

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Sexting

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Sixth, seventh grade is when people started sending nudes. The popular girls would send them to the popular guys. . . . I would find out about it and be like, ‘You know that’s wrong, right?’ I was iffy, at first. But everyone was doing it, so I just felt like I had to.

—teen sexting story in *The Washington Post*

Are You Prepared to Talk about Sexting?

Today's culture teaches teens that rebellion is part of growing up, that hiding one's actions from prying eyes is normal, and that sex is no big deal. Because of that, sexting has become normalized—everyone does it! Right? Whether your teens attend public school, private school, or homeschool, they are not immune to the influence of culture, thanks to the ubiquity of the internet and smartphones. At some point, they or their friends will be tempted by the ease, seeming playfulness, and safety (no risk of pregnancy OR face-to-face rejection) that sexting offers. May this guide serve as an education in its appeal, its prevalence, its danger, and the underlying heart issues to begin addressing with your teens.

What is “sexting”?

A combo of “sex” and “texting,” it's literally sending sexually explicit messages via electronic device (computer, smartphone, tablet, gaming console). This can mean saying sexual things via words and emojis, as well as sending suggestive or nude photos.

Are teens sexting?

Unfortunately, yes. Up to [40% of teen boys and 37% of teen girls](#) report sending sexual messages via text, email, or private messaging, while 48% report receiving such messages (and these numbers are from 2008!). [80% of these teens](#) who admit to sexting are under the age of 18, and [at least 50% of teens](#) report that they have been asked to send a sext.

Why do they sext?

There are many reasons given by those who engage in the activity, and they differ between males and females. For guys, 77% claim to sext as a way to get girls in the mood for sex, while 18% claim to sext as a result of pressure from a female, and 5% list other reasons. For girls, 40% claim to sext as a joke, 34% claim to sext as a way to feel sexy, 12% claim they were pressured to do it, and 14% give other reasons. (These stats from [this study from 2008](#).)

At Axis, we have teams of 20- to 24-year-olds who travel around North America speaking to middle and high school students. Through this, we've heard countless stories about girls who feel rejected, ugly, and unlovable because guys aren't asking them for naked photos. It has become the new measure of popularity and likeability, so many girls will sext because they are only thinking of the status it affords them, not about its risks, negative impacts, or a guy's motives in asking for the photos.

As for why guys might feel motivated to sext or solicit nude photos, it could be something as simple as their hormones and curiosity, but it could also stem from peer pressure and the desire to come across as manly or cool. We came across one 14-year-old boy who asked a 14-year-old girl for nude photos. When she refused, he whined and complained, saying, “Why can't you just be normal and send me a pic?!” So for some boys, it also may be so commonplace among their peers that the thought of it being morally wrong or inappropriate has never even crossed their minds. Additionally, though porn is ubiquitous and easily accessible, young men might prefer sexting because it's with a person they know and because it could lead to something more, which porn will never be able to offer.

What apps do they use to sext?

Anything with image-sending capabilities (e.g. a phone's default text messaging app, [Messenger](#), [WhatsApp](#)). However, those that provide some level of privacy, secrecy, and/or anonymity are usually preferred ([Snapchat](#)—potentially in conjunction with their camera glasses called [Spectacles](#)—[Kik](#), direct/private messages on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and even [Pinterest](#)). Other apps like [Tinder](#), [Melon](#), [Periscope](#), and [all of these](#) afford teens more privacy, the ability to connect with complete strangers, and live-streaming capabilities. Also, keep in mind that many video games have chatting functions and/or allow players' avatars to simulate sex.

Ultimately, if you don't know what an app on your child's device is for, ask him/her. And if you really don't like your teen being able to download any app at any time, consider [implementing Parental Controls](#) on his/her device and using a [social media contract](#).

Emojis as sexts?

As crazy as it sounds, yes. A picture is worth a thousand words, and emojis can convey meaning much more quickly and covertly than words. Thus, many emojis have double meanings, especially when combined in certain ways to create a narrative. (And in case you're wondering how kids figure this out, all it takes is a quick Google search to find entire guides and encyclopedias for emoji sexting...which often contain links to "related articles" about online porn. Somehow, emojis and sexting have become the gateway drug.) Here are some of the ways emojis are used in sexting:

 = butt

, ,  = male genitalia (the third refers to a slang term)

,  = female genitalia (the second refers to a slang term)

 = X-rated eyes, i.e. looking at something X-rated

 = "Speak no evil," i.e. don't break our sexual confidentiality

 = Send videos of yourself, preferably doing something X-rated

, ,  = Male ejaculation

,  = Sexual penetration

,  = Spanking

,  = Netflix and chill (a euphemism for "fooling around" or having sex)

, ,  = Oral sex

, ,  = Masturbation

Are you getting the picture for how these are quite literal and essentially depict sexual acts step by step? There are many ways to combine emojis to convey sexual meaning, so hopefully the above helps you understand the building blocks in order to interpret your teens' texts.

— Isn't it illegal for a minor to sext?

This is where things get fuzzy. In the US, if the sexting occurs between two consenting adults (18+), then it's not illegal. But if it's between minors, it's possible that [child sexual exploitation and child pornography laws](#) could come into play. But the law hasn't been able to keep up with technology, so in instances where a teen takes a photo of him/herself and shares it with others, he/she could be considered both the perpetrator and the victim (and there are steep consequences for perpetrators of child pornography). And, if your child is 18 and sexting with someone who is 17 or 16, your child would be tried as an adult (not a minor) if charges are filed. Check out [this Wikipedia article](#) for more info.

— How is sexting affecting teens?

In many ways, but one concerning effect is that those who engage in sexting are more likely to have sexual intercourse, [according to research](#). In addition, those whose sexts are shared without their consent ([this study](#) found that 1 in 4 sexters were sharing sexts, despite expectations they would remain private) also face bullying, rejection, and ostracism from their peers, as well as negative changes in their emotions and behavior, such as shame, isolation, depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

What it boils down to is this: The immediate acceptance they seek from their peers seems much more satisfying than living a life that's holy and pleasing to the Lord. It also means that when they experience rejection from their peers, it affects them much more deeply than knowing they might be rejected by God. One reason for this is that rejection and acceptance from those around us is much more immediate, salient, and felt than that from God. But living a life worthy of the sacrifice He made for us is a long-term play, one that involves delayed gratification in the knowledge that what's to come is beyond-imagination better than what's here and now—including popularity or sex or finding “the one.” Along with other influences, **sexting is teaching them to fear man more than they fear God**. Yet, for many reasons, younger generations either can't or won't understand that, instead clinging to temporal pleasures and distractions.

— I checked my teen's phone, didn't find anything, so he/she isn't sexting, right?

Unfortunately, that's not necessarily true. There are many ways to hide nude photos. One way is through apps like [Calculator%](#), which appears to be a calculator, but is actually a secret vault of files that can only be accessed via a secret code. Also, photos can be taken, sent, and deleted immediately to hide one's tracks. Or, as seen above, they could be sending sexts via messaging apps of which you're not aware or sending “coded” messages via emojis.

— If my child isn't sexting, do I really need to talk about it?

Not addressing it is an option, but it may not be the wisest choice. Even if your child hasn't sexted, the pressure to do so will only become greater over time. If you don't equip them with the tools they need to be wise and make good decisions ahead of time, how will they know what to do when confronted with the pressure to sext?

— So how do I address this with my child(ren)?

Deep Breaths. Whether you've discovered your child is already sexting or whether it just makes you angry to know that sexting and the pressure to do so is a thing, reacting out of elevated emotion can frustrate and alienate your child. Don't deal with the issue until you've had time to calm down.

Perspective. If your child has been sexting, let us reassure you: You're not a bad parent! Whatever guilt, shame, anger, sadness, frustration, or defeat you're feeling is real—but it's also not true. Your child could have been raised flawlessly but still make this choice because he/she is an autonomous individual. So rather than letting it discourage you, be encouraged! You have a beautiful opportunity to tell your story, admit what you've pursued in the past that was not fulfilling, and bring your child into a deeper understanding of and relationship with the Lord because of this situation.

Something Better. Realize that, more than anything else, the underlying issue is the fact that teens' imaginations have been hijacked to believe that sexting will fulfill them more deeply than following God's plan for sex, sexuality, and beauty. *So rather than coming down on them, we need to offer them a better story to live into.* If we don't do that, they may demonstrate a change in behavior for a time, but because they still believe that something is better than God's best for them, eventually they'll pursue another harmful behavior in search of fulfillment. We can offer that better story by explaining why God set things up the way He did and how it leads to true, lifelong fulfillment. We also need to explain (and model) what true fulfillment looks like.

Questions. If your child has been caught or confessed to sexting, take some time to ask questions before rendering judgment and/or discipline. Why were they sexting? How did it make them feel? Had they considered the consequences? Would they do it again? Why or why not? Often, asking questions will help you see where their hearts are and potentially even help them to decide for themselves that they shouldn't keep sexting.

Boundaries. There should be consequences. Being an adult means we learn to deal with consequences, not avoid them. So sheltering children from all consequences only keeps them from learning the skills necessary to become well-adjusted Christ-followers. But that doesn't mean these consequences should be punitive or come from a place of anger. Instead, calmly explain to your child why he is having privileges revoked, tell him that it hurts you to have to do it, and offer a vision of what you hope for for him in the future. Then clearly outline the steps he will have to take in order to regain and retain privileges, making sure he knows the stakes are higher—both in terms of privileges and self-damage—if the sexting continues.

Accountability. Work with other adults you trust to create a system of accountability for the whole family, not just for your children. Your kids will be much more willing to submit to accountability if they see you doing the same. Sometimes, our kids have good hearts and great intentions, but when the temptation becomes overwhelming, they need someone fighting with and for them. A robust accountability process can provide someone they trust to go to when they're too ashamed to admit their struggles to you.

— When should I address it with my kids?

This is where your discernment and your children's level of access to technology comes into play. But just like we wouldn't send our kids into a basketball game without training and

coaching them first, we also shouldn't send them into the technological/online arena without the training, coaching, and tools they need to make wise choices. So if you decide to allow your kids access to a family computer or tablet at a young age, implement Parental Controls while also having constant conversations with them about the power and risks of technology. If you get your child a smartphone so you can keep in touch with him/her, be smart about the Parental Controls you implement, but never let them be a substitute for discussion, training, and accountability.

— **What if I've done everything I can, but my kid still won't stop sexting?!**

God is bigger than this issue, despite the exasperation and frustration and helplessness you're feeling. And even though being constantly on your knees asking God to deliver them from this sin may not feel like you're doing much, it is the most powerful thing you can do for your child's heart. Never stop asking the God who created your child to bring him/her in a deeper relationship with Him. Ask God to help you catch your child in the act. Ask Him to give you wisdom and discernment to know when to discipline and when to simply love. And ask Him to give you the peace to trust that He is at work and that He works all things [for the good of those who love Him](#).

— **How can I start discipling my younger kids to not even be tempted by sexting?**

A huge part of the reason sexting has become normal is because of the double standard our culture has when it comes to sex. Guys are supposed to fit into a certain mold of manliness, one that involves being the toughest, coolest, most aggressive, most successful, and most virile. As part of that, it's expected that guys will have an unrelenting sexual desire that they should indulge however they please—as long as it's not hurting anyone else. Though God designed both men and women to be sexual, this over-the-top, insatiable version of male sexuality is a far cry from God's perfect plan for sexual fulfillment.

So why do teen boys fall for it? There are a variety of reasons, but the one that's important to us is the fact that culture typically speaks louder, more often, and more persuasively than the Body of Christ does. For whatever reason, sex has been taboo in Christian circles, something we only talk about once with our kids (e.g. "The birds and the bees" talk), unless of course we're telling them to wait until they're married to have sex. But the "discussion" is often one-sided, brief, way too late, and incomplete, not allowing teens to ask questions or be honest.

The other side of the double standard regarding sexuality is that women are taught to find their value and identity in their sexuality, appearance, and ability to please a man. Thus, they're told an unbiblical narrative day in and day out about how to find fulfillment. No wonder young girls want to feel validated by being asked for nude photos. Yes, God designed women to be feminine, beautiful, and sexual, but not in such a way that their identity and self-worth comes from it. Women are also taught that finding their "soulmate" or "The One" is the ultimate goal in life, so finding that kind of earth-shattering love becomes first and foremost in their minds, which makes them willing to do almost anything to get it.

We have to start discussing sex and all related things (porn, sexting, femininity, masculinity, etc.) with them at much younger ages. Shying away from it because it's uncomfortable or weird is easier for us, but terrible for them. We have to teach them about true masculinity, true femininity, and true fulfillment starting at young ages so that can see temptation for what it is when they're older. Here are some thoughts to help guide your conversations:

- Where *should* we find our fulfillment? Does that seem fulfilling to you? Why or why not?
- We can tell where we actually find our fulfillment by looking at what we hope and dream for and what we spend our time on/with. What are those things for you? Why do they seem so fulfilling?
- God's plan for us is the best plan possible, but sometimes it seems like other things are better. Why?
- Culture is constantly bombarding us with the idea that we need to indulge our desires. Why? So why does God say the opposite?
- All our actions have consequences, some we may never see. How is sexting impacting the way we look at others? The way we treat them? The way we think about them?
- What does it mean to be biblically masculine/feminine? How is that different from what the world says?

But remember, your child will never want to talk to you about difficult topics or confess her struggles unless you have made it very clear (through words and actions) that you are a safe person to talk to.

And don't forget to pray fervently for your children's hearts! They are, after all, independent beings who make their own choices. And sometimes we can do everything right, but they will still choose to do things that hurt them. (Or the opposite: We could do everything wrong, and they might still choose to honor God in everything they do!) But our most powerful ally in this fight for our children's hearts is Christ Himself.

— Anything else I should know?

One of the major consequences of sexting that most tweens and teens don't consider is having their messages and photos shared with someone besides the intended recipient. There are many stories of girls who turn to self-harm and suicide after their reputations were destroyed by boys sharing their sexts with others, like this one of a [13-year-old girl in 7th grade](#). In fact, [39% of teen boys and 38% of teen girls](#) say they've seen sexually suggestive messages that were *originally meant for someone else*.

— The Bottom Line

No child—no matter how good, innocent, smart, tenacious, sweet, strong, or obedient he/she is—is immune to the pressures and allure of sexting. There are countless stories of tweens and teens that no one would ever suspect getting caught up in sexting scandals. So, as the saying goes, the best defense is a good offense.

Rather than waiting until your child is in trouble, make sure your children know that you are a safe haven and that they can talk to you about anything. Also, initiate the conversation about sexting, its underlying attractions, its risks and dangers, and most of all, how it is simply

not part of God's best for us. When we remove the veil and demonstrate how sexting, despite its promises of satisfaction and fulfillment, actually leaves us emptier and less satisfied than before, that's when our children will begin to understand. We can continue to tell them not to do it because it's wrong or because it could get them into legal trouble or "because we said so," but how it makes them feel and its perceived benefits will win every time.

Remember, the ultimate goal in discipleship is to help others desire what Christ wants for them with every fiber of their being. We do that not by addressing the behavior, but by addressing the underlying heart issues through loving, honest conversations.

— Other Resources

[Bark](#), an app for tracking texting and social media activity

[Circle](#), a device that helps put healthy boundaries on device activity

[Qustudio](#), an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

[Screentime](#), an app for tracking and limiting time spent online

[Connect Safely](#) website

[Protect Young Minds](#) website

[Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey](#)

[The Online Mom](#) website

[U Know Kids](#) website

[How to Set Up Screen Time Limits on an Xbox One](#)

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