



ThinkUKnow e-Newsletter - April 2016

Most young people with a smart phone will say they have taken a selfie; a selfie with their friends at a party, at school, with their family, or even to immortalise a good hair day. But how many would also say they have taken a naked selfie? Or have forwarded this naked selfie on to someone else? If they have, they have engaged in 'sexting'.

Sexting is the act of sending sexually-explicit messages or images, primarily between mobile phones, although it also includes images or videos sent via social networking sites or any other form of media sharing device.

The difficult thing about sexting is that people, especially children and young people, may not be aware of the legal, ethical, and social implications of sending and receiving an image or video containing explicit material, the 'sext'.

Research conducted by the University of Sydney in 2013 provided a snapshot of the main reasons teenagers engage in sexting. The top response was 'to be fun and flirty' followed by 'as a sexy present'. While these reasons sound relatively personal and suggest the sharing of these images plays part of an intimate relationship between two people, the possible consequences can be anything but personal and reach far further than the intended recipient.

Legal considerations

Young people may not be worried about the potential criminal charges associated with sexting. However, Australian Commonwealth law considers a naked image of a person under the age of 18, or an image depicting a

Time2Talk

In this section we look at ways to start talking with children and young people about their use of technology.

What would you consider an appropriate use of text or image sharing?

Are you aware of the legal consequences associated with sending and receiving a sexually explicit image of yourself or someone else under the age of 18-years-old?

What would you consider reasons people might engage in sexting in the first place? Weigh up the pros and cons, risks and consequences.

In light of this, what would make more sense? To send or not to send?

young person in a sexualised pose or engaging in sexual activity, as child pornography.

So where do young people stand in this situation? If the young person takes the photo, even of themselves, they may have, according to Commonwealth law, produced child pornography.

Did the young person receive an image that falls within this category? If yes, they may now be in

possession of child pornography.

Did the young person send this image, whether it is of themselves or not? They may have distributed child pornography.

These are serious offences which carry maximum penalties of 15 years' imprisonment and potential registration as a sex offender. These laws were designed to deal with adults who offend against children but may also be applied to young people engaged in malicious forms of sexting.

Ethical considerations

Children and young people need to be aware of the consequences associated with sharing images or videos. Once it is sent, the sender potentially has lost control over who sees that image and if or where it is shared from that point forward. The image can be saved, forwarded, altered, printed or stolen. Children and young people must ask themselves if they are okay with their image being in the hands of anyone, anywhere?

From the perspective of the recipient, consider the expectations of the sender. The young person now possesses an image that has the potential to cause more harm than good. If they intended that image to be shared with everyone they know, they would have sent it to them. Young people have the ethical responsibility to respect the physical and psychological wellbeing of both the sender and themselves, and treat the image accordingly.

Social considerations

Finally, if the image or video was to be shared outside the intended recipient, what does this mean for the young person? Who else has seen the image? Their friends? Classmates? Teachers? Parents? Siblings?

The sender may experience feelings of shame and embarrassment, with their friends and family also being affected emotionally. With this in mind, consider the repercussions of the image being shared further. What harm is being caused to the person, not just personally, but socially, by sharing their image without consent?

While the act of taking a photo or video in a scenario placing them within the category of sexting may begin from an innocent start point such as 'being fun and flirty', the potential challenges and consequences associated with engaging in such an activity are anything but fun!

It's important for parents, carers and teachers to have open discussions about this issue with children, and to promote empathy and looking at situations from other people's perspectives. While it may seem like 'everybody is doing it', there is value in helping young people develop strategies to avoid feeling pressured into inappropriate content.

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