

Youth and Sexting: Information for Educators and Caregivers



As technology continues to develop and becomes more popular, sexting has become more common among youth. Many people think about all of the potential risks when they think about youth sexting, but there can also be positive outcomes, particularly in romantic/sexual relationships.

To reduce the risks associated with sexting and increase the positive outcomes for youth who decide to participate in sexting, comprehensive education is necessary. Educators and caregivers have a role to play in this education.

What is sexting?

Sexting refers to the production and/or distribution of sexually explicit, suggestive, or evocative text messages and/or sexually explicit images, emojis, or videos by way of various forms of communication technologies. Communication technologies can include text or instant messaging via cellphones as well as uploading content (e.g., photos) to web and social media sites. Sexting can be consensual or non-consensual (e.g., when content is forwarded to others without consent).

How common is sexting?

Research has shown that rates of sexting increase as youth get older, and the practice has become more common with the increased use of mobile devices like smartphones with cameras and mobile apps (e.g., Snapchat). Around 10-15% of youth have sent a sext, and 12-27% of youth report receiving a sext. Among adolescents, most sexting occurs between romantic partners, but can also occur with strangers, acquaintances, peers, and potential partners.

Why do people sext?

- *Part of a sexual/romantic relationship*: to gain attention from an existing or potential partner, flirt, build intimacy, strengthen trust, improve relationship satisfaction, connect with potential and current romantic/sexual partners, sexual experimentation, precursor to sexual activity or a first step in a sexual relationship, substitute for sexual activity when abstaining from sexual contact
- *Self-expression*: a desire to be fun, flirtatious, and sexy; fulfil needs for sexual expression and self-presentation; may be a more comfortable means for expressing feelings and sexual desires compared to in-person communication
- *Entertainment*: means of distraction; boredom; to “joke around”; for fun, especially between romantic partners
- *Social pressure from peers*: to gain status with peers; pressure from a partner and/or group norms (e.g., “everyone is doing it”); coercion (particularly for girls)
- *Instrumental or aggravated reasons*: exploitation of sexual content; revenge (particularly among ex-partners)

What do youth think about sexting?

Attitudes regarding sexting tend to be ambivalent (i.e., mixed, or contradictory) among youth. Positive beliefs of sexting include viewing it as fun, flirty, hot, and exciting, while negative beliefs include perceiving it as dangerous, risky, stupid, immoral, slutty, inappropriate, damaging, and illegal.

Youth make clear distinctions between consensual sexting and non-consensual sexting, with the latter being viewed as wrong and a violation of trust. Youth report that the dissemination of images without consent of the person depicted is the most serious negative outcome of sexting as it can lead to social shame, stigma, harassment, and subsequently mental health problems.

What are the risks and potential negative outcomes?

The risks of sexting and its outcomes can differ depending on the motivations for engaging in it (e.g., consensual, or experimental sexting versus non-consensual, pressured, and coercive sexting). Potential risks include:

- *Online victimization*: sexual exploitation, duplication and spreading of sexts, cyberbullying
- *Social shaming*: bullying, name-calling, victim-blaming, harassment, threats, reputational damage
- *Legal consequences* (particularly if those involved are underage)
- *Increase in sexual risk behaviours*: lack of contraception use, engaging in sex while under the influence of substances
- *Negative impact on mental health* (more common among young teenagers, pre-teens, and youth with pre-existing mental health difficulties): depression, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, self-harm, substance use
- *Dating violence*: physical violence, coercive sexting, cyber dating abuse

Sexting and the Law

In Canada, the age of consent for sexual activity is 16 years, with close-in-age exceptions for youth aged 12 to 14 and 14 to 16. Sexting is lawfully addressed or regulated in Canada with Section 163.1 of the Criminal Code of Canada child pornography laws and is defined as “any visual representation (photographic or drawn) that shows a person who is under 18 (or depicted as under 18) engaged in explicit sexual activity, or which depicts the sexual organs or anal region of a person under 18 for a sexual purpose” (Criminal Code, 1985a, b, 163.1). In 1999, the Supreme Court of Canada introduced a “private use exception” (R v Sharpe, 1999) that acknowledges youth have a right to sexual expression and can create and share expressive materials if the exchange is consensual and recipients are close in age.

Sexting Education

Communication is an important aspect of healthy relationships. Youth want to learn about sexting and believe it should be a regular aspect of social and health curriculum. Taking a comprehensive, harm reduction approach to sexting education can help youth make fully informed decisions and may reduce the occurrence of negative outcomes related to sexting. When providing sexting education:

- Share that sexting can be a normal lower risk way to explore one’s identity, sexuality, and relationships if it is done so consensually.
- Focus on consent and negotiation skills specific to sexting.
- Discuss what constitutes a harmful sext (e.g., coercive sexting, non-consensual/pressured sexting, revenge sexting, and non-consensual forwarding of sexts), and provide information about potential negative impacts of sharing and distributing sexts.
- Avoid taking an abstinence-only approach to sexting or labeling it as “child pornography”. Doing so can lead to stigmatization and victim blaming, decrease help-seeking, and potentially isolate youth in abusive relationships.
- Consider bringing in an adult from a non-school affiliated organization or peer educators to share information.
- Discuss gendered double standards (e.g., girls as victims and boys as perpetrators) and differing or perceived behaviours among boys and girls.



Safer Sexting

Sharing the following tips with youth who decide to engage in sexting can help to reduce the risk of negative outcomes.

- Get consent (only send sexts to someone who you know wants to see it) and set expectations.
- Do not share sexts that you receive from others.
- Only send sexts to people you know and fully trust. Check for identifying details in photos and turn off services that automatically backup photos.
- Use apps that automatically delete sent images after a certain amount of time (e.g., Snapchat) and promptly delete explicit photos of yourself and others from your device.
- Talk to a trusted adult if you experience non-consensual sexting.

Remember

Sexting in and of itself is not necessarily harmful; the harm generally results from sexts being shared, whether consensually or not. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual sexting and provide youth with information to make fully informed choices.

For more information and resources related to sexting and its impact on youth health, view *An Environmental Scan of Online Resources Related to Sexting* at <https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/an-environmental-scan-of-online-resources-related-to-sexting/> and *Youth Sexting: A Critical Review of the Research Literature* and <https://skprevention.ca/resource-catalogue/sexual-health/youth-sexting-a-critical-review-of-the-research-literature/>.

