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Adolescent Sexting – Myths, Facts, and Advice

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Abstract:

Adolescent sexting remains an important public health issue because of the potential for psychosocial and legal consequences. This article briefly reviews the current state of the science of adolescent sexting research. It serves an up-to-date and data-driven resource to school nurses and school staff to help augment understanding and facilitate discussion regarding teen sexting. The review is structured along popular myths about sexting.

Article text:

Approximately 95% of teens owned mobile phones in 2018 and half of American teenagers are “almost constantly online” (Pew Research Center, 2018). The rapid rise and accessibility of digital media has changed several aspects of adolescent life during a crucial time in development, including their intimate relationships and their exploration of sexuality. In a positive way, social media can empower adolescents to experiment with self-presentation, identity construction, and the development and maintenance of relationships (Baker & Carreño, 2016). Sexting, the sending of self-made sexually explicit images, is one of the new ways through which adolescents use digital media to experiment with their romantic relationships and sexuality (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2018a).

For many adolescents, engagement in sexting might never lead to any negative consequences. However, sexting can carry certain risks, especially when a sexually explicit text, image, or video is shared beyond the intended audience, or is used to extort an individual. With respect to this latter point, a perpetrator could use the sexted material as a way to blackmail the creator into sending additional images or to coerce into sexual contact in real life (Van Ouytsel,

Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2017). Images forwarded beyond the intended recipient may lead to bullying victimization (e.g., name-calling), and can damage the victim's reputation psychological well-being, as well as negatively affect their perception of school safety (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015; Wachs & Wolf, 2015). A single incident could therefore have a significant long-lasting impact on individual students and the school. Additionally, some teens report being pressured or harassed into sending sexually explicit pictures of themselves (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Given the potential psychosocial risks associated with sexting, scholarly and public concern about this behavior has rapidly increased.

A sizeable minority of teenagers are engaging in sexting. For example, a study in Pennsylvania found that 29% of students sent or received a sexting image in the 30 days prior to the study (Frankel, Bass, Patterson, Dai, & Brown, 2018). In one school in the Midwest, 28.7% reported sending sexually explicit pictures through their cell phones (Gregg, Somers, Pernice, Hillman, & Kernsmith, 2018), and in southeast Texas 27.6% reported they were sending sexts (Temple et al., 2012). A recent meta-analysis of 39 studies and over 110,000 teens found that worldwide, 14.8% of teenagers between 12 and 17 years old have sent a sext and 27.8% have received them (Madigan, Ly et al, 2018). These findings suggest that 1 in 7 and 1 in 4 teens are sending and received sexts, respectively. That fewer adolescents report sending sexts than receiving could be explained by the 1) fact that some teenagers might send images to multiple recipients; 2) possibility that those who received an image might decide not to send one back; and 3) the likelihood that youth might underreport their engagement in sending and feel more comfortable reporting having received an image (Klettke, Hallford, & Mellor, 2014). Importantly, the meta-analysis further revealed that approximately 12% of teens forwarded sexts without the

consent of the original sender (Madigan, Ly et al., 2018). These statistics indicate that sexting has become a part of teenagers' everyday lives and that most are confronted in some way with sexting, even if they are not actively sexting themselves.

During adolescence, teenagers start to develop their sexual self-concept (Thomas, 2018). From a developmental perspective, adolescents' engagement in sexting can therefore be understood as a way to experiment with their sexuality and sexual behaviors. Additionally, adolescents are more inclined to engage in risky behaviors and are less inclined to evaluate the potential risks of these behaviors. They may also be less concerned about long-term consequences in favor of short term rewards (Steinberg, 2011). Studies have found that sexting is cross-sectionally associated with impulsivity (Temple et al., 2014) and sensation seeking (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014). As peer group norms become more important to adolescents, they are more influenced by peer pressure, which may make them more likely to engage in risk behaviors such as the sending of sexually explicit photographs (Van Gool, Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2015). Indeed, several studies have found that youth who engage in sexting are more likely to perceive that their friends approve of sexting (Houck et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, Walrave, & d'Haenens, 2017; Walrave et al. 2015).

When a sexting incident occurs within a school setting or if students ask for advice on sexting, a thorough understanding of this behavior is essential for effective guidance (Diliberto & Matthey, 2009). The aim of our article is, therefore, to briefly review the current state of the science of adolescent sexting research and to provide an up-to-date and data-driven resource to school nurses and staff to help augment understanding and facilitate discussion regarding teen sexting. We have structured our review of the literature along four popular sexting myths that we often

encounter when visiting schools, talking to health practitioners and parents, or reading media headlines.

Myth 1: The prevalence of sexting is drastically on the rise

An often heard concern is that teen sexting is on the rise. A review of published research on sexting in Web of Science yielded only one meta-analysis that directly addressed this question and found that the rate of sending a sext does appear to be increasing over time, at a rate of 2.6% between the years 2009 to 2016 (Madigan et al., 2018). Although speculative, this increase corresponds with the rapid rise in ownership of smartphone devices among adolescents during this same time period. As mentioned above, 95% of American teenagers owned a smartphone in 2018, as compared to 73% in 2015 and 47% in 2013 (Pew Research Center, 2013, 2015, 2018). As opposed to other devices, such as laptops or tablets, smartphones typically do not have to be shared with other family members. They can be easily taken into the bedroom or other private spaces and are therefore less easy to monitor by parents (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, et al., 2017). Qualitative research has found that smartphone applications such as Snapchat, provide teenagers with a purported sense of privacy, which makes it a popular medium to engage in sexting. For instance, Snapchat allows users to set a time after which their messages and pictures disappear, contributing to the perception of adolescents that they have more control over their images. A focus group study by Van Ouytsel, Van Gool et al. (2017) found that adolescents were usually aware that screenshots can be taken of these images, but that they regarded Snapchat as the safest available way to engage in sexting. Digital media also contain certain characteristics that make it easier to disclose intimate information, such as sexting images (i.e., the online disinhibition effect). The fact that the communication partners are invisible and that their reactions cannot be immediately seen, might

make it easier for some adolescents to send a sexually explicit image. Moreover, the asynchronic nature of digital communication allows users to log out or walk away from the device, allowing them to be confronted with a response at their own time (Suler, 2004). Because of these characteristics, digital media might allow adolescents to express their sexual preferences more easily than in an in-person setting (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool et al., 2017). Indeed, youth who experience difficulties in expressing their emotions have been shown to be more likely to engage in sexting (Houck et al., 2014). A rise in rates of self-reported sexting may also be a sign of shifting social norms: as sexting becomes more normalized, teenagers might feel more comfortable in reporting that they engaged in this behavior.

Myth 2: Girls are more likely to sext than boys

Another common (mis)conception is that girls are more likely to send sexting images than boys. This assumption is also often reinforced by the media's portrayal of teen sexting, in which girls are often depicted as the "senders" and boys the "receivers" of sexual images. While both boys and girls are blamed for their engagement in sexting, focus group research has shown that girls are also more easily stigmatized for their involvement in sexting compared to boys, for whom sexting is more often framed as 'being silly' or 'stupid' (De Ridder, 2018). Contrary to these portrayals, a recent meta-analysis did not find any gender differences in either the sending or the receiving of sexts (Madigan, Ly, et al., 2018; Madigan, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018). One potential explanation for the lack of gender differences in the sending of sexts might be that some send an image first in the hope of being reciprocated with a sext in return (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2018b). There appears to be gender differences when examining "asking for" sexts, in which studies have found that boys compared to girls are more likely to ask for a sext (Temple et

al., 2012), and are also more likely to apply pressure to send sexts (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). An analysis of online messaging board posts about sexting, showed that techniques of sexting pressure included threats, getting angry or ignoring the girl until she would send a sext (Thomas, 2018). When taking into account other demographic characteristics such as ethnicity or SES, studies have also found inconsistent results (Handschuh, La Cross, & Smaldone, 2019). The scarce studies that are available on the relationship between sexting and sexual orientation, suggest that youth who identify as a sexual minority (i.e., LGBTQ youth) may be more likely to sext images (Rice et al., 2012; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016).

Myth 3: If teenagers are engaging in online sexual risk behaviors, they must be engaging in offline sexual risk behaviors

Another concern is that sexting is automatically a sign of sexual risk behavior. This is only partially true. Two meta-analyses of cross-sectional studies, which means that data for a given study were all collected at one point in time, found that sexting is linked to offline sexual behaviors (Handschuh et al., 2019; Kosenko, Luurs, & Binder, 2017). With respect to sexual risk behaviors, it has also been shown that teens who sext are more likely to have unprotected sex and a higher number of sexual partners (Kosenko et al., 2017). However, because of the cross-sectional nature of these studies, it is not possible to establish whether engagement in sexting actually *leads* to risky sexual activity at a later point in time. Thus far, only one study by Temple and Choi (2014) has investigated the links between sexting and sexual behaviors over time. The analysis revealed that while sexting was longitudinally associated with having sex in the following year, no such relationship existed with engagement in sexual risk behaviors. These results suggest that teenagers might use sexting as a first step towards actual sexual contact.

Myth 4: Sexts are meant as a means to “hook up” (i.e., engage in casual sexual behavior)

Youth sexting is sometimes framed within the contemporary hook-up culture, which encourages casual sexual encounters. However, both qualitative and quantitative research has found that most adolescent sexting images are exchanged within the context of a committed or intended romantic relationship (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, Lu, Temple, & Ponnet, 2018). Some do so because they are pressured or coerced by their romantic partner, because they feel that it is expected of them by their dating partner, or because they are scared that their boyfriend or girlfriend will otherwise end the relationship (Choi, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2016; Thomas, 2018). Others do so as a sign of genuine love, commitment, and trust (Thomas, 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017). When a sexting image is exposed beyond this type of relationship it can constitute a serious breach of trust that they had placed in someone important to them, oftentimes during one of their first romantic experiences. Being aware of this complex context that surrounds teenage sexting also makes it easier to understand why some adolescents would be persuaded to engage in sexting even if they would normally not be willing to do so, and can prevent unnecessary victim blaming.

Advice for school nurses

School nurses may be the first responders when it comes to sexting. They are often the ones who field parent phone calls, manage concerned teachers and administrators, work with students “caught” sexting, and manage the individual and school when a sexting image is distributed in mass with or without consent from the student (Mattey & Diliberto, 2013). While there are currently no evidence-based prevention programs that are specifically aimed at preventing sexting

or dealing with sexting issues, school nurses could consider, however, the following recommendations and actions within their school community. First, they can play a role in educating parents about this issue. Parents and caregivers could potentially play an important part in preventing problematic sexting behavior, as research suggests that parent-child communication about sexual topics could reduce sexual risk behaviors (Yu, 2010). Parents are also encouraged to regularly check in with their children from an early age with questions about their media use, and to ask what they have heard or experienced with regards to sexting, using examples appropriate for the child's age. These conversations should be spread out over a longer period of time to reinforce the message (Moreno, 2018; Temple, 2015). News events, story lines in shows and soap operas, or events within the child's community or school can serve as excellent starting points to have a natural conversation about these issues (Moreno, 2018). Parents could also ask their teenagers to teach them how to use popular social media applications and to explain their features to them. Knowing the different applications will allow them to engage in conversations with their kids more confidently and provide an ideal starting point to engage in conversations about media use (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013). Teenagers should be reassured by their parents that their cellphone access will not be taken away if they report engagement in sexting, as this can oftentimes be a deterring factor in reporting online risk behavior, and leave children vulnerable to abuse (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Vandebosch, 2015).

Second, school nurses can inform school faculty about these issues and lobby school administrators for healthy relationship programming, and ensure these include information on sexting and digital citizenship (i.e., being safe, legal, and ethical online). These interventions could target multiple common risk and protective factors of risk behaviors in youth and teach them resilience towards sources of sexting pressure (Temple & Lu, 2018). Prevention materials on

sexting should avoid victim blaming and preferably refrain from depicting girls as only engaging in sexting, given the fact that statistics show that boys and girls are engaging in sexting at similar rates. Prevention efforts could also teach adolescents practical skills in how to protect themselves against online risks, such as using appropriate privacy settings (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Van Gool, 2014).

School nurses can also advocate school administration and other stakeholders to develop a sexting task force that can act when a sexted image gets spread within the school (Aldridge, Davies, & Arndt, 2013). When nonconsensual sexting occurs and images are shared without permission of the creator, school nurses could use these incidents to talk with the impacted students and student body about digital citizenship (e.g., online risk behaviors) and healthy sexual behavior. It is imperative that the victims (i.e., the individuals who sent the original image that may have been found or distributed beyond the intended audience) are not blamed for their actions (Temple & Lu, 2018). As the research shows that sexting often coincides with sexual behaviors, a sexting incident could also provide a starting point to discuss sexual health behavior with adolescents (Temple & Lu, 2018). School staff should appreciate that nonconsensual sexting could lead to bullying and distress for the victims. Victims (and perpetrators) of nonconsensual sexting should be provided with appropriate follow-up care by school counselors and school psychologists. Bullying related to a nonconsensual sexting case could resurface at later points in time, thus requiring regular check-ins with victims (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Van Gool, 2014). Finally, school nurses can work with local police, school resource officers, and policy-makers in decriminalizing consensual sexting and in not blaming the victim (e.g., the teen who originally created and sexted an image).

Sexting impacts a significant number of adolescents. It can pose significant challenges for school staff, and have a lasting impact on students. Understanding the role that adolescent sexting

can play in the lives of teenagers is a first step towards effective prevention and intervention. We hope that this data driven resource can provide a stepping stone towards more effective school policies on sexting.

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