



# CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

## Teens need to learn dangers of ‘sexting’

By Jane Sutter

Sharing photos has been a hallmark of young romantic relationships since cameras were invented but combine our “it’s ok to bare all” culture with the immediacy of text messaging and social media, and teens can suddenly feel embarrassed and ashamed when a photo meant for one person is suddenly shared exponentially.

The sharing of intimate (sexually explicit) images or video with another person is commonly called “sexting” when it happens via a text message or private messaging on social networks or through an app.

Certainly not every teenager is involved in sexting, but sexting is in the top four concerns that staffers at Common Sense Education hear from teachers, according to Kelly Mendoza, senior director of education programs there. (Common Sense Education is a program sponsored by Common Sense Media, a non-profit in San Francisco,



Calif., dedicated to improving the lives of children and families.)

Pinpointing how many teens have sent or received a “sext” is difficult because children aren’t always honest in these types of surveys, fearing that their answers will be

found out, Mendoza said. Various research studies show that from 5 to 20 percent of youth report having sent or received a sext, according to Mendoza.

A *New York Times* article published in March 2018 cited a recent study in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics* that compiled data from 39 studies of people ages 12 to 17. The aggregated data showed that 14.8 percent of respondents had sent sexts, 27.4 percent had seen them, and 12 percent had forwarded a sext without consent.

Sexting among teens usually happens within a relationship, when teens are thinking about being in a relationship with someone, or as part of flirting behavior, Mendoza said.

One trend she sees is that girls share photos more often than boys do, and girls are being pressured to share more than boys are. Sometimes romance isn’t involved and “children are just bored and are doing it to get a thrill,” Mendoza said.

She noted that it shouldn’t be surprising that this type of behavior is happening. “We’re in a selfie, image-sharing culture. Kids take selfies constantly and share them,

## How parents can talk to their teens about sexting

**Don’t wait** for an incident to happen to your child or your child’s friend before you talk about the consequences of sexting. Sure, talking about sex or dating with teens can be uncomfortable, but it’s better to have the talk before something happens.

**Remind your kids** that once an image is sent, it can never be retrieved, and they will lose control. Ask teens how they would feel if their teachers, parents, or the entire school saw the picture.

**Talk about pressures** to send revealing photos. Let teens know that you understand how they can be pushed or dared into sending something. Tell them that no matter how big the social pressure is, the potential social humiliation can be hundreds of times worse.

**Teach your children** that the buck stops with them. If someone sends them a sexy photo, they should delete it immediately. It’s better to be part of the solution than the problem. Besides, if they do send it on, there could be legal implications.

Source: *Common Sense Media.*

Continued on page 2

and that's part of their culture." With American media being saturated with sexual content, children see imagery of what they think they should look like and what they should be doing, "so no wonder that children are taking revealing selfies and pictures of themselves and posting them and thinking that kind of behavior is ok."

### What's a parent to do?

Mendoza said that scare tactics do not work. Telling young people that they could go to jail, be labeled as a sex offender, and have their lives ruined, isn't the right approach, she maintains. (Many states, including New York, now recognize that the majority of sexting involving teens doesn't rise to the level of sex offender. In New York, if a teen is charged with distributing nude photos electronically, he or she could be required to participate in an education reform program.)

On the Common Sense website, there are tips for how parents can talk to their children about sexting, including reminding children that once an image is sent, they have no control over what happens to it and the sharing of it, and it can never be retrieved. Parents should teach their children that as bad as the pressure may be to send a sext, that the potential social humiliation could be hundreds of times worse.

Mendoza recommends that parents talk to their children when they begin learning sex education in school or when an incident happens in popular media. "It's a sensitive topic, it's challenging to talk about, but it's better to keep those lines of communication open."

### A need to learn 'thinking routines'

Teaching young people the proper skills for dealing with their complex online lives is part of the Common Sense Education program. In partnership with Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, innovative resources were created for a Digital Citizenship Curriculum for grades 6-8. The free curriculum launched this past January includes lessons on sexting and relationships.

A key aim of the curriculum is to teach them "thinking routines," which are defined as "short, accessible, easy-to-remember structures that direct our thinking toward deep and nuanced reflection," according to information on the Common Sense website.

Children are taught to recognize "red flag feeling" moments when texting or using social media, and they are encouraged to use a thinking routine called F.I.R.E., which stands for Feel, Identify, Reflect, Enact. The routine works as follows:

**Feel:** They take a pulse on their emotions and think about how they are feeling, such as sad, anxious, worried, uncomfortable.

**Identify:** They think about what happened that led to the feeling. Was it something they or someone else did?

**Reflect:** They reflect on possible responses, what choices are available and what are the benefits and drawbacks for themselves and other people on the steps they might take.

**Enact:** They think about whether they are ready to move forward and address the situation in a way that will be productive for them and others.

Mendoza said that F.I.R.E. "can be a tool children can use to slow down in a moment and think through before they do something they are going to regret." Mendoza said this habit is similar to teaching young

children to stop, look and listen before crossing the street.

Common Sense Education's research has shown that this preventative approach resonates more with children than the scare tactic of legal repercussions. "We're looking at giving children real tools they can use, help them identify emotions and feelings, which can be pretty strong when they are teenagers, and hopefully they can use some tools when there is no adult around to guide them or support them at that moment," Mendoza said.

While by no means are the majority of teens participating in sexting, Mendoza said she believes that teens are even less likely to tell an adult about it than they are about cyber bullying, and the reporting for that behavior is low. "It's not something (teens) are supposed to be doing, it's shameful, it's difficult to tell an adult, so (parents should) keep those lines of communication open and let their children know they are there for them no matter what."

*Jane Sutter is a Rochester area freelance writer.*

## Resources from Common Sense Media and its affiliate Common Sense Education:

- A guide to "cellphone parenting" covering many topics and offering advice and tips for parents: <https://www.common sense media.org/cellphone-parenting>
- Free lesson plans on digital citizenship for grades K-12, including the lesson on F.I.R.E. in the grades 6-8 curriculum: <https://www.common sense.org/education/digital-citizenship>
- To view a video called "8 Things You and Your Teen Should Know About Sexting," go to <https://www.common sense media.org/blog/talking-about-sexting>

## Resources from the Cyberbullying Research Center

<https://cyberbullying.org/resources/parents>

- For parents and educators, an eight-page downloadable guide called "Teen Sexting: A Brief Guide for Educators and Parents."
- For teens, a one-page downloadable "Sexting Advice for Teens" that offers 10 points, including "ignore or flat-out reject any requests from others for inappropriate images" and "sexting doesn't define a healthy, functional romantic relationship."

# Watch for These Warning Signs of Abuse in Minors

No longer wants to see a **particular person** they had been close to

Declining **academic** performance

Tries to hide use of **technology**

No longer interested in **activities** they used to enjoy

Changes in **personality**

Demonstrates **aggressive behavior** or constantly angry

Tries to get minors **alone**



Commits physical and emotional **boundary violations**

**Withdraws** from family or friends

Keeps **secrets** with minors

Gives lavish **gifts** to minors

Allows or encourages minors to **break laws** or rules

Has **inappropriate** or suggestive conversations with minors

Is overly interested in **spending time** with minors

Does not believe the **rules** apply to them (or, does not follow rules or protocols)

Takes **photos** without approval, or asks minors to send them photos

## ... and These Warning Signs of Perpetrators

Source: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



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DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER

## Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:  
Karen Rinefierd,  
Diocesan Coordinator  
of Safe Environment Education  
and Compliance,  
585-328-3228, ext. 1255  
or Karen.Rinefierd@dor.org.

*Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.*

*To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:*

Deborah Housel  
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;  
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,  
ext. 1555  
victimsassistance@dor.org.

*All photos in this newsletter are for illustrative purposes only.*

# ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

## ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

### CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

#### Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>  
*PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.*

#### NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>  
*A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.*

### FOR PARENTS:

#### Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>  
*A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education*

#### Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

#### iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepSAFE.org/>  
*Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies*

#### Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>  
*Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America*

## LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

**Bivona Child Advocacy Center**  
(Monroe, Wayne counties):  
[www.BivonaCAC.org](http://www.BivonaCAC.org)  
585-935-7800

**Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:**  
607-737-8449  
[www.chemungcounty.com](http://www.chemungcounty.com)

**Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:**  
315-253-9795  
[www.cacofcayugacounty.org](http://www.cacofcayugacounty.org)

**Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program**  
(Ontario County):  
[www.cacfingerlakes.org](http://www.cacfingerlakes.org)  
315-548-3232

**Darkness to Light organization:**  
[www.d2l.org](http://www.d2l.org)

**STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:**  
[www.sthcs.org](http://www.sthcs.org)  
716-372-8532

**NYS State Central Registry**  
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):  
1-800-342-3720

**NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)**  
866-313-3013

**Tompkins County Advocacy Center:**  
[www.theadvocacycenter.org](http://www.theadvocacycenter.org)  
607-277-3203

**Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:**  
585-786-8846

**Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:**  
315-531-3417, Ext. 6