



# Sexting , Social Networking , & Cyberbullying

## Sexting

### Definition & Background

“Sexting” is a relatively new term used for the act of sending a sexually suggestive or explicit text message (AKA texting, SMS, MMS) to someone else. In most instances, the intended recipient is a current or prospective boyfriend or girlfriend. These messages may vary from simple text, to photos, or even short videos sent from a mobile phone to either another phone and/or email account.

References to sexting in mainstream society only date back to 2006. It is a newer concept that appears to be directly correlated with the emergence of faster mobile networks, more sophisticated phones (with photo and video cameras and different messaging options), and the increasing availability of these networks and devices to teens.

### Sexting Statistics

Like many emerging threats to online safety and child safety, reports vary about the proliferation and severity of texting. However, it is hard to dispute that the problem exists and that the consequences can be dangerous. A report done by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in 2008 surveyed 1,280 teens and young adults. Their research found that 75% of teens and 71% of young adults believe that sending sexually suggestive content “can have serious negative consequences.” Despite that, 39% of teens and 59% of young adults have sent or posted sexually suggestive emails or text messages, and 20% of teens and 33% of young adults have sent/posted nude or semi-nude images of themselves. Perhaps more disturbing was the study’s finding that ~38% teens and ~46% of young adults say it is common for nude or semi-nude photos to get shared with people other than the intended recipient.

### Similarities & Differences to Offline Behaviour

A common thread in many threats facing online teens these days is that the behaviours creating the threats are not new, but the manner in which these behaviours are manifested are. While a precocious teen in the 1980s might have sent a provocative note or photograph to their boyfriend or girlfriend, today’s teen uses mobile devices, social networks, and email to share such content.

These channels make it easy to share, reproduce, and forward such content to unintended recipients. Even worse, unlike their counterpart of 20 years ago, today's teen must cope with the fact that behaviours such as sexting can not only have serious safety and legal repercussions, but may also leave a permanent record.

### **Harmful Effects**

A shared sexting message could have disastrous consequences. For starters, the impact of such content getting "leaked" could result in social isolation from friends, bullying, and unwelcome sexual solicitations. Further, in cases where such content might have been shared as the result of revenge, it could certainly lead to violence. Aside from issues reputation and social issues, sending, receiving, and/or sharing this type of content could lead to disciplinary action by schools, employers, and possibly even state and federal law enforcement. Most importantly, what might start out as a fleeting and thoughtless lapse of judgement could lead to serious emotional and self-esteem issues for any child or young adult.

### **Recognizing if Sexting has become a problem with your teen**

Short of concrete evidence (or concerns voiced by your teen, their friends, their teachers, or law enforcement officials), the best way of recognizing any problems with your child is to communicate with them. Knowing what your child is up to and paying attention to their moods and behaviour is essential. A parent can usually tell ("sense") when something is amiss. If the lines of communication are already open, then exploring what may be wrong will be an easier conversation. Some common signs might include mood swings, changes in weight and appetite, lapses in personal hygiene, or a new found fascination with morbid or offbeat topics or entertainment. These, of course, are common examples, but each child may react differently. Just remember that communication with your child is essential and can help prevent a potential problem or mitigate the damage of a problem that has already started.

### **What to do if you discover your child is involved in a situation involving sexting...**

While it is often easier said than done, controlling your emotions is essential. While situations involving sexting can vary tremendously in terms of the harm that they can cause, it is hard to imagine a scenario where a parent would not be very upset to learn of their child's involvement in such a case. Despite a parent's anger, fear, concern (or all of the above), remember that communication will be required in order to address the issue. If a child feels further threatened or isolated by their parents in such a situation, they may be much less likely to share further details about the situation out of fear of further reprisal.

In any situation that presents a potential threat to the safety and health of anyone involved, a parent should immediately contact the appropriate medical and law enforcement officials in their area. If the nature of the threat is less severe, then recruiting the support of key advisors, family members, friends, coaches, teachers, etc. might be a good place to start. Also, depending on the situation, you might find it appropriate to discuss the situation with any other parents or parties involved.

Again, it is imperative to understand that you are the parent and that this is a time when your child will be coming to you for guidance and support. Whether your child is the victim or the victimizer, it is incumbent on you to communicate with your child, assess the situation, and select

a course of action that mitigates the potential for immediate and long-term damage to the safety and well-being of all parties involved.

### **Laws that Help**

Because technology tends to move faster than the laws that govern it, there has not been a lot of legal precedent set in this area as of late 2009. Further, and as you might expect, local laws vary greatly depending on the social and political culture of a given geography or state. For example, Vermont lawmakers recently introduced a bill that legalized the consensual exchange of graphic content between teens aged 13-18. However, they made it illegal to share such content with an unintended recipient. In Ohio, a new law was recently proposed that would reduce sexting-related crimes from a felony charge to a misdemeanor. This would prevent teens from potentially being labeled "sex offenders". Like Ohio, Utah also recently reduced such crimes to a misdemeanor.

## Social Networking

### **Definition & Background**

The Internet makes information easily transmittable amongst both strangers and acquaintances for business, educational, and social purposes. In the earliest days of the Internet, affinity groups quickly formed around common interests; the ability to communicate with others in the group was made possible through message boards, chat rooms, and newsletters.

Soon after, Social Networks (many consider Friendster to be the original) were created to enable real life friends to share information and interact on the Internet, and potentially to expand personal networks through mutual friends. However, the need for actual friendship or even a common friend was soon trumped by the perceived prestige of having a large online community, resulting in the tendency for people to become "friends" with people they had never met.

The term Online Friends can be used to describe the presence of a real life friend in one's virtual (online) community, or to describe people who interact online but who may not have met in person. It's common for social networking sites to facilitate "friending" – the act of becoming part of one's online network – through searches or browsing of other community members. While most social networking websites require that online friendships be mutually agreed upon – that is, the sites are set up so that one person requests the friendship and the other approves it – it is not uncommon to receive friend requests from complete strangers.

It is possible that Online Friends never interact, as having the illusion of a large friend network is all that some people seek. However, that does not necessarily mean it's a harmless situation. When people allow others into their online community, they are giving them access to personal information which may include photos, videos, schools, hobbies and details such as their address or phone number. With all of this information, an immoral person would be armed to do tremendous harm.

A reference to one's Online Friend can represent a variety of realities:

"Suzy from school is my friend on facebook."

- “ilovebacon2 is my friend from the online game site; we’ve never met in person but „talk“ and play cards every week.”
- “I received four friend requests today from people I’ve never met.”

It is wise to not make assumptions that Online Friends are all good or all bad. If you are curious about the origin of your child’s online friendship, it is best to ask.

### **Data & Research**

As participation in online communities has become more common, so has contact and solicitation by strangers. The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and Cox Communications reported that over 60% of teens had established a presence on social networking web pages where they shared photos and personal information. While these actions may seem harmless in a secure environment, the following statistics reveal that security and privacy are not the status quo.

- 71% of respondents reported receiving messages online from someone they didn’t know
- 45% of respondents have been asked for personal information by someone they didn’t know
- 30% of respondents have considered meeting someone that they’ve only talked to online
- 14% of respondents have actually met a person they’ve only spoken to over the Internet (9% of 13-15s; 22% of 16-17s)
- Nearly half of respondents who received online messages from someone they didn’t know, reported that they’ll usually reply and chat with that person.

### **Surprising Differences to Offline Behaviour**

Even prior to the Internet it was observed that people feel safer using written messages than they do using the telephone or speaking in person. Studies have shown that people are more willing to type secrets into a computer than they are to tell them out-loud to somebody. This sentiment – and practice – has become more prevalent as communicating through the Internet has replaced interpersonal interaction. In a study of 16,000 MySpace users between the ages of 14 and 21, over a third of respondents revealed that they find it easier to talk to online buddies than to people out in the “real world”. Respondents reported feeling closer to their Online Friends than offline ones, since they had much more frequent contact and more insight into each other’s lives. Thus, it can be extrapolated that the ease of sharing information enabled by technology, and the candor generated by using the Internet as a medium, results in people sharing more with an Online Friend who they don’t know well than they would if they interacted with this individual in person.

While this would not be a problem if one’s online friends were in fact people they knew outside the Internet, we know this is not the case. Even more harmful is the fact that the sharing of personal information can be further exaggerated with Online Friends who began as online strangers. While there may be a sense of friendship or trust with one’s new Online Friend, the use of written communication, and the fact that they have not met in person act as a „protective“ shield, opening the door for more candid dialogue. It is through this frank dialogue that strangers can extract personal information from an unwitting new Online Friend.

## **Harmful Effects**

While the practice of engaging in and maintaining friendships online shouldn't yield harm, the reality can be much different. Firstly, even if one only engages with "real world" friends, simply having a presence on these Online Social Networking sites puts their personal information on the Internet. While one can try to control the information they share with others, they cannot control information or potentially damaging content such as photos or videos posted to the Internet by other people. Additionally, the ability to „tag“ content – to label it with the names of the individuals in it – can draw a straight line back to an individual. It can sometimes seem impossible to prevent others from sharing one's name or image.

It has also been widely argued that the rampant use of technology as a communication medium between friends is resulting in poor interpersonal skills and less developed writing skills.

## **Helping Children Manage Their Online Friends**

**It would be nearly impossible (and ill-advised) to try and keep your child off of Social Networking sites (or anything similar that may emerge) and to prevent them from interacting with their friends through the Internet. Therefore, educating your child about potential risks, and how to safely manage their online image and privacy, seems to be the better approach. The following recommended steps can help with keeping your children safe online:**

- Speak with your child and find out which Social Networks they are part of, or want to be part of.**
- Find out which Social Networks their friends are part of.**
- Ask them who their Online Friends are, and how they know them.**
- Ask if you might be part of their Online Network. In addition to giving you first-hand insight into the information they are posting about themselves and information and content posted by others, you will be able to understand the dynamics of the particular site and to see how common it is to be contacted by strangers online.**
- With younger children – particularly ones who are curious to begin interacting with their friends online – you may require that they let you co-manage their Online Network and consult with you prior to adding new friends to their network.**
- Remind your children that they cannot fully control their online image, but they can take preventative steps by controlling who they directly share information with.**
- Help your children navigate the security settings on their Social Networks, and encourage them to minimize the amount of information they make publicly available.**
- Advise your children to not enter chat rooms, or to engage in any conversations over the Internet with people they don't know, regardless of how harmless it might seem.**

## **Definition & Background**

Video sharing is the act of recording video and uploading it on a website that allows others to view it. Video may also be shared by sending it to others via email or mobile phone.

## **Popular Uses and Applications of Video Sharing**

Video hosting websites have enabled organizations like non-profits and educational institutions spread the word of their missions and gain momentum to support some very worthy causes. It allows people to easily distribute their message to a large audience and adds a personal touch while saving both time and money.

Sharing videos for social purposes has proven to be as popular, if not more popular than sharing videos for business purposes. Individuals may upload videos for reasons ranging from voicing their opinions on a vlog (video blog) to sharing the personal statement section of their college entrance application to showcasing a talent.

## **Data and Research**

Over the last five years, there has been extensive research about the uses of video sharing on websites and mobile phones among different demographic groups. A study released in April, 2010 about sharing videos via mobile phones shows “an interesting counter-trend, with more 12-13 year-olds sending/receiving video than those 14 and older (41% vs. 27%).”<sup>1</sup> The graph below summarizes the full spectrum of photo and video usage for mobile phones:

The comfort level and higher frequency of sending and receiving video can be a cause for alarm to parents, and should be. The content and subject matter of their videos is most likely harmless – forwarding popular funny videos from the Internet, like the sneezing panda. Many parents are concerned about how easy it is for their children to acquire and/or use video technology. Webcams are affordable and easily accessible, and many laptops on the market today come equipped with a built-in webcam.

## **Harmful Effects?**

Technological advances have allowed the average consumer to acquire discreet video recording devices, and the proliferation of video capabilities on laptops (webcams and built-in webcams on laptops) and mobile phones means that anyone of our children – or anyone of us for that matter – could potentially be recorded on video at anytime without our knowledge. With children in particular, a silly moment at a party during which they may exercise bad judgment (or no judgment) may be caught on camera by a friend and live forever on video. One child may send the silly video to another on a mobile phone, or by email, and if interest is high enough, a video can go „viral“ within hours and cause potential emotional scarring for the subject of the video. The fact that “57% of [adult] internet users have watched videos online and most of them share what they watch with others,”<sup>2</sup> shows an increasing trend that a video posted or shared will not only be viewed, but passed along to others.

An issue that is just as plausible as a child being videotaped without their knowledge is the child who purposefully creates their own video and sends it to *one* person. In this case, the most frequent cause for concern is if they are in a relationship, and an intimate video is created to share with their mate. The danger in this situation is when the two break-up, and if it is an unpleasant parting, one half of the couple has fuel to embarrass the other. Unfortunately, the likelihood of this scenario is more and more likely, as according to a survey conducted by The National Campaign, “22% of teen girls and 18% of teen boys have sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves.”<sup>3</sup> Another popular scenario becoming more common-place is that of teens

„sexting“ – sending sexually explicit text messages, or partial or fully nude pictures of themselves – to someone as a way to flirt.

The creation of user-generated videos and sending or posting such private content is treated different generationally.<sup>4</sup> An article published by CNET News describes the „Naked Generation“, and the ease with which twenty-somethings post personal information about themselves, their relationships, and their partners. They are a generation living online. Our children witness the actions of the generation just preceding theirs and are desensitized to „private“ information being shared publicly, and further blur the line themselves. The consequences of actions taken in a passionate moment are not considered until it is too late.

The effects on an individual as the result of a video being distributed without permission can be devastating, far-reaching and long lasting. Obvious immediate effects are loss of self-esteem, embarrassment, loss of friends and social alienation, which can lead to depression and other emotional issues. Longer-lasting effects can range from losing candidacy for a job or becoming ineligible to matriculate at an institute of higher learning. In a nutshell, some of life’s milestone moments for a young adult may be ruined because of a decision they made as a young child or teen.

### **Another Pitfall to Consider about Children and Video Sharing**

It is important to speak to your child about the responsible use of video on their mobile phones and email accounts. Some states have amended laws about distribution of child pornography to include forwarding video via mobile phone and electronic mail, or sexting. Some states are charging participants with felony counts and they are required to register on the sex offender list, which can affect them for life. In some cases, it is not clear if the age of the distributor is taken into consideration. Parents should take every opportunity to speak to their children and educate them about this danger. Discuss this issue on the SafetyWeb blog here. If your child receives a video that shows partial or full nudity of one of their classmates or friends, they should delete it immediately and never forward it to anyone else.

### **Know Your Video Sites – - and Their Terms of Service**

There is a proliferation of video sharing sites on the Internet. Because the sites have different offerings and goals, the terms of service for the sites vary. Some of the most popular sites include: Photobucket, Flickr, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Yahoo! Video, Google Video, Metacafe, Revver and Blip.tv.

A few bloggers have explored the differences between some of the terms of so that users have a better understanding of important issues like intellectual property, and privacy rights. A brief article comparing terms of service agreements for several different video-hosting sites can be read by clicking here. Wikipedia also has a page called Comparison of Video Services which offers a very inclusive list of video hosting sites, and some profile information about those sites, including their terms of service.

### **Ways You Can Help**

Opening up the lines of communication and talking to your child is the best way to prepare them to use video technology responsibly. Teach your child that if they feel uncomfortable posing for a photo or video, it probably isn’t the best thing to do, and that they can stop at any time. Tell them

it is okay to ask you if they receive a message and they are unsure if it is a „good“ message or a „bad“ message. Spend time with your child so that they are able develop their own judgment and readily identify good and bad images and videos. Teach them to trust their judgment, delete the bad images, and tell you if they are really offensive or potentially dangerous.

# Cyberbullying

## Definition & Background

Cyberbullying simply refers to the act of bullying online. This type of bullying can consist of any of the following actions committed by an individual or group to another individual or group:

- Threats of violence
- Hate speech
- Harassment
- Peer pressure
- Bribery
- Psychological abuse
- Extortion

Further, these offenses are often committed by people impersonating someone else, anonymously, or under the guise of a group, making accountability and preventability difficult.

The definition of cyberbullying has broadened over the years since it has expanded to include any number of internet connected devices, web sites, behaviours, victims, and victimizers. For example, in its earliest incarnations, cyberbullying mostly consisted of one person or small group of people attacking each other via an internet-enabled desktop computer. These earlier offenses, while certainly harmful, had some limitations in the amount of damage they could cause because:

- Most computer usage was still limited to desktop computers
- Broadband internet connectivity was more limited
- Most mobile devices were not equipped with cameras and/or data services
- Social Networks were not mainstream

Given these constraints, you did not hear about it as much as it was generally less frequent, and was usually confined to smaller groups.

Today, things are different. Most homes and schools have broadband connectivity, portable Internet enabled computers and devices prevail, most mobile phones have photo, video, and data services, and socializing online has long hit mainstream. Given the pervasiveness and social acceptance of these technologies, it has become very easy for one person to not only capture and share information easily, but for that information to spread almost instantly.



## **Cyber bullying Facts**

The cyber bullying statistics can be quite daunting. For example, a study done by isafe.org on 1,500 students grades 4-8 found the following:

- 42% of kids have been bullied while online. 1 in 4 have had it happen more than once.
- 35% of kids have been threatened online. Nearly 1 in 5 have had it happen more than once.
- 21% of kids have received mean or threatening e-mail or other messages.
- 58% of kids admit someone has said mean or hurtful things to them online. More than 4 out of 10 say it has happened more than once.
- 53% of kids admit having said something mean or hurtful to another person online. More than 1 in 3 have done it more than once.
- 58% have not told their parents or an adult about something mean or hurtful that happened to them online.

So what does this mean for the victims? A recent survey conducted by Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin at cyberbullying.us yielded the following results:

“Looking at the most recent victims of cyberbullying, both boys and girls are likely to report feeling angry, sad, and embarrassed. Slightly more girls than boys feel frustrated, while significantly more boys are scared as a result of cyberbullying.”

## **Similarities and Differences to Offline Behaviour**

Cyberbullying varies dramatically from offline bullying in many ways. For starters, the torment is no longer limited to face-to-face interactions in a controlled environment. It now carries over from the schoolyard, to the home, and the entire online community. Also, as mentioned above, bullies can come in all shapes and sizes, with either known or unknown identities. No longer is it about the one big bully picking on the smaller kid in the schoolyard. Anyone with an Internet connection of any kind can bully almost anyone else. Further, not only is cyberbullying more difficult to prevent, it can spread very quickly and leave a permanent online trail that can have devastating long-term consequences for both the bullied and the bully.

## **Harmful Effects**

The effects of cyberbullying can hurt and hurt quickly. There have been numerous stories in the news of children, teens, and young adults who have been driven to suicide or violent crime as a result of being bullied online. While these tend to be the more extreme cases, cyberbullying can have a serious detrimental effect on a victim's self-

esteem, emotional well-being, and sense of personal safety. As a result, this can often lead to any number of further negative consequences including, but not limited to depression, despondence, self-destructive behaviour and poor performance in school or work just to name a few.

## **Recognizing if Cyberbullying is a problem with your Child and How to Stop Cyberbullying**

Parents and teachers are best equipped to recognize changes in behaviour that might be the result of cyberbullying. Communication with your child, his/her teachers, coaches, and friends is a must. Also, being “friends” with your child online and understanding how they “live” online as well as offline will not only help you to stay informed, but can also let your child know that you are there. Opinions vary greatly on this issue, and certainly vary based on the age of the child in question. Whether you do or don’t become online friends with your child, a discussion with your child about it can’t hurt.

### **What to do if you discover your child is involved in a situation involving Cyberbullying...**

Talk to your child, make sure they are OK, and make sure they know you are on their side. Some children can be embarrassed or ashamed of the situation they might find themselves in. It is important to have an open dialogue with them.

Next, if the offenses are serious enough, you should consider contacting your child’s school and/or your local law enforcement agency. Just because it happens online, you should not take these offenses lightly. Also, be sure to NOT erase any traces of what you find online as these traces (e.g. comments, messages, photos, etc.) can help in taking action against a cyberbully.

Finally, contact the web site(s), social networks, or mobile phone providers that might have been used as a platform for these offenses. They most often take these offenses seriously and are willing to help stop and prevent these behaviours.

### **External Resources**

- <http://www.connectsafely.org/Safety-Tips/tips-to-help-stop-cyberbullying.html>
- <http://www.isafe.org>
- <http://www.cyberbullying.us>
- <http://netfamilynews.org>
- <http://www.ncpc.org/cyberbullying>