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The Problem of Teens and "Sexting"

By Rosemary Black

[This risky behavior affects teens nationwide. Find out how and what to do.](#)

Teenagers in Los Angeles who send sexually explicit text messages are seven times more likely as those who don't to be sexually active, according to a recent survey. The study, reported by Reuters Health, found that the young people who "sexted" also were more likely to practice risky sex behaviors. So does "sexting" automatically lead to "having sex?"

"No one's actually going to get a sexually transmitted disease because they're sexting," University of Southern California social network researcher Eric Rice, who led the study, told Reuters Health.

What researchers were interested in finding out was whether sexting and engaging in risky behavior were linked. "And the answer is a pretty resounding 'yes,'" Rice told Reuters Health.

Sexting is in and of itself a risky behavior, says Sheri Meyers, MFT, Psy. D., *Chatting or Cheating*. "You are already stretching the limits when you are sexting, and it loosens the boundaries," she explains. "Once you say yes to texting, it is easier to say yes to the next level of risky behavior." Which, for many teens, is having sex.

The recent survey, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, was based on nearly 2,000 Los Angeles high school students, the majority of whom were Latino. Some 75 percent of the students had a cell phone and used it on a regular basis.

But sexting—transmitting sexually explicit photos and messages—could be curbed if parents take some action, Meyers says.

"It's a mistake for a parent to think kids can work this out themselves when there is a lot of peer pressure," she says. "As parents, we need to have an ongoing conversation on the topic, not a confrontation."

All too often, she explains, a young girl will send sexy photos of herself to her boyfriend. "Then when they break up, the boy starts sharing," Meyers says. "Before you know it, that picture is sent out to hundreds of people."

Sexting results in the loss of control of privacy, says April Masini, who pens an advice column called AskApril.com.

"Without the teen even realizing it, the naked photos or videos can go up on You Tube or some other social network site," she says. "Your teen loses control as well as self-esteem."

How can you reduce the chances that your teen will sext?

- 1. Have her sign a contract** agreeing not to take or send photos of nudity or sexually explicit text messages, Meyers says.
- 2. Check your teenager's phone at random times** to make sure she is complying with the terms of the contract. "Teenagers don't fully develop their adult brain until age 23," Meyers says. "They don't have the impulse control and the judgment. As parents, we still need to be their prefrontal lobes."
- 3. Be a good role model.** Don't use your cell phone at the dinner table, Meyers says.
- 4. Make sure your child knows you strongly disapprove of sexting,** Masini says.

What if you find out your child has been sexting?

Take away the phone for a month, Masini recommends, and impose a "probation period" after that where you check the phone frequently to make sure your teen is complying.

[Dr. Sheri Meyers, MFT, PsyD reviewed this article.](#)