



SEXTING & NUDES

A Guide for Parents

IN THIS GUIDE, YOU WILL:

- ✓ Learn what sexting is and the personal & legal repercussions.
- ✓ Understand the teenage brain: impulsivity and the need for approval.
- ✓ Learn tips for protecting kids online.
- ✓ Bonus: Includes practical steps in the event that your kid has been sexting or received an inappropriate image.



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What is Sexting?

Sexting broadly refers to the act of sending sexually explicit messages, photos, or videos from one person to another via digital devices such as smartphones, social media, or messaging platforms.

When minors are involved, any sexually explicit content that they take of themselves or others is legally considered self-generated child sexual abuse material or SG-CSAM. This is true even if the minor voluntarily created the image, because the law exists to protect children from exploitation and harm.¹

Legal Consequences

Many teens do not fully understand that what they see as a private exchange can also be classified as child pornography, regardless of consent, and could lead to serious legal consequences.

Parents should know that state laws vary, but across the United States, teens who send explicit images of themselves or peers risk arrest, criminal charges, and, in some cases, being labeled as having distributed child pornography.² In addition to legal issues, there are emotional, social, and educational impacts that can be long-lasting when intimate images are shared beyond the intended recipient.

Who is Involved & How Common Is It?

Sexting behaviors are more common than many parents realize, and they are occurring at younger ages than expected. Research from Thorn shows that about one in seven minors admit to having

shared their own nude images, and about one in four minors agree that sharing nudes is normal among peers.³ In surveys, one in five minors reported being asked to send a nude image, and one in four have received sexual messages.⁴ Children as young as nine have reported engaging in nude sharing behaviors.⁵

Thorn also concludes that **many teens believe that sending nudes is a normal part of modern relationships.**⁶ This normalization can make it harder for young people to recognize risks or say no.

Given the intersection of device access and puberty that exists for kids today, sending naked photos, sharing photos of others, and being asked for nude photos is increasingly common among kids. **And kids don't view it as fundamentally bad.**⁷

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence have made it possible to create fake nude images, increasing fear and confusion around image safety and consent.⁸

Participating in this behavior can be the result of exploration and natural curiosity, or a result of pressure and exploitation. While this behavior poses a variety of dangers, we've found that very often the point of most harm occurs when content is reshared without consent. The prevalence of the issue means it's key that you begin a dialogue with your child about it while they are open to learning from you.

How Sexting & Nudes Has Become Normalized

Digital culture has reshaped how young people view intimacy and privacy. Sexting is often used as a way to explore identity and intimacy, like a digital note passed in class for a new generation. It can feel fun, flirtatious, or like a way to get a partner's attention.

- Smartphones provide constant, private access to cameras and messaging.
- Social media rewards visibility and attention.
- Peers may reinforce the idea that sharing images proves trust or maturity.
- Exposure to sexualized content online lowers perceived risk on.

Nearly one in five children ages 9 to 17 say they have been shown someone else's intimate images without consent, illustrating how quickly these images can spread once digital content leaves the control of the original sender.⁹

This perceived normalcy and frequency reflect how digital culture and peer group expectations can shape behavior. **Young people may not perceive sending explicit content as risky or harmful**, interpreting it as a means to connect with a romantic partner, express interest, or fit in socially with their peers. The reality is that sharing intimate images, even consensually, still constitutes child sexual abuse material when minors are involved.

Some children may view sexting as a natural extension of flirting or dating. What looks like a reckless choice to you can feel like a normal, even necessary, part of a modern relationship to them. Social media and messaging apps make it easy and immediate to create and send images, reducing the perceived barrier that older generations experienced before digital media.

The normalization of sexting among young children and teens may be influenced by the ubiquity of smartphones, the rise of social media platforms, and the ways adolescents communicate digitally.

Deepfake technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) add another disturbing layer; **many youths have reported knowing peers whose nude images were digitally fabricated using AI**, blurring the line between real physical vulnerability and digitally induced exploitation.¹⁰ Today's online environment also exposes children to grooming behaviors, sextortion, and other forms of digital coercion.¹¹





The Teenage Brain: Impulsivity and the Need for Approval

One important biological reality to keep in mind is that adolescents' brains are still developing. The area that manages self-control and evaluates long-term consequences—the prefrontal cortex—has not yet fully matured.¹²

Meanwhile, the brain systems tied to emotions and social connection are especially active. This makes peer acceptance and validation feel overwhelmingly important. Together, these factors increase the likelihood of risky choices, as the immediate emotional payoff of feeling wanted or accepted can outweigh the distant and less tangible risk of an image being shared.

Simple curiosity about their own sexuality and how to express it, often without fully understanding the consequences, in many cases, can push an adolescent to experiment with sexting.¹³

Sextortion and Online Exploitation

Sextortion occurs when someone uses sexually explicit imagery or the threat of sharing it to coerce the victim into

providing more images, money, or other favors. Between 2021 and 2023, reports of online enticement, which includes sextortion, to NC-MEC's CyberTipline more than tripled, and about 79 percent of these cases involved financial motives.¹⁴ In many cases, victims might feel ashamed and therefore do not seek help, which allows perpetrators to continue harming them.

90% of financial sextortion victims are teenage boys, typically aged 14 to 17.¹⁵

Risks and Repercussions

The consequences of sexting can be severe and long-lasting, even when images are shared consensually.¹⁶

There are serious repercussions that parents should be aware of. When a teen's intimate image is shared without consent, it can spread rapidly among peers and even become publicly accessible online, impacting the child's reputation, self-esteem, and mental health.¹⁷ Young people whose images circulate without their consent often face bullying, harassment, ostracization, and intense emotional

distress. Some experience shame, humiliation, and anxiety, and in the most tragic circumstances may contemplate self-harm and suicide.¹⁸

Aside from the social and emotional harm, **nonconsensual distribution of intimate imagery is a form of abuse that can leave lasting reputational consequences, affecting education, employment opportunities, and relationships later in life.** Research shows that girls often bear a disproportionate burden of shame and social punishment compared to boys when intimate images are circulated, a result of societal double standards.¹⁹ Some teens also experience legal and academic consequences, such as school discipline, loss of privileges, or involvement with law enforcement, underscoring the complex and multifaceted risks involved.²⁰

Teenage boys are also increasingly bearing the brunt of a “shocking” and “exponential” rise in online financial sextortion scams, with data showing they make up the vast majority of victims in these specific, targeted cases.²¹ Reports to the FBI and National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) have shown that while sextortion historically impacted young girls, recent trends indicate that approximately 90% of financial sextortion victims are teenage boys, typically aged 14 to 17.²²

Perpetrators often target teen boys on social media and gaming platforms, posing as attractive young girls to trick them into sharing explicit photos, which are then used to blackmail them for money, gift cards, or cryptocurrency. To learn more about “sextortion,” you can find our *Truth About Sextortion*



Guide in the resources area of our website.

Where and When Sexting Happens

Sexting most commonly occurs on platforms that feel private or temporary to young users, even though content can be easily saved or shared.

- Text messages and direct messaging apps
- Social media platforms with disappearing messages.
- Online gaming chats and live-stream platforms
- Dating apps that minors sometimes access despite age restrictions

Sexting often increases during adolescence, when romantic interest, peer pressure, and curiosity intensify; however, it can begin earlier as children gain access to smartphones and social media.²³

Parental engagement and communication are essential in addressing sexting and its risks. Conversations



about digital behavior, online consent, and respect should begin early, ideally before children receive their first smartphone or create social media accounts. These discussions need to be ongoing, not a single “talk,” because a child’s understanding and the online landscape evolve over time.²⁴ **Create an environment where children feel safe to ask questions**, express curiosity, and disclose uncomfortable experiences without fear of judgment or punishment.

What Parents Can Do to Help

Parents should share that **once an image is sent, it can no longer be controlled**; it may be saved, copied, reshared, and potentially become impossible to fully delete from the internet. Reinforce respect for boundaries, including not pressuring peers for images and not forwarding images of others. **Help children understand consent in both digital and real-world contexts**, emphasizing that consent can be withdrawn and that sharing someone else’s images without permission is harmful and wrong. Talking about sexting in terms of trust, safety, and respect often resonates more than focusing only on legal consequences.

Talk About the Risks of Sending, Asking For, and Resharing Nudes

It is important that kids know that it is illegal to share naked photos of people under the age of 18,²⁵ even if they are of themselves. However, leading with this can set a very serious tone that could isolate them, causing feelings of fear or shame if they do end up participating in this

behavior in the future. Instead, start small and build towards the tough stuff. **Talk to your child without judgment through conversations centered around trust**, consent, what to do if someone asks for a photo of them, threatens them, and the risks of sending naked photos and passing around images of other people.

Be mindful of how these experiences make you feel and take a couple of deep breaths before initiating these tricky conversations. Then, focus on taking a calm, non-judgmental approach and start small.

Practical Steps for Online Safety

In addition to communication, there are practical steps parents can take to promote online safety. Establish family rules about digital device use, privacy settings, and what is appropriate to share online. **Hope Inspire Love offers a “Family Tech Agreement” template (available in the resource area of our website) that focuses on raising kids with healthy tech boundaries and promoting their overall well-being.** It is a written plan that defines how, when, and where devices and technology are used in your home. Encourage children to think critically about their digital footprint and the long-term implications of their online behavior.

Parents may also want to familiarize themselves with parental control tools and privacy settings on social platforms, striking a balance between respecting privacy and autonomy to foster and build trust. **Teach children how to report inappropriate contact and how to block and report accounts that solicit sexual images.** Make it clear that they can always come to you or a trusted adult if they receive requests for nudity or experience coercion online.

If a problem does arise, there are resources available, such as reporting to law enforcement, contacting NCMEC’s CyberTipline for help with content removal, and using services like **“Take It Down”** (takeitdown.ncmec.org) to try to remove images hosted online. Professionals such as counselors, pediatricians, or psychologists

can also support children dealing with the emotional impact of online sexual content.

Understanding the broader digital culture and educating yourself and your children about the realities of sexting are key to prevention. **By fostering open dialogue, modeling respectful communication, setting clear expectations for online behavior, and using available safety resources**, parents can help their children navigate the digital world with greater awareness and resilience.²⁶ Regular conversations that cover the technological, emotional, and ethical dimensions of sexting will empower young people to make safer choices and seek help when needed, ultimately reducing harm and promoting healthier digital relationships.

Create a Safe Space for Continued Dialogue

Having these conversations early on, while your kid is open to learning from you, can help them better understand the situation and know you'll be there unconditionally.

Talk Early & Often: Discuss digital citizenship, consent, and respect before kids get devices. Even if you think they know you'll support them if anything happens, having these conversations can make a significant difference in their willingness to share their experiences with you if something goes wrong.

Controlling your child or teen's online access and behavior might be a knee-jerk reaction to protecting their safety, but it is recommended that open communication and honest dialogue about internet dangers provide a better platform for educating them.



Teach children how to recognize predators and reassure them that they can talk openly without fear, blame, or punishment. Online safety boils down to building resilience, critical thinking, and responsible behavior, ensuring users (especially kids) can navigate risks like cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and scams by trusting their instincts, communicating issues, protecting data, and knowing when to seek help, making it a blend of awareness, skills, and support systems, not just tools.

Final Thoughts for Parents

Sexting is not simply a trend or phase. It exists at the intersection of child development, digital culture, peer pressure, and online risk. By staying informed, maintaining open communication, and emphasizing safety, consent, and respect, parents can help children navigate digital spaces more confidently.



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My Kid Has Been Sexting. Now What?

This guide and the information provided in it is for general informational purposes only. It is not intended as legal, financial, or professional advice. Please consult a qualified professional for specific guidance tailored to your situation.

What to Do as Soon as You Discover It

This moment is critical. How you respond in the first half hour can determine whether your teen withdraws and keeps secrets or feels safe enough to open up, allowing you to support them. Pause and take a breath. The objective is not an emotional reaction, but a thoughtful, steady response guided by a clear plan.

Learning that your teen has been sexting can feel like chaos suddenly crashing into your household. Your thoughts spiral, questions flood your mind, and every instinct urges you to react, yell, punish, or permanently take away their phone or device. But deep down, you probably recognize that acting out of fear or shock will not resolve the situation or protect your child.

The First 30 Minutes: A Parent's Crisis Response Plan

Your immediate priority is to stabilize the situation and collect accurate information. Picture yourself as an emergency responder. You need to evaluate what is happening and assess the situation, prevent further harm, and offer immediate support. This is a time for calm decision-making, not anger.

Step 1: Calm yourself before addressing your child or teen

Your emotions are intense, and the impulse to confront or confiscate devices is strong. Resist it. An outburst will only teach them that coming to you is unsafe. Before speaking to them, ground yourself using this approach:

Pause: Stop what you are doing. Do not rush into confrontation.

Release: Let go of the urge to punish or lecture right away. Breathe: Take three slow breaths. Inhale for four seconds, hold for four, and exhale for six. This brief reset helps steady your nervous system. Your calm presence is what your teen needs most right now.

Step 2: Speak without blame or shame

Your goal is understanding, not extracting a confession. To get honest answers, your adolescent needs to feel safe, even if the conversation is uncomfortable. Shaming or yelling will immediately shut down communication and will not lead to positive change.

Approach the conversation with clarity and care:

State the facts calmly: "I saw something on your phone that worries me. We need to talk

about it so I can understand what is going on and help."

Sit with them: Sit at their level rather than standing over them, which can feel intimidating.

Keep your tone reassuring: Speak in a gentle and slow manner. Let them know, "You are not in trouble. My role is to keep you safe, and I need your honesty to do that."

Step 3: Assess the situation: consent, pressure, or sharing

Understanding the details is essential. Ask neutral, fact-focused questions to determine the level of risk:

- "Can you explain what led up to this message or photo?"
- "Did you feel pushed or pressured to send it?"
- "Was it sent to one person or multiple people?"
- "Do you know if it has been forwarded to others?"
- "Who was involved? Is this someone you know from school?"

Their responses will help you determine whether this was a consensual peer interaction, a situation involving coercion or bullying, or something more serious, such as contact with an adult.

Should your teen be punished for sexting?

Wanting to impose strict consequences is a natural reaction rooted in fear and a desire for protection. But the real aim is not punishment. It is prevention and safety.

Severe punishments often have the opposite effect, pushing teens to hide their actions rather than change them. Instead of consequences that humiliate, choose ones that educate and guide. This does not mean ignoring the behavior. It means responding in a way that actually helps.

A reasonable consequence could include temporarily losing phone privileges, along with clearer rules and increased supervision. More importantly, focus on teaching digital safety, rebuilding trust, and reinforcing that you are the safest person they can turn to when something goes wrong online.

Managing the Aftermath: Reporting Images and Protecting Your Child

At this stage, your focus moves away from figuring out what happened and toward safeguarding your child. The priority becomes limiting further harm and restoring a sense of safety. While emotions may be intense, this moment calls for calm, deliberate action and a clear plan.

Steps to Limit Harm and Regain Control

Move through the following actions in sequence. Each step, no matter how minor it may feel, helps protect your child and gives you back some control in a difficult situation.

Preserve all evidence. Avoid deleting any messages, photos, videos, usernames, or profiles from your child's device. Capture screenshots of conversations, images, and account details. This documentation may be crucial if you need to involve school officials, platforms, or law enforcement.

Report the content to the platforms involved. One of the most urgent goals is to stop the image from spreading further. Contact the social media platforms, messaging apps, gaming services, or websites where the content appeared and report it using their safety or abuse reporting tools, clearly indicating that the material involves a minor.

File a report with the CyberTipline. Any instance of online sexual exploitation of a child should be reported to the CyberTipline, the national reporting system operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Submitting a report ensures the information is routed to the appropriate law enforcement agency for investigation.

Involving the school. You are your child's strongest advo-

cate, and sometimes support from their school is necessary.

Reach out to school administrators if other students are involved, if the images or messages are circulating among classmates, or if the situation is affecting your child's sense of safety or ability to learn. School officials can intervene, enforce disciplinary measures, and help prevent bullying or harassment on campus.

Contacting law enforcement. Although it can be a difficult decision, contacting law enforcement is critical in certain circumstances. If you believe your child is being coerced, threatened, harassed, or extorted by anyone, whether an adult or another minor, you should contact your local police department or sheriff's office promptly.

Law enforcement professionals are trained to respond to these cases with care and discretion. They can assess whether a crime has occurred and take steps to protect your child and others. Trust your judgment. Reporting the situation is an important step in ensuring safety and accountability.

Moving Forward: Restoring Trust and Establishing Healthy Boundaries and Limits

The most urgent part of the situation may have passed, but the longer process of repair is just beginning. Healing

does not require erasing what happened. Instead, it involves learning from it and using that experience to strengthen honesty and connection moving forward.

Rebuilding trust after a sexting incident

One of the most difficult challenges after an incident is the silence that follows. Parents may feel an urge to constantly monitor, check devices, and stay on high alert. While rules may have been broken, the deeper harm often lies in the disruption of trust and communication between parent and child.

Repairing that bond should be the central focus. Trust is rebuilt gradually through steady, dependable actions rather than dramatic apologies or one-time conversations. It starts with showing respect for your child as a person, even when you are disappointed in their choices, so that communication remains open and honest.

This rebuilding process includes:

Listening more than speaking. Invite your child to talk about their emotions, experiences, and daily life, not solely about the incident. Let them share without fear of criticism or immediate consequences.

Being consistent and dependable. Follow through on both support and consequences in a predictable way. Consistency helps your child feel secure

and shows that your words and actions align.

Expressing your own emotions. Sharing feelings such as fear or concern helps your child understand that your response comes from care and love, not control. This kind of openness strengthens emotional connection.

Developing a family digital safety agreement

This agreement is not meant to be a punishment. It serves as a shared guide for how your family will approach technology and online behavior together.

The process should be collaborative, allowing your child to have a voice rather than feeling lectured. A family media agreement works best when it is flexible and evolves as your child grows and gains maturity.

Such an agreement can help clarify expectations by:

Establishing tech-free times and spaces. For example, limiting device use in bedrooms at night or during family meals can protect sleep, focus, and connection.



SOURCES:

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Clarifying privacy and supervision. Setting expectations that devices may be checked occasionally, not as a form of discipline but as part of rebuilding trust and ensuring safety.

Defining acceptable online behavior. Agreeing on what content is appropriate to share, how to treat others respectfully online, and how to respond when something feels uncomfortable or concerning.

Creating a safety exit plan. Developing a code word or phrase your child can use at any time to signal they need help leaving an uncomfortable situation, without fear of punishment or interrogation.

Model Healthy Digital Habits. Your personal technology habits communicate powerful lessons. Research published in *Pediatric Research* shows that children tend to model their screen use after their parents, which makes mindful tech behavior especially important. When you demonstrate balance by stepping away from screens, setting limits, and choosing in-person connection, you teach healthy digital habits through example.²⁷

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