



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND 'SEXTING'

Summary of a qualitative study



SEXTING IS DEFINED AS THE “EXCHANGE OF SEXUAL MESSAGES OR IMAGES” AND “CREATING, SHARING AND FORWARDING SEXUALLY SUGGESTIVE NUDE OR NEARLY NUDE IMAGES” THROUGH MOBILE PHONES AND THE INTERNET.



WHAT IS SEXTING?



Statistics range between 15 and 40 per cent of young people being involved in sexting

Sexting is defined as the “exchange of sexual messages or images” and “creating, sharing and forwarding sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images” through mobile phones and the Internet.

Quantitative research on sexting varies: statistics range between 15 and 40 per cent of young people being involved in sexting, depending on their age and the way sexting is measured. However, qualitative research is also needed to understand this fast-moving issue in more detail.

Our study was designed to listen to young people’s views and experiences, rather than to test any particular conceptions of sexting.

WHY WE CARRIED OUT THE STUDY

We need to improve our understanding of the complex nature of sexting and the use of mobile technology among young people. This pilot study investigated the phenomenon, the scale and impact of which remains widely unknown. For this reason, the research itself was small in scale and exploratory in nature.

We conducted focus group interviews with 35 young people in Years 8 and 10 in two inner city London schools. We asked participants to friend our research profile on Facebook and mapped some of their activities online. We then returned for 22 individual interviews with selected young people. We also interviewed teachers and staff at the schools.

Given the study’s size, caution is needed before making any generalisations. However we believe the findings are not unique to these two schools and we urgently need to expand the research with a broader study.



THIS BOOKLET PROVIDES AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF OUR KEY FINDINGS. THE FULL REPORT CAN BE FOUND ALONG WITH OUR OTHER WORK ON SEXUAL ABUSE AT WWW.NSPCC.ORG.UK/SEXUALABUSE



WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE EVIDENCE

The findings reveal problems experienced by young people, distinguishable from the panicked stories in the media. We have uncovered a range of experiences that contradict any easy assumptions about sexting as a singular phenomenon.

Sexting can't be described in absolute terms – wanted versus unwanted sexual activity, deliberate versus accidental exposure – for much of young people's engagement with sexual messages and images is ambiguous. Few teens wish to be excluded from sexual banter, gossip, discussion or, indeed, from the flirtatious activity that is endemic in youth culture.

But to take part is to be under pressure – to look right, perform, compete, judge and be judged. Teenagers' experience is often more pressurised than forced – they choose to participate but they cannot choose to say no.

We also found that sexting is not just practiced on a one-to-one basis but as a group, networked phenomenon. Sexting doesn't just affect those engaged in specific practice; it permeates and influences the entire teen network in a number of ways.

- 1 Threat comes mostly from peers**
- 2 Sexting is often coercive**
- 3 Girls are the most adversely affected**
- 4 Technology amplifies the problem**
- 5 Sexting reveals wider sexual pressures**
- 6 Ever younger children affected**
- 7 Sexting practices are culturally specific**

1 Threat comes mostly from peers

For young people, the 'stranger danger' hyped by the media is not the primary technology related threat – it's technology mediated sexual pressure from their peers. Children rarely express concern about inappropriate sexual approaches from strangers. When they did, they were quick to brush off the approach as from a "weirdo", "pervert" or "paedo".

The problems posed by sexting come from their peers – from 'friends' in their social networks. This means much of the typical advice about being careful who you contact, or keeping your profile private misses the point.



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PROVIDING THE RIGHT SUPPORT

Teenagers' awareness of practices to reduce online risk from strangers indicates the success of e-safety campaigns. The focus of these campaigns now needs to shift towards reducing the risk from their peers.

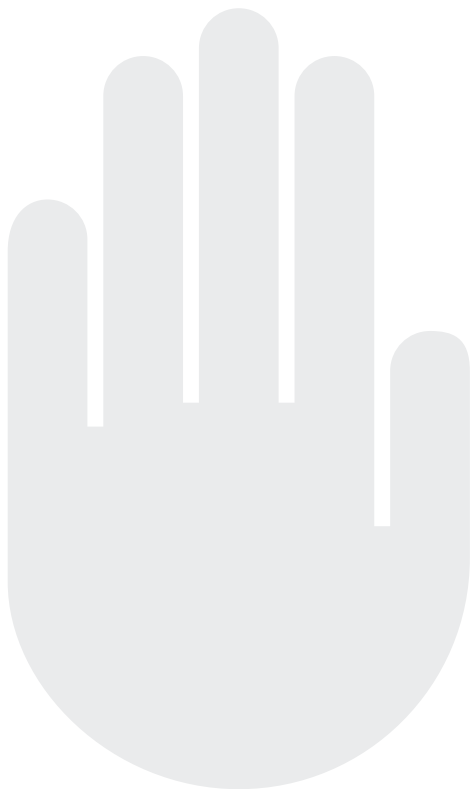
2 Sexting is often coercive

Sexting does not refer to a single activity, but to a range of activities which may be motivated by sexual pleasure. They are also often coercive, linked to harassment, bullying and even violence.



When you say no to people (boys who ask for pictures of your 'tits', 'bra' or 'bikini')... you fall out with them, so I just make excuses.

**Female participant,
Year 8**



LEARNING FROM ANTI-CYBERBULLYING INITIATIVES

To address the problem of sexting, teachers, parents and other adults must be willing to discuss sexual matters, sexual bullying and cyberbullying with teenagers – independently and as part of existing anti-bullying initiatives.

3

Girls are the most adversely affected



Sexting is not a gender-neutral practice. It is shaped by the gender dynamics of peer groups, where primarily boys harass girls, and it is exacerbated by the gendered norms of popular culture, family and school, which fail to recognise the problem or to support girls.

We found considerable evidence of an age-old double standard, where sexually active boys are admired and 'rated', while sexually active girls are denigrated, shamed and despised as 'sluts'.



If they had a picture of a girl naked and you told them, 'That's wrong,' they will think straight away you are gay.

**Male participant,
Year 10**



I think she took the picture, she sent it to her boyfriend and then she was just being very stupid and just showed it around to everyone. I mean, I think she was stupid because why would you send your naked pictures to a boy that you have been going out with for a week or two?

**Female participant,
Year 10**

This creates gender-specific risks where girls are unable to openly speak about sexual activities and practices, while boys are at risk of peer exclusion if they do not brag about sexual experiences.



CONFRONTING THE AGE-OLD DOUBLE STANDARD

Safety initiatives need to provide support for girls without treating sexting as a girl-only or girl-initiated problem. The role, responsibility and experiences of boys in relation to sexting also deserve more research and practical attention.

4 Technology amplifies the problem

Technology is not neutral either: the specific features of mobile phones, social networking sites and other communication technologies facilitate the objectification of girls. They allow the creation, exchange, collection, ranking and display of images.



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Well like say I got a girlfriend I would ask her to write my name on her breast and then send it to me and then I would upload it onto Facebook or Bebo or something like that.

**Male participant,
Year 8**



IMPROVING SAFETY FEATURES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people should be able to enjoy technology and social media without feeling under threat. Providers need to make it as easy to prohibit harmful messages or images as it is to share them. Easy-to-use, age-appropriate tools can help children and young people to avoid the distress of unwanted sexual images and text – or seek redress if it happens.

5

Sexting reveals wider sexual pressures

Although the extent of sexting cannot be determined from a small-scale qualitative study, most children interviewed were familiar with the practices referred to as sexting, while some had experienced or knew of others who had experienced sexting.



Most young people felt in some way oppressed by perceived sexual pressure – to perform, judge and be judged – from peers.

Crucially, we found that most young people felt in some way oppressed by perceived sexual pressure – to perform, judge and be judged – from peers. Such pressures may vary by context, but the specifics such as expectations on appearance (being very thin, having large breasts or big muscles) or actions (viewing porn, tripping and touching up, sending images of own their body parts) should be discussed in order to undermine the culture of silence that exposes young people, especially girls, to risk.



Yeah, I got harassed like nearly every single day, not sexual harassment like seriously, but then they do stuff like, 'Oh look at her bum' and 'Look at her breasts'.

**Female participant,
Year 10**



UNDERMINING THE CULTURE OF SILENCE

The government needs to set clear expectations on schools to enable the discussion of sexual pressures with children and young people as part of the school curriculum. Teachers need support and training to facilitate this conversation and schools should consider young people as peer mentors.

6

Ever younger children affected

It is striking that although the Year 10 teenagers interviewed were more sexually aware and experienced, with many stories to tell regarding their own sexual and sexting activities, or that of their peers, they also appeared more mature in their resilience and ability to cope.

The Year 8 children were more worried, confused and, in some cases, upset by the sexual and sexting pressures they face. Their age meant that parents, teachers and others did not support them sufficiently, even though sexual pressures are experienced at younger ages:

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I don't get why boys always send stuff they want to do to you or pictures of what they want to do to you.

**Female participant,
Year 8**

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If they want it [a blow job] they will ask [by text] every single day until you say yes.

**Female participant,
Year 8**



PROTECTING YOUNGER CHILDREN

Sexting could be affecting children even younger than those in Year 8. We recommend that research and policy initiatives are developed for primary school aged children and for supporting transitions into secondary school.

7 Sexting practices are culturally specific

New technologies enable public expression of identity, which can be positive but can also bring with it pressure to perform particular idealised forms of femininity and masculinity.



For girls, sexting can involve being subjected to oppressive, racialised beauty norms around feminine appearance and body ideals.

For girls, sexting can involve being subjected to oppressive, racialised beauty norms around feminine appearance and body ideals. Boys must negotiate competitive masculinity, where status can be achieved in new ways through technology. This can involve soliciting, collecting and distributing peer-produced sexualised images of girls, which operate as a form of commodity or currency.



MORE OPENNESS, SUPPORT AND RESOURCES ARE VITAL

To overcome the culture of silence, adult embarrassment, and a paralysing uncertainty over changing sexual norms, adults – particularly teachers, parents and those working in industry or commerce – should develop an explicit discourse that recognises, critiques and redresses the sexual pressures faced by young people.

Sexting may only reveal the tip of the iceberg in terms of these unequal and often coercive sexual pressures, but they also make such pressures visible, available for discussion and therefore potentially open to resolution.

THERE IS MUCH MORE TO LEARN



By not taking proactive action we are contributing to the perpetuation of stereotyped, unrealistic, damaging and constricting attitudes and behaviour.

Sexting is a fast-moving area and more research is needed. This report, however, provides valuable insight to policy makers and professionals working with school children – as well as parents and children.

Sexting and the sexually coercive behaviour associated with it, which is highlighted in this study is something that needs to be fully understood and addressed in order to provide the right support for children. By not taking proactive action we are contributing to the perpetuation of stereotyped, unrealistic, damaging and constricting attitudes and behaviour.

The full study can be found at nspcc.org.uk/sexualabuse

HOW YOU CAN WORK WITH THE NSPCC

This study forms part of the NSPCC's priority work on sexual abuse. Our recent study *Child abuse and neglect in the UK today (2011)* found that two thirds (65.9 per cent) of contact sexual abuse experienced by children aged 0-17 was perpetrated by someone aged under 18. Through studies like this we can increase our understanding of peer-to-peer relationships in order to keep children and young people safe.

A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting' (2012) prepared for the NSPCC by Jessica Ringrose, Rosalind Gill, Sonia Livingstone and Laura Harvey, and other NSPCC research on child sexual abuse is available at www.nspcc.org.uk/sexualabuse

The NSPCC is committed to working with people and organisations concerned about the issues we have discovered through this study. If you would like a more information from the NSPCC on this work, please email help@nspcc.org.uk

