

Sexting in teens linked to more sexual activity, low self-esteem

October 8 2014, by Valerie Debenedette



Relatively few teens say they have engaged in sexting, or the sharing of nude or nearly nude photos via mobile phone or the Internet, finds a new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Only 7 percent of the teenagers who responded to the survey said they had shared nude or nearly nude photos of themselves, noted Michele Ybarra, M.P.H., Ph.D., president and research director of the Center for Innovative Public Health Research in San Clemente, CA, and the lead author on the study. She noted that this definition was broad and could include a photo of someone in a bathing suit. "It seems likely that if an even more narrow definition were provided, even fewer youth would be categorized as sending or sharing a sext, thus demonstrating just how

uncommon the behavior is in adolescence," she said.

However, the study found that [sexting](#) appears to be associated with being sexually active and with engaging in [risky sexual behavior](#). Teens who sext also appear to be more likely to use alcohol or marijuana and are less likely to have high self-esteem.

The findings are from an online survey conducted between 2010 and 2011 of more than 3,700 teenagers aged 13 to 18 in the U.S. Participants were asked if they had shared sexual photos of themselves that were nude or nearly nude with anyone in the last 12 months and if so, how the pictures were shared (by cell phone, over the internet, or in person) and with whom. They were also queried about their sexual activity.

Among youth who were sexually active, sexting was related to having a greater number of past-year sexual partners and having multiple current sexual partners.

Girls were more likely to sext than boys and the incidence of sexting went up with age. Teenagers who self identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were more likely to sext, perhaps because it is safer for sexual minority youth to express one's sexuality privately than in public, Ybarra suggested. About 70 percent of those who sexted said they shared the photos with someone they knew offline. While about 50 percent sexted with someone the same age as themselves, 41 percent said they did so with someone older.

Many discussions of the prevalence of sexting have focused on the technology used to send photos. The study authors observed that sending nude or semi-nude photos of oneself is more about what is going on in the teenager's life than the device or technology used. "Understanding the motivations behind sexting is critical for parents, teachers, police, and pediatricians who are trying to determine how to handle such

situations as they arise," they say.

"All young people need to understand the risks and potential consequences of sharing sexual pictures of themselves – by texting or online or in person. They also need to know how to handle requests for sexual pictures from others," said Carol A. Ford, M.D., president of the Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine and chief of the Division of Adolescent Medicine at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "One result of this study that was really interesting —and important —is that [young people](#) with high self-esteem rarely send these types of messages."

More information: Ybarra ML, Mitchell KJ: "'Sexting' and its relation to sexual activity and sexual risk behavior in a national survey of adolescents." *J Adol Health*. 2014. DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.07.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.07.012)

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