

Teens are sending racy texts and photos unaware of the consequences

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A recent study by the Education Development Centre in Massachusetts finds 13% of high schoolers have received "sex" messages. (Shutterstock)

It's 2011. Do you know what your kids are texting?

Jenny: "soooo"

Johnny: "paw"

Jenny: "got it. kpc. ttyl."

Translation:

Jenny: "so"

Johnny: "parents are watching"

Jenny: "got it. keeping parents clueless. talk to you later."

Maybe this conversation is a bid for privacy, or maybe it's a sext attempt.

A recent study by the Education Development Centre in Massachusetts finds 13% of high schoolers have received "sex" one in 10 has sent, posted or forwarded sexually suggestive or explicit photos or videos of people they know. Other studies show even higher numbers.

Merlyn Horton, executive director and founder of Safe OnLine Outreach Society, says these teens are doing absolutely nothing wrong developmentally, but with uncontrollable technology at their fingertips and without understanding the consequences.

"If you're under 18 and have pictures of yourself depicting genitalia or the anal region, it could legally be child pornography. If you're distributing that, you could be distributing child porn," Horton says.

Unlike Canada, the U.S. is quicker to enforce child pornography laws and turn teenage sext offenders into sex offenders. The consequences of a conviction will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

"The U.S. seems to be adopting a surveillance approach to protect children from themselves, by sewing GPS devices into their clothes or having kids' cell activity forwarded to parents," says Peter Cumming, coordinator of the children's studies program at York University. "That's fighting a losing battle. You give up your own life, and there are things parents are not meant to know about their children."

Cumming believes some people have difficulty connecting dots between playing doctor, spin the bottle and similar activities showed each other body parts before, what's different now is that kids may be showing them to more people than they would in an original act."

He suggests not using scare mongering tactics. "Make children understand whatever they share can be taken advantage of by sexual predators or peers."

There are short and long-term consequences for education, relationships, employment -- plus a loss of privacy.

And it's not just children who need to be more educated -- it's adults too.

You can't get a virus from sexting, but it just takes one click to make a sext go viral. Something many teens - and politicians don't understand.

"The same way we educate about stranger danger, we need to educate everyone about sexuality, technology, and the two. Cumming.

Perhaps the consequences don't seem tangible because the act itself is so "virtual."

And while the sexting study found no causal relationship between sexting and depression, there is an association between those who engage in high-risk behaviour online, like sexting, are generally the same kids who engage in high-risk behaviour offline. "Kids generally experience depression," Horton says.

If you want to know how your child is doing, she says to ask. "We should be having an ongoing dialogue throughout the conversation that comes up once they're 15.

Horton suggests no cell phones in bedrooms and to leave powered-off phones in the kitchen overnight, as the most egregious sexting happens between midnight and 5 a.m.

Still, Cumming says not to panic. "Children and adults are sexual beings; we've known this for at least 100 years. Some things change and we need to adjust to provide safe environments for everyone."

So, make sure your kids practise safe text.

Learn to speak text: 10 codes you should know

- 1. CD9** – code 9 parents are around
- 2. P911** – parent alert
- 3. PIR** – parent in room
- 4. 8** – oral sex (or ate)
- 5. GYPO** – get your pants off
- 6. GNRN** – get naked right now
- 7. RUH** – are you horny
- 8. CU46** – see you for sex
- 9. IWSN** – I want sex now
- 10. GNOC** – get naked on camera (webcam)

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