Changing attitudes about sexting

*Ken Corish from the South West Grid for Learning discusses So you got naked, a resource aimed at helping young people deal with the consequences of sharing indecent images*

**Please tell us about the South West Grid for Learning and the work they do**

The South West Grid for Learning is a charitable trust that began over 10 years ago with the aim of providing internet connectivity and support for schools. We work with 15 Local Authorities in the South West providing technology and safety features like connectivity, filtering and firewalls. While doing this work we found that while we were providing safety resources in schools young people were still vulnerable at home and so five years ago we developed educational services for online safety. We also found that schools were vulnerable when trying to deal with incidents and so we provided services for them.

Through our reputation for online safety we then became a lead partner with the UK Safer Internet Centre and we now have a triumvirate partnership with Childnet and the Internet Watch Foundation.

**Please tell us a little bit about your role**

I am the online safety manager for the South West Grid for Learning. I used to be a teacher and educational adviser and in my current role I oversee the development of resources and manage a team of consultants who work with schools, parents and young people. We also work with a range of other agencies including social care.

**Why did you decide to create the So you got naked resource?**

During the course of our work with young people we realised that while there were resources looking at preventing sexting in response to anecdotal evidence about the rise of sexting, when we conducted our own research we found that 40% of 1,100 11 to 16 year olds had already been involved in sexting or had seen it. Even more worrying was that 40% of the young people asked thought that a topless image of a 16 year old girl was acceptable and 20% thought a naked image of a 16 year old girl was acceptable. We also found out that 72% of young people wouldn’t go to an adult if they were the victim of sexting, but would rather tell a friend.

In response to this we realised that although we had preventative material advising young people not to partake in sharing self-generated indecent images (SGII) there was also a place for a resource that empowered young people to deal with it if they did get involved. We chose the provocative title of ‘So you got naked’ to resonate with those who have experienced the consequences of sexting.

We created a booklet explaining the drivers for this behaviour for teachers and parents and a leaflet for young people. This leaflet contains advice and guidance and tries to explain that even if a young person has shared an inappropriate image of themselves it’s not always the end of the world and that they do have some power. The leaflet advises young people on the steps they can take to try to have an image taken down and also gives guidance on how they can attempt to work with search
engine optimisation so that the image doesn’t appear prominently in a search. It also advises on where to get help and how to tell a trusted adult.

The resource is available at South West Grid for Learning and can either be downloaded electronically or ordered as printed copies.

**What has the reaction been to the resource?**

We were a little worried about the response as the aim of the resource isn’t to say that sharing indecent images is acceptable but rather to provide a counterpoint to preventative guidance.

Despite our worries we have had a very positive response from our partners, other agencies and schools. The resource is now the biggest item on our online store and we have even had international interest in the resource when the privacy commissioner for Victoria, Australia contacted us to collaborate on adapting the resource for schools in Victoria. This has now been introduced to schools across Australia.

**What trends do you see surrounding incidents of sexting?**

Our research shows that young people see sharing indecent images as mundane and they don’t see it as compromising their integrity. Research shows that girls are more likely to sext in response to a request, while boys are more likely to sext someone to see if they get a reaction. Anecdotal evidence suggests that girls are more at risk than boys and this does show that there are attitudes surrounding gender that need to be dealt with to improve the situation. For example a boy who sexts is likely to receive praise from his peers while a girl will be labelled a ‘slag’.

We have also seen that there are endemic levels of sexting for certain age groups. It seems as though sexting is most prevalent at the cusp of change so those young people in Year 8 making the transition from primary to secondary school, when they begin to experience a broader and more challenging environment, with a change in social demographic and most likely access to a wider range of technology, are particularly at risk. This is also true for young people at the end of Key Stage 3 who are experiencing another transition phase.

**What do you think schools should focus on in online safety education?**

It is important to note that young people can compromise their online safety and integrity in several different ways and with new technology developing all the time it is vital to realise that we need to focus on changing young people’s attitudes to sharing information and images not just on teaching them about different technologies.

Education should focus on the prevalence of incidents and also address the attitude that certain technologies can give that make it seem as if you can manage sharing this type of information and the feeling of ‘dis-inhibition’ that can accompany communicating online. A lot of young people don’t understand the demographics of certain online communities or platforms and don’t understand the consequences of sharing information on that forum.
For example a lot of young people think that it’s ok if you can’t see their face in an indecent image but from a legal point of view all of these images fall under the definition of child sexual abuse. However, while it is important that the police are involved in dealing with indecent images it is also essential that young people aren’t criminalised for sharing images. The police in this country have been good in adopting a sensitive response, an approach that has been supported by the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Although our programme began by looking at technology the development of this technology has meant that our resources have become broader, looking at safeguarding, PHSE and focusing on changing attitudes. For example we are currently developing resources to educate young people about pornography and to help schools with sex and relationship advice.

What support do you provide for schools?
We offer a helpline for professionals, providing support for those dealing with online safety and perhaps delicate issues. This is a free service aimed exclusively at professionals and we also offer advice for those teachers who may have become a target or victim themselves. In NI we have direct links with C2K.

We also have links with the industry so we have links with social networks like Facebook and Ask.FM who have been very proactive in dealing with our responses. We are able to help professionals make requests to remove content and we have been able to have content removed much more quickly than directly approaching the website in question. The helpline can be found at UK Safer Internet Centre.

Is there one particular app or website that schools should be aware of?
The landscape changes so rapidly that it’s hard to name a particular platform. A year ago we would have been discussing Chat roulette and MSN but now we’re discussing Ask.FM. I think it’s important for schools to realise that they shouldn’t focus on the technology but rather on the behaviour around using that technology.

The industry is also starting to become more aware that they need to build safeguarding measures into the design of their products and companies like Ask.FM have started engaging with the UK Safer Internet Centre but until reporting methods are vastly improved and made clearer then it is up to schools to educate young people about protecting themselves.

What advice would you give schools to educate their pupils about online safety?
I think one really important point to pass on to young people (and to teachers) is that if you are using something for free, be that an app or a social network, YOU are the product. It is you and your information that the network needs so you need to take care with what happens to your information and images. These are a valuable commodity and it’s up to you to protect your own information.
Recent research from the Internet Watch Foundation indicates that up to 88% of self generated indecent images (SGII) are harvested and sold to websites dealing in indecent images of children. This should make young people realise that it’s not just about checking their privacy settings but also about really thinking about what they are posting. When using online networks like Facebook you are dealing with an algorithm that is designed to make social connections without you having to, so applying privacy settings can seem a little bit of contradiction. My advice would be to teach young people to manage their friends by sorting them into groups and then choosing which content to share with certain groups. This means information is more private and should empower young people to really make a choice and consider what they are sharing before they post it. We produce a leaflet Facebook Check which schools can order from our website.

My final piece of advice for teachers or other professionals would be that if they suspect that there are inappropriate images of a young person online or on a device they should:

1. Have a colleague corroborate their suspicion (DT or DDT)
2. DT / DDT Seeks advice from the police

It’s vital that teachers and professionals don’t embroil themselves in a situation by following incorrect procedure so it’s vital that schools have robust incident management procedures in place.

You can download the ‘So you got naked’ advice on the South West Grid for Learning store, as well as finding other resources and advice.