



'Sexting' Teens Can Go Too Far

Sending Provocative Images Over Cell Phones Is All the Rage, but It Can Go All Wrong

By GIGI STONE

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What happened to the time when if you liked a boy at school you'd pass him a note?

These days the disturbing new trend in teenage flirting is sending nude or semi-nude photos from cell phone to cell phone: instead of "texting," they call it called "sexting."

While the X-rated offerings are usually intended just for a boyfriend or girlfriend, the photos often wind up being shared.

While 17-year-old Matthew Younger of Maryland says he has never done anything like this himself, he has seen it happen among his peers.

"If a boy meets a girl or has a girlfriend on summer break he comes back and shows all his boys the [naked] pictures he's been sent. No one gives it that much thought really," says Younger.

The dangerous combination of teenagers behaving provocatively and impulsively is not new, but the accessibility to the technology is. With cell phone cameras, they have been handed a tool so easy to use for some it's impossible to pass up.

And in the transparent culture built around social networking sites, it all spreads like wildfire.

"Somebody might send it to somebody else's phone and that person has Facebook on the their phone and they automatically upload it to their Facebook or MySpace page," explains Somalia Yaborow, 16, of Alexandria, Va.

What teens don't realize is just how serious the consequences can be.

News reports are increasingly documenting legal repercussions after indecent photo appear online. And attorneys say there are many unanswered questions about whether young people who send their own photos could face prosecution for obscenity or child pornography.

This year in Wisconsin, a 17-year-old was charged with possessing child pornography after he posted naked pictures of his 16-year-old ex-girlfriend online.

In Alabama, authorities arrested four middle-school students for exchanging nude photos of themselves. In Rochester, N.Y., a 16-year-old boy is now facing up to seven years in prison for forwarding a nude photo of a 15-year-old girlfriend to his friends.

"I don't think that's what was contemplated when the laws were written, says the Rochester teen's attorney, Tom Splain, who has worked on several similar cases this year. "I think it was more for the older pedophile collecting pictures of young children; we're now running into high school students getting swept up in these charges."

The nonprofit National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has been researching the issue.

Director Marisa Nightingale says it's crucial parents talk to their children about potential consequences, because while criminal charges are rare, compromising photos could easily come back to haunt the teens when they go to apply for college or their first job.

"Even if it doesn't result in something official, they can get really humiliated and find something they thought was a joke can become something that haunts them for years," says Nightingale.

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Teens caught 'sexting' face porn charges

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

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A growing number of teens are ending up in serious trouble for sending racy photos with their cellphones.

Police have investigated more than two dozen teens in at least six states this year for sending nude images of themselves in cellphone text messages, which can bring a charge of distributing child pornography. Authorities typically are notified by parents or schools about so-called "sexting."

This week in Spotsylvania, Va., two boys, ages 15 and 18, were charged with solicitation and possession of child porn with intent to distribute after an investigation found they sought nude pictures from three juveniles
□ one in elementary school.

"It's absolutely becoming a bigger problem," says Michelle Collins of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

Of the 2,100 children the center has identified as victims of online porn, she says, one-fourth initially sent the images themselves.

She says some did it for fun and others were tricked into it by adults they met online.

"They may not realize the danger they are exposing themselves to," says William Shaw, district attorney for Clearfield County, Pa. "When they put it online, they lose control."

Last month, Shaw filed a juvenile petition against a 15-year-old girl for sending nude photos of herself over the Internet. He says his objective isn't to jail her but to get her counseling or other help. The 27-year-old man who enticed her to do it has been sentenced to 10 years for having sex with her.

Lawmakers are debating penalties. On Wednesday, the Utah Legislature passed lighter penalties, from a felony to a misdemeanor, for sexting.

In Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Juvenile Court Judge Thomas O'Malley struggled to figure out what to do with eight teens, 14 to 17, caught trading nude cellphone pictures of themselves. He says the father of one of the girls found the images.

If the 17-year-old who sent the nude photos to an ex-boyfriend were convicted of a child-porn charge, he says, she would be a registered sex offender for 20 years.

"These kids have no record, not even a parking ticket," says O'Malley, a father of four teens.

He required each to do community service and to ask peers if they knew sexting was a crime. They told O'Malley they surveyed 225 teens; 31 knew.

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