

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO
SEXTING

**SCREEN
+ SANITY**™



SEXTING

WHAT IS IT?

A combo of “sex” and “texting,” it’s literally sending sexually explicit messages via computers, smartphones, and tablets. This can mean saying sexual things via words and emojis, as well as sending suggestive or nude photos.

GIRLS VS. GUYS

For girls

Getting asked for a nude is a measure of popularity and likeability—so many will sext for the status it affords them, not thinking about the risks, negative impacts, or guy’s motives. There are many stories of girls who turn to **self-harm and suicide** after their reputations were destroyed by boys sharing their sexts with others.

For guys

Sexting can be motivated by hormones, curiosity, and a desire to come across as manly or cool. Although porn is ubiquitous and easily accessible, sexting appeals because it might lead to something more, which porn will never be able to offer.

50%

of teens report they have been asked to send a sext, from acquaintances and strangers

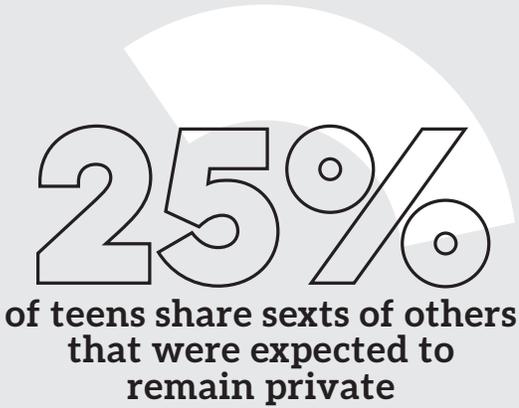
THE STATS

A recent study found that 15% of teens ages 12-18 had sent a sext and 27% had received one.

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Emojis are worth a thousand words, and it only takes a quick Google search to find online encyclopedias for emoji sexting, often linking to “related articles” about online porn. These include:

- BUTT**
- MALE GENITALIA**
- FEMALE GENITALIA**
- X-RATED EYES**
- SPEAK NO EVIL**
- SEND VIDEOS OF YOURSELF**
- MALE EJACULATION**
- SEXUAL PENETRATION**
- SPANKING**
- NETFLIX & CHILL**
- ORAL SEX**
- MASTURBATION**



25%
of teens share sexts of others that were expected to remain private

PARENTS BEWARE

The Calculator app is a common app teens use to **keep sexts hidden**. It appears to be a calculator, but hides a secret vault of files that can only be accessed via a secret code.

 Learn more at **SCREENSANITY.ORG**

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CAN I PREVENT SEXTING FROM HAPPENING TO MY CHILD?

Sexting has becoming a normalized behavior in teen culture—so at some point your child or their friends will be tempted. While you cannot fully prevent your child from sexting, you have a serious advantage if you take a **driver's ed approach** to smartphone and social media introduction. At Screen Sanity, we call this "Ride. Practice. Drive." Before you hand your child the keys to a car, they spend many years shadowing you in the backseat, learning the rules of the road. **Before you give your child full-access to the online world, make sure you have talked to them about Sexting—one road hazard they will encounter frequently.**

Use any opportunity that gives you a natural way to bring the topic up, whether it's a school assembly, something you see on your own feed, or a situation in a TV show. **Proactively make sure they know you are safe harbor—they can talk to you about anything. Talk openly about sexting's underlying attractions, risks and dangers.** Not sure where to start? Here are some ideas:

-  Have you witnessed or heard about sexting? How did it make you feel?
-  Do you feel like you could tell me if you were sent a sext? How do you think I will react?
-  Why do you think teens find sexting fulfilling? Where should we find our fulfillment? What are the things that seem fulfilling to you?
-  How is sexting impacting the way we look at others? The way we treat them? The way we think about them?

HOW CAN I EQUIP THEM TO RESIST THE PRESSURE OF SEXTING?

As your child gains access to new apps or devices, it should feel like a "learner's permit"—with you logging hours by their side, calmly responding when they receive inappropriate texts, coaching them with ongoing support and assistance. You'll want to start with strong limits, and release them slowly.

- Install a monitoring app like **Bark** as a safety net, an app that monitors a device and flags inappropriate content.
- Share passwords with parents.
- Only allow a small number of friends and family when they start texting.
- When they start a new social media account, make sure it's private.
- Create device-free zones — like bedrooms overnight, which is prime time for making impulsive, irrational decisions and bathrooms, which give privacy to act on impulsive ideas.
- Engage with your child's online activities, showing them how to identify and block unwanted solicitations (you can do so anonymously), reject messages from strangers, and report inappropriate content immediately.

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WHAT APPS DO THEY USE TO SEXT?

In addition to the Calculator app mentioned above, teens can sext using anything with image-sending capabilities (e.g. a phone's default text messaging app, [Messenger](#), [WhatsApp](#)). However, those that provide some level of privacy, secrecy, and/or anonymity are usually preferred ([Snapchat](#)—potentially in conjunction with their camera glasses called [Spectacles](#)—[Kik](#), direct/private messages on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), and even [Pinterest](#)). Other apps like [Tinder](#), [Melon](#), [Periscope](#), [Bumble](#), and [all of these](#) afford teens more privacy, the ability to connect with complete strangers, and live-streaming capabilities. Also, keep in mind that many video games have chatting functions and/or allow players' avatars to simulate sex.

Ultimately, if you don't know what an app on your child's device is for, ask him/her. We suggest [implementing Parental Controls](#) on his/her device so that your teen needs approval to download new apps, but never let these be a substitute for discussion, training, and accountability.

ISN'T IT ILLEGAL FOR A MINOR TO SEXT?

This is where things get fuzzy. In the US, if the sexting occurs between two consenting adults (18+), then it's not illegal. But if it's between minors, it's possible that [child sexual exploitation and child pornography laws](#) could come into play. But the law hasn't been able to keep up with technology, so in instances where a teen takes a photo of him/herself and shares it with others, he/she could be considered both the perpetrator and the victim (and there are steep consequences for perpetrators of child pornography). And, if your child is 18 and sexting with someone who is 17 or 16, your child would be tried as an adult (not a minor) if charges are filed. Check out [this Wikipedia article](#) for more info.

IF MY CHILD ISN'T SEXTING, DO I NEED TO TALK ABOUT IT?

Not addressing it is an option, but it may not be the wisest choice. Even if your child hasn't sexted, the pressure to do so will only become greater over time. If you don't equip them with the tools they need to be wise and make good decisions ahead of time, how will they know what to do when confronted with the pressure to sext?

HOW IS SEXTING AFFECTING TEENS?

In many ways, but one concerning effect is that those who engage in sexting are more likely to have sexual intercourse, according to research. In addition, those whose sexts are shared without their consent (one study found that **1 in 4 sexters were sharing sexts, despite expectations they would remain private**) also face bullying, rejection, and ostracism from their peers, as well as negative changes in their emotions and behavior, such as shame, isolation, and depression. There are many stories of girls who turn to self-harm and suicide after their reputations were destroyed by boys sharing their sexts with others, like this one of a [13-year-old girl in 7th grade](#). In fact, 39% of teen boys and 38% of teen girls say they've seen sexually suggestive messages that *were originally meant for someone else*.

HELP! MY CHILD IS SEXTING. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Deep Breaths

Whether you've discovered your child is already sexting or whether it just makes you angry to know that sexting and the pressure to do so is a thing, reacting out of elevated emotion can frustrate and alienate your child. Don't deal with the issue until you've had time to calm down.

Perspective

If your child has been sexting, let us reassure you: You're not a bad parent! Whatever guilt, shame, anger, sadness, frustration, or defeat you're feeling is real—but it's also not true. Your child could have been raised flawlessly but still make this choice because he/she is an autonomous individual. So rather than letting it discourage you, be encouraged! You have a beautiful opportunity to listen and give empathy, perhaps share about your own mistakes, and develop a deeper relationship with your child through this situation.

Something Better

Realize that, more than anything else, the underlying issue is the fact that teens' imaginations have been hijacked to believe that sexting will fulfill them. **So rather than coming down on them, we need to offer them a better story to live into.** Ask them what leads to true, lifelong fulfillment. What do they hope and dream for? What matters most to them? As they identify and pursue those things, it can help them break free from the allure and pressure of sexting.

Questions

If your child has been caught or confessed to sexting, take some time to ask questions before rendering judgment or consequences. Why were

they sexting? How did it make them feel? Had they considered the consequences? Would they do it again? Why or why not? Often, asking questions will help you see where their hearts are and potentially even help them to decide for themselves that they shouldn't keep sexting.

Boundaries

Being an adult means we learn to deal with consequences, not avoid them. So sheltering children from all consequences only keeps them from learning the skills necessary to become well-adjusted adults. But that doesn't mean these consequences should be punitive or come from a place of anger. Instead, calmly explain to your child why he is having privileges revoked, tell him that it hurts you to have to do it, and offer a vision of what you hope for him in the future. Then clearly outline the steps he will have to take in order to regain and retain privileges, making sure he knows the stakes are higher—both in terms of privileges and self-damage—if the sexting continues.

Accountability

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FINAL THOUGHTS

No child—no matter how good, innocent, smart, tenacious, sweet, strong, or obedient he/she is—is immune to the pressures and allure of sexting. There are countless stories of tweens and teens that no one would ever suspect getting caught up in sexting scandals. **Today's youth want to talk to us about sexting.** When we remove the veil and demonstrate how sexting, despite its promises of satisfaction and fulfillment, actually leaves us emptier and less satisfied than before, that's when our children will begin to understand. We can continue to tell them not to do it because it's wrong or because it could get them into legal trouble or "because we said so," but how it makes them feel and its perceived benefits will win every time.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Bark](#)

An app for tracking texting and social media activity

[Circle](#)

A device that helps put healthy boundaries on device activity

[Qustodio](#)

An app for tracking and limiting time spent online

[Screentime](#)

An app for tracking and limiting time spent online

[Connect Safely](#)

Website

[Protect Young Minds](#)

Website

[Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey](#)

[The Online Mom](#)

Website