



How can parents deal with sexting?

So, your son or daughter has shared what was meant to be a private photo - something explicit or inappropriate, to use the formal language. But what happens if someone decides to pass that image on?

Sexting is a modern-day parenting nightmare. Picture messages and videos can quickly circulate - even ending up on porn sites - and the repercussions for your child can be devastating.



Why do teens send the pictures in the first place?

Sometimes, taking these images can simply be experimental. Teens are exploring their identities and their sexuality: they're surrounded by explicit images on billboards, in magazines and online; they want to test their new sexual power and have people confirm their attractiveness. They may therefore choose to share an image - but not fully consider how easily it could be passed on once out of their hands.

Often, too, intimate photos 'escape' from romantic relationships when young couples argue or split up. Created in a loving relationship - perhaps with some pressure from one partner, but frequently willingly - they are often later shown by the recipient to a friend, either to show off or out of revenge. In other cases, one person may be put under pressure or even blackmailed into taking and sending such photos.

While there are, of course, cases where nothing bad happens as a result of taking an explicit picture, the risks are high and the fallout can be not only distressing, but dangerous. Once you've lost possession of the image, it can go **anywhere**. Furthermore, it's important to **remember that it's illegal to share photos of this nature of anyone under the age of 18; anyone who does could be breaking the law, as could anyone who passes on, shares or even saves such an image.**

So, what can you do to help?

Don't panic! Firstly, put your worry into perspective. There are undoubtedly serious risks involved, but bear in mind that in around two-thirds of cases where teens share or post such photos, nothing happens as a result.

Still, it's worth having a chat with your child about the potential repercussions of taking or sharing such images, and reminding them about online safety. Often, young people won't think through the consequences of doing something like this, even if it is a one-off.

What not to do

High profile cases and media stories can make every parent worry and come to the conclusion that the only course of sense is to confiscate their teen's mobile phone. None of this will achieve the aim of increasing the child's safety. Even if your child doesn't personally have a device on which to take and share a photo, someone else will. If people want to do it, they can.

Strictly forbidding something can make it seem more tempting. It also makes it very difficult for your child to come to you if things go wrong and they need advice. The best thing you can do is to keep the door always open.

What to do if your child comes to you about an image they have shared

Try to remain calm and assess the situation. Your first priority is to keep your child safe. Reassure them that they've done the right thing by coming to you, and you'll do what you can to help.

Explore the facts carefully - establish whom they shared the image with in the first place (or where they posted it). Your child may be upset at having to disclose this information. If it is a former boyfriend or girlfriend it can seem like a double betrayal. Remember, also, that they may not know where the photo has been shared.

If you know the person with whom they shared the picture, it may be possible to contact them or their parents immediately to get it deleted/taken down.

If it's on a website or social network, try to get the provider to remove it by reporting it at once, using their report button.

If it was shared on a mobile, this makes it harder to retrieve, but it may be possible to trace who it was sent to. You can contact the provider to change the mobile number so that your child does not receive any unsolicited contact.

If the photo is likely to be circulating at the child's school or college, inform them immediately. They have the power to respond to this. They will follow their child protection and safeguarding policies and will support you as things develop.

It is a matter for the police if:

- you think your child was coerced into making and sharing one or more images
- your child's image is being exploited or there are threats, blackmail or extortion
- there is an adult involved

But if your child willingly made and shared a photo or several of this type and it was part of a romantic relationship, you may not want the police involved. Having a criminal record can blight a young person's life and your own child has actually broken the law by sharing this photo too. How well do you know the other young person's family? Can you find other ways to resolve this? Sometimes the local Community Safety Officer can come to give young people a talk about the law in order to frighten them a bit. Use your judgment here.

If your child is depressed or anxious, seek professional help at once.

This content was provided by Adrienne Katz, author of Cyberbullying and e-safety: what educators and other professionals need to know. She is a director of Bullying Intervention Group which runs the BIG Award, a national award for schools who can demonstrate excellence in bullying intervention. Adrienne runs the Cybersurvey which has explored young people's experiences online annually since 2008.