

**A PARENT'S GUIDE THROUGH THE TEEN
WORLD OF "SEXTING"
*A "SEXTING TYPLOGY"***

CHRISTOPHER MULLIGAN LCSW

CYBER ADDICTION RECOVER CENTER

3685 MOTOR AVENUE, SUITE 150

LOS ANGELES, CA 90034

855-735-HELP

The Crimes Against Children Research Center (**CACRC**) recently conducted a survey of 550 cases of “sexting” obtained from a national survey of law enforcement agencies. To promote an objective discussion of the problem of sexting and to develop strategies to minimize the dangers and harm related to “sexting” the researchers created a typology. The aim of the typology was to show the diversity of “sexting” incidents and organize “sexting” behaviors in a way that helps school officials, parents, law enforcement and other community-based organizations and leaders to respond effectively to needs of teens who engage in “sexting.”

What is sexting?

The term “sexting” has been used in the media and by researchers to refer to sexual communications with content that includes sexually explicit pictures and text messages, sent using cell phones and other electronic devices. Because the term has been used in a variety of ways, the researchers at CACRC selected an alternative term: "**youth-produced sexual images.**" The CACRC defines youth-produced sexual images as pictures created by minors (age 17 or younger) that depict nude or nearly nude minors and/or minors engaged in some form of sexual behavior. These images, by virtue of the fact that they depict minors in a sexually graphic manner, can be categorized as **child pornography** under current criminal statutes.

How many minors have created youth-produced sexual images?

Several studies have suggested sexting is widespread among teens, but the actual number of teens that make and send sexual content is unclear. One widely cited study by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that 20% of teens had participated in sexting (either sending or receiving). However, due to methodological problems with this study, the 20% figure is considered to be exaggerated. A better designed study by the Pew Research Center, using a nationally representative sample of youth ages 12 to 17, estimated that 4% had created and sent sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images. ***The Pew research suggests that creating such images is not yet a statistically normative behavior among teens.***

Typology described

The researchers at the CACRC determined that the 550 cases studied could be divided into two categories: ***aggravated and experimental***. Aggravated incidents involved criminal or abusive behaviors beyond the creation, sending, or possession of youth-produced sexual images. These additional behaviors included: 1) adults soliciting sexual images from minors and minors sending images to adults and 2) criminal or abusive behavior by minors such as sexual abuse, extortion, deception, threats, malicious conduct arising from interpersonal conflicts, and/or the creation and sending of images without the knowledge or against the will of the minors who were pictured.

In experimental incidents, in contrast, youth created and sent sexual images without any criminal elements. That is, there was no criminal behavior beyond the creation and sending of images, no apparent malice, and no lack of willing participation by the youths pictured. Generally speaking, in these experimental episodes, teens took pictures of themselves to send to an established boy or girlfriend, to create romantic interest in another teen, or for attention seeking. The researchers at that CACRC use the term experimental because these incidents, although they did not represent normative behavior, ***did appear to grow out of typical adolescent impulses to flirt, find romantic partners, and experiment with sex and get attention from peers.***

Aggravated Sexting

The category that involved criminal elements beyond the creation or sending or possession of youth-produced sexual images was divided by the researchers into two distinct sub-groups: ***adult involved cases that included sexual offending by adults and cases that involve youth only (no adults).***

In most of the adult involved cases, adult offenders developed relationships with and seduced youth in what were clearly criminal sex offenses (even without the added element of youth-produced sexual images). Some of these adult offenders had face-to-face relationships with victims as family members, friends, relatives, or community members. In other cases, offenders used the Internet to meet

victims. The youth-produced sexual images were generally solicited by the adult offenders.

The other category of “aggravated” cases involves **youth only**. In these cases, adults did not solicit youth-produced sexual images or interact sexually with youth, either knowingly or unknowingly. The researchers determined there were two subgroups of “youth only” cases: 1) **intent to harm** and 2) **reckless misuse**. The key in distinguishing the “**intent to harm**” group from the “**reckless misuse**” group was in the intent of one of the teens involved. If a teen took or used images intending to harm, harass, or embarrass a peer, then the incident was categorized as “intent to harm.” This included retaliation for relationship breakup or actions directly taken to discredit someone's reputation.

In the “**reckless misuse**” category, by contrast, pictures were taken or sent without the knowledge or willing participation of a teen, but there was no apparent specific intent to cause harm. For example, in a frequent reckless misuse scenario, a teen received images and showed or forward the images to others without permission.

The researchers determined there were three subgroups in the “aggravated incidents, youth only” category: 1) cases that arose from interpersonal conflicts such as breakups and fights among friends 2) cases that involved criminal or abusive conduct such as blackmail, threats, or deception and 3) criminal sexual abuse or exploitation by youth sex offenders.

In summary, the “youth only-reckless misuse” group did not seem to involve any intent to harm despite the fact images were taken or sent without the participation or acknowledgment of the youth that was pictured. In these cases, pictures were taken or sent impulsively or recklessly and the victim may have been harmed as a result, but the intent was not malicious.

Experimental Sexting

Within the experimental category the researchers determined there were 2 subcategories: 1) romantic episodes in which teens, in an ongoing relationship, made images for themselves or each other and these images were not intended

to be distributed beyond the couple and 2) sexual attention seeking in which images were made and sent between teens who were not known to be romantic partners, or where one teen took pictures and sent them to multiple friends and acquaintance, or posted them online, presumably to draw sexual attention.

Within the romantic subgroup of the experimental category, these incidents included couples in an ongoing romantic and sexual relationship who made images of each other. Within the “sexual attention seeking” subgroup these images were made and sent, but not within an ongoing relationship. Often the intent was to interest someone in a relationship. In some cases, teens were offended by receiving sexual images. However, this reaction did not, by itself, put the episode in the aggravated category unless there was evidence the sender *intended* to offend or hurt. If the sending of images was repeated when interest was not reciprocated, it could, however, become harassing and thus “malicious” and reclassified as “aggravated.” This scenario is rare according to the researchers. Most cases that involve malicious and harassing behavior arose from *teen conflicts* which were not apparent in the cases categorized as “experimental.”

Implications

According to the researchers, the most important implication of their analysis is the recognition that “youth-produced images” are made and distributed under a wide range of circumstances. It is important, according to the researchers, that no single stereotype be permitted to dominate popular thinking or influence public policy. Youth-produced sexual images are not all “impulsive” acts or “romantic exchanges.” Some aggravated “youth only” cases entailed a considerable amount of malice, such as teens who engaged in blackmail by threatening to send pictures that included sexual acts.

Cases that involved adults were also diverse. Some featured exploitative adults who tricked or seduced teens into sending graphic pictures, while others involved teens, often troubled, who initiated sexual interactions with adults. Research consistently shows that the teens who are most vulnerable to adult initiated sexting are the same teens who are vulnerable to sexual abuse offline: teens who

are depressed, isolated, anxious, and traumatized. These were largely non-forcible crimes by adults who had illegal sexual contact with underage youth or what is generally referred to as statutory rape.

Statutory rape is relatively prevalent crime, although there is no information about how often it includes youth-produced sexual images. ***Certain characteristics histories of physical or sexual abuse, delinquency, depression, and conflict with parents appear to increase the risk that teens will be drawn into statutory rape type relationships.*** It is important to keep in mind that crimes charged as statutory rape are diverse in their dynamics. The participation of underage youth, while generally deemed voluntary, is a voluntary to ***varying degrees.***

Young teens have little experience with intimate relationships. They often do not know how to negotiate with older partners about sexual activity. Some youth are pressured or coerced into sexual activity and some are intimidated into sexual activity. Nonetheless, many youth in these situations believe they are in love, are resistant to viewing a relationship as criminal, and feel considerable loyalty to the adult offender.

Even cases with only juveniles can be serious. As described above, there are cases featuring minors alone as producers and recipients of images that have very abusive and exploitative dimensions. Some teens used images to blackmail peers, some teens sexually abused and photographed younger or vulnerable youth, and some used images to damage reputations.

The researchers recommend considering the developmental context of sexting behaviors. In evaluating the seriousness of episodes the researchers state it is important to consider the behavior of young people in the context of psychosexual development. The research supports the view that sexting is not simply teens acting "stupid" or "reckless." Learning about romantic and sexual relationships is a key task of adolescent development in our culture, which provides mixed messages about appropriate sexual behavior. A large part of sexual development involves negotiating behaviors that are heavily weighted with moral, interpersonal and life course implications. Teens need to struggle with

questions related to how much intimacy they want or should allow, and what kinds of activities will create bonds and trust. Teens also need to think about the meaning of various forms of sexual behavior and how they feel most comfortable expressing themselves sexually.

Sending sexually graphic photographs have reputational consequences, but so do most kinds of sexual interactions for teens. Teens have to try to balance reputational concerns against the sense of trust and safety that romantic attachments create. The sharing of sexual images, although risqué' in one social dimension, may also be a form of sexual sharing that actually involves comparative safety for teens.

In contrast to face-to-face sexual encounters, “cyber” encounters can be engaged in outside the presence of the other person. As a result, these encounters can **decrease** feelings of immediate embarrassment and may be more manageable as the teen can control how she or he appears. Additionally, the pressure for additional sexual intimacy is not as intense and immediate as it is in face-to-face encounters and allows for teens to opt out at will simply by logging off or turning off their phone.

In summary, sexting is a diverse activity that needs to be responded to with diverse approaches – from addressing clearly illegal actions through consensual sharing of images. Creating community based forums where teens and adults can speak and share and problem solve about sexting is the best possible approach at this time. Certainly, educators and parents can best support teens as they negotiate “sexting” options through empowerment: information, critical thinking, and collaborative problem solving.

For more information contact: Christopher Mulligan LCSW @ 855-735-HELP or go to www.cyberaddictionrecovery.com.