Research and recommendations: what can schools do about sexting?

Do you know what messages students are sending from their mobiles?

Suzanne O’Connell offers some suggestions on how schools might tackle the increasing problem of sexting.

In the parliamentary debate on 14 February 2013 into violence against women and girls, MPs debated (among other issues) sexting in schools. Claire Perry MP highlighted that: ‘The problem is children and young people exchanging inappropriate images, content and messages. That is a huge, growing and endemic problem.’

Research suggests that it is considered normal behaviour by many.

Sexting involves creating, sharing and forwarding sexually suggestive rude (or nearly rude) images. It is more likely to be instigated by boys, and extended distribution or ‘exposure’ can have significant emotional implications.

What is particularly worrying is that research suggests that it is considered normal behaviour by many.

What we know about sexting
The NSPCC asked the Institute of Education, King’s College London, the London School of Economics and the Open University to conduct a small-scale qualitative study to improve understanding of sexting and the use of mobile technology by young people.

The researchers conducted focus group interviews with 120 young people aged 13 to 14 across three counties in England and published their findings in 2012: A qualitative study of children and young people and ‘sexting’: a report prepared for the NSPCC.

Main findings

The main messages from the NSPCC research include the following.

- The main threat is from technology-mediated sexual pressure from the ever-widening circles of peers, rather than ‘stranger danger’.
- Sexting is often coercive and linked to harassment, bullying and even violence.
- Girls are most adversely affected – primarily, boys harass girls.
- Technology amplifies the problem, increasing the objectification of girls.
- Sexting reveals wider sexual pressures.
- Ever younger children are affected – the impact on Year 8 was greater than in Year 10.
- Sexting practices are culturally specific, with girls being subject to oppressive, racialised beauty norms and boys being subject to competitive masculinity – both linked to commercial culture.
- More support and resources are vital.

**A very worrying picture**
The research presented a very worrying picture of life in secondary school, particularly for girls.

Girls were repeatedly asked to send images of themselves. If they gave in, they were vulnerable to being labelled as ‘sluts’, with very little control over the further distribution of images.

The circulation of pictures is a form of popularity currency, particularly among boys. The NSPCC found that both boys and girls blamed girls for sending the pictures.

**Pressurised yet voluntary**
‘They choose to participate but they cannot choose to say “no”’

The researchers found that: ‘Much of young people’s talk, therefore, reflects an experience that is pressurised yet voluntary – they choose to participate but they cannot choose to say “no” ’ (p.7).

They suggest that the young people they talked to were well aware of how to protect themselves from strangers online, but had greater difficulty when it came to reducing risk from known peers.

**Resigned attitudes**
Many of the young people felt that they had few friends who could be trusted, and they could not see a way of publicly disagreeing with the practice: ‘There seemed to be a certain resigned individualistic attitude in the sense that nothing they could do would change anything, so as long as it didn’t [affect] them personally, there was no point in trying’ (p.42).

This also applies to the pressure on boys to behave in a certain macho masculine way or be at risk of being labelled ‘gay’.
**Sexist abuse and physical harassment**
What is perhaps particularly worrying, according to the NSPCC research, is the general prevalence of sexist abuse and physical harassment that sexting is part of.

Girls were subject to sexual harassment on a regular basis. Sexting is only one expression of this.

**Exposure**
The NSPCC report talks about ‘exposure’, which is ‘a term used by the young people to describe the unwanted posting of private pictures or text to Facebook or Blackberry messaging’.

Exposure ranged from proving that someone told a lie to taking a picture of them when they weren’t expecting it. They found that girls were constantly under threat of exposure, and that this could have an impact on their emotional wellbeing.

**Sharing personal images and videos**
Dr Andy Phippen of Plymouth University wrote a report in 2009, entitled ‘Sharing personal images and videos among young people’, based on research carried out by the South West Grid for Learning and Plymouth University.

Of the 535 respondents, 56% were aware of times when images and videos were distributed further than the intended recipient, but only 23% believed that this was intended to cause upset.

**Blasé attitudes**
Dr Phippen’s particular concern was the relaxed attitude that there seemed to be about it: ‘The survey clearly shows a population fully aware of the concept of sexting and a significant subset who are actively engaged with the practice. What is particularly worrying is the somewhat blasé attitudes to the subject’ (p.2).

Some 40% of respondents did not see anything wrong with a topless image, and 15% did not take issue with a naked image.

Also, 40% said they knew friends who carried out the practice of sexting, and 27% of respondents said that sexting happens regularly or all of the time.
The school’s role
Discuss sexting with pupils.

In Dr Phippen’s research only 27% thought that young people needed more support and advice about sexting, and only 24% would turn to a teacher if they were affected by it. However, he suggests that schools should be more prepared to discuss sexting with their pupils, as they may not be fully aware of the implications of their actions.

The NSPCC found that girls often said that they would go to their mum or go to a teacher if something became particularly upsetting, but this was a ‘rote’ answer. Overall, there was a culture of silence, as girls were also concerned about being seen as a ‘grass’.

Discuss sexual matters as part of anti-bullying initiatives
Reference to the use of mobile technologies should be included in anti-bullying policies

The NSPCC points out that there is a fine line between sexting and bullying, and it is important that teachers are willing to discuss sexual matters as part of their anti-bullying initiatives.

The difference in perception of sexting according to gender needs careful handling, says the NSPCC report: ‘We found considerable evidence of an age-old double standard, by which sexually active boys are to be admired and “rated”, while sexually active girls are denigrated and despised as “sluts” ’ (p.7).

Decide policy on mobile technologies
Reference to the use of mobile technologies should be included in anti-bullying policies.

There are some specific differences to other types of bullying. For example, non-response can lead to very public ‘punishments’, and messages can be sent repeatedly. This needs to be taken into consideration, when deciding on policy.

Recommendations for schools
The NSPCC recommendations for schools include:

- An LLW curriculum in post primary schools that covers peer exchange of sexual messages, images, invitations and taunts either together with or separately from bullying
- greater awareness of the issues and resources to cope with sexual cyberbullying or digitally mediated sexual harassment in schools
• strategies to address teacher embarrassment and acknowledgement that sexual harassment might not come from a stranger but from another child in the same class
• readiness to address issues through viewing and discussing up-to-date, realistic, filmed scenarios – these should be gender-sensitive and non-moralising, and should resist blaming girls
• addressing the issue of sexting in single-sex groups (ideally small ones), with boys being helped to recognise their double standards
• acknowledgement that not all sexting is a problem
• ensuring that those addressing the problem in schools are up to date with technology
• placing greater emphasis on information and pedagogical resources, rather than on heavy-handed surveillance systems.

**Author details: Suzanne O’Connell. Types of abuse ICT and internet**

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