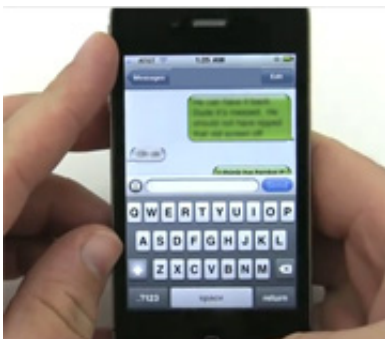


'Sexting' may go hand-in-hand with unprotected sex among teens

September 17 2012, by Maureen Salamon, Healthday Reporter



Study found association with other forms of sexual risk-taking among high school students.

(HealthDay)—Teens who "sext" sexually explicit texts or images are probably taking other sexual risks as well, with new research indicating these adolescents are seven times more likely to be sexually active and significantly more apt to be having unprotected sex.

Analyzing self-reported behaviors of more than 1,800 Los Angeles students aged 12 to 18 (most were between 14 and 17), researchers found that 15 percent with cell phones acknowledged sexting and 54 percent knew someone who had sent a sext. Rarely was sexting the only sexually risky behavior involved.

"It's surprising in some ways that sexting isn't an alternative to [risky](#)

[sexual behaviors](#), it's part of the [same] landscape," said study author Eric Rice, an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California. "I don't want to be alarmist, but I do think that parents who suspect their kids are sexting should be aware of the probability their kids are involved in other [sexual behavior](#) as well. They probably should worry insofar as it's likely their teens are sexually active and not using [birth control](#)."

The study is published online Sept. 17 and in the October print issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

Previous studies on sexting indicated similar rates of participation among teenagers, but the new research is purportedly the first to examine any association between sexting and [sexual activity](#).

Participants were mostly Latino/Hispanic, 87 percent identified as straight and nearly three-quarters reported owning a cell phone and using it every day.

Youths whose friends sexted were 17 times more likely to sext themselves—viewing it as a "normal" behavior—and non-heterosexual students were more than twice as likely to report sexting than their [heterosexual peers](#).

"The students we talk to said texting has been associated with an existing [romantic relationship](#) or interest, so I think it makes sense that these kinds of behaviors are happening, for the most part, within an existing [relationship](#) and not something out of the blue," said Justin Patchin, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. He was not involved in the study.

Patchin and Rice agreed the findings are an opportunity for parents to broach the subject with children and discuss the consequences. If they

find out their own kids are sexting, they may want to measure the individual circumstances before deciding how to react, said Patchin, also an associate professor of criminal justice.

"It's one thing if it's your 17-year-old who's been in a committed relationship with a person for a long time . . . vs. a 13-year-old sending inappropriate pictures to a person they're interested and who they've never had a relationship with," he said.

"I certainly don't want to condone sexting among any teenager, but we need to understand the continuum of relationships and behaviors," Patchin added. "The main thing is that parents need to educate kids and talk about consequences—[such as] that they can never be sure someone else won't see those images or texts."

Shari Kessel Schneider, a senior research associate at the Education Development Center in Newton, Mass., said the findings also highlight a need for physicians and educators to "be aware that youth who are sexting may need additional education and guidance related to adolescent sexuality and safe and responsible Internet use."

"While some have suggested that sexting may be a safe alternative to sexual [behavior](#), it is not surprising that these online behaviors are entangled in teens' face-to-face interactions," said Schneider, who led a study on sexting and depression among Boston-area youth. "If a parent finds out their child is sexting, it's an important opportunity to engage their son or daughter in a discussion of what constitutes a healthy relationship and how youth can stay safe both emotionally and physically."

The study revealed an association between teen sexting and other sexual behaviors. It did not prove a cause-and-effect relationship.

More information: The [U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) has information about sexting.

[Abstract](#)

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