immediately. Explain that they're at risk of being charged with producing and distributing child pornography. If they've received a nude photo, make sure they haven't sent it to anyone else.

- Consider talking with other teens and parents involved, based on what you've learned.

- Some experts advise that you report the photo to your local police, but consider that, while intending to protect your child, you could incriminate another - and possibly your own child. That's why it's usually good to talk to the

kids and their parents first. If malice or criminal intent is involved, you may want to consult a lawyer, the police, or other experts on the law in your jurisdiction, but be aware of the possibility that child pornography charges could be filed against anyone involved.

- **Teens:** If a sexting photo arrives on your phone, first, do not send it to anyone else (that could be considered distribution of child pornography). Second, talk to a parent or trusted adult.

Tell them the full story so they know how to support you. Also, don't freak out if that adult decides to talk with the parents of others involved - that could be the best way to keep all of you from getting into serious trouble.

- If the picture is from a friend or someone you know, then someone needs to talk to that friend so he or she knows sexting is against the law. You're actually doing the friend a big favour because of the serious trouble that can happen if the police get involved.

- If the photos keep coming, you and a parent might have to speak with your friend's parents, school authorities or the police.

For more details visit http://www.connectsafely.org/pdfs/sexting_tips.pdf

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