

Teens who 'Sext' don't dwell on consequences

December 19 2013, by Alan Mozes, Healthday Reporter



Peer pressure seems stronger than parental warnings, study suggests.

(HealthDay)—"Sexting"—sending out sexually explicit text messages or photos by cellphone—is fairly common among teens, a new Belgian study finds. And peer pressure, the search for romance and trust that the recipient will respond positively seem to be the key factors driving sexts.

Adolescents tend to take a mostly benign view of the practice, the researchers found, dwelling little on the potential for negative fallout down the road.

Warnings by parents or teachers against the practice appear to fall on deaf ears, with many teens unconcerned about [parental monitoring](#) of their phones or the potential for blackmail or future risk to their reputation.

"During adolescence, [young people](#) explore their sexuality and identity, and form different kinds of friendships, including their first romantic relationships," said study lead author Michel Walrave, an associate professor in the department of communication studies at the University of Antwerp.

"In this context," he said, "[sexting](#) can be used to express their interest in a potential partner," to maintain intimacy while dating, to engage in "truth-or-dare" flirting or to earn bragging rights among peers.

The risk of unintended consequences is the problem, Walrave said. "As words and images sent can be easily copied and transmitted, sexting messages can rapidly spread to audiences that were not intended by the sender of the message," he said. "This can ruin the reputation of the depicted girl or boy, [and] lead to mockery or even bullying."

The study appeared online in a recent issue of the journal *Behavior & Information Technology*.

The researchers conducted a written survey among nearly 500 Belgian girls and boys between the ages of 15 and 18 who were attending two different secondary schools.

More than a quarter of the kids said they had sent out a sext during the two months leading up to the poll.

Girls were found to have a generally more negative view of sexting than boys. However, boys and girls already in seemingly trusting relationships seemed relatively disposed to embrace a behavior they perceived—rightly or wrongly—as acceptable and desirable among their peers, the researchers found.

The bottom line, Walrave said, is that any intervention aimed at curbing

teen sexting needs to address the overriding social environment. That is, one in which risky, explicit communications with a high potential for blowback are viewed positively by friends and romantic partners.

"Our study observed that especially the influence of peers is important in predicting sexting behavior," he said.

Why? "Adolescents may be more focused on the short-term positive consequences of sexting, such as gaining attention of a desired other, than on the possible underestimated short-term and long-term negative consequences," Walrave said. "Raising awareness at school could alert young people to the risks of sharing sexually intimate content with a romantic partner, especially if the romance sours."

Walrave also advised incorporating sexting-prevention efforts beyond sex-education programs. For instance, he said, it could also be addressed in programs specifically designed to target bullying and cyberbullying, given that sexts have the potential to become a bully's digital ammunition.

One U.S. expert expressed some frustration with the way the study was conducted.

"Overall, this article further illustrates that sexting behaviors continue to occur among adolescents, and therefore additional education of teens regarding the potential consequences is warranted," said Justin Patchin, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center.

But at the same time, he said, the findings weren't specific enough.

"I am disappointed by the way sexting was measured in this study," said Patchin, who also is a professor of criminal justice at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire.

"The researchers simply asked teens one question: 'Have you sent sexts in the last two months?'" he said. "They didn't ask whether the teens had received sext messages, and they did not distinguish between text-based and image-based sexually explicit content. Are we talking about pictures or just naughty talk? There is a big difference."

For her part, Shari Kessel Schneider, project director for the Education Development Center in Waltham, Mass., focused on what can be done to help teens make smarter decisions.

"Educators must emphasize the permanence of images placed online, and teach children to be resistant to [peer pressure](#) in general," she said. "Whether it's about using drugs or sending a sext, [educators should] help teens understand that not all their peers are doing it."

"Parental involvement is important," Kessel Schneider added.

"First of all, parents need to expand their effort to teach children about the meaning of a digital footprint," she said. "Secondly, they need to monitor their teen's phone use. I just don't think a teen is as likely to send a sext if they know a parent is monitoring their phone regularly."

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics has tips for [talking to kids about social media and sexting](#).

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