

Apr 1st, 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM

## Adolescents and Sexting: The Various Consequences and Strategies for Schools to Respond

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Hagensick, Scotti, "Adolescents and Sexting: The Various Consequences and Strategies for Schools to Respond" (2015). *Annual Graduate Student Symposium*. 7.  
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# Adolescents and Sexting:

*The Various Consequences and Strategies  
for Schools to Respond*

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# Sexting Among Adolescents

- What is sexting?
- How does it play a role in adolescents' lives?
- What are the consequences?
- How can school districts respond effectively?

Sexting is known as the sharing of sexually explicit photos, messages, or sexual content. According to many sources, this behavior is rapidly increasing as more and more preteens and teenagers own cell phones today. Unfortunately, many teens are unaware of the serious consequences that may result from partaking in such behaviors. Potential consequences may range from being charged with a felony pornography charge or having to register as a state sex offender.

Beyond legal repercussions, students may also face damage to their reputation, social exclusion or experience bullying or cyber stalking.

This presentation will focus on the social, emotional, and legal consequences incurred by sexting actions. I will also discuss the current legal stance of the State of Iowa in regard to sexting. Finally I will discuss key ideas for school counselors and administrators to keep in mind when responding to a school sexting scandal.

# Sexting and Teens' Digital World

- The definition of sexting is expanding
  - Communicating sexually via digital means is becoming increasingly easier
- More teens than ever before own cell phones
- Between 10-20% of teens have shared sexual content using technology (Moreno, Parks, Zimmerman, Brito, & Christakas, 2009)

The definition of sexting has been challenged in recent years. It used to mean explicit or suggestive text messages. However sexting behaviors have changed with the advances in technology. Experts have recommended updating the definition to include other methods of communicating sexually such as texting, sending/receiving photos, explicit video, phone sex and live sex via programs such as Zoom or Skype.

Only 18% of 12-year-olds in 2004 owned a cell phone. In 2009, that number more than tripled. Almost 60% of 12-year-olds owned a cell phone in 2009. The rate of text messaging also has skyrocketed and on average, teenagers send 110 texts per day.

While some people still frown upon sexting behaviors, preteens and teens are certainly engaging in the behavior. While statistics vary, it is estimated between 10-20% of all teens have shared sexual content digitally in the United States.

Not only are students engaging in these behaviors, both boys and girls are equally as likely to send suggestive photos or texts via cell phones. However, teens are four times as likely to receive a text in comparison to their likelihood of sending one. Our students are at a high risk of receiving explicit content whether they are asking for it or not.

# The Motivation to Sext

- Gain popularity and social standing
  - Female students are twice as likely to cite this reason (VandenAbeelee et al., 2014)
- Pressure to initiate or maintain a romantic relationship

Adolescents themselves are often at a different stage developmentally and cognitively than are adults. While we are able to conceptualize sexting as a risky behavior and one that has serious potential consequences, teenagers often overlook the consequences or even lack the awareness. As adults, we often wonder why sexting is enticing to students and why they believe it may be a good idea.

According to VandenAbeelee, the more popularity students will gain as a response to sexting, the more likely they are to do so. In fact, in this particular study which utilized a Wald Test, there is a 70% increase in the odds of sexting for every one unit of increase in popularity.

Other teens report feeling pressure to keep another peer interested in them romantically or may resort to sexting in order to develop a new relationship.

# Social and Emotional Consequences

- Damage to reputation
- Perceived as “slutty” or “lacking judgement”
- Difficulty managing feelings; potential suicide risk
- Girls may be judged more harshly than boys for participating in sexting behaviors
  - Female students who sext endure harsh criticism from both male and female peers (Lippmann & Campbell, 2014)

Both male and female students may face a variety of social and emotional consequences after engaging in sexting behaviors. The consequences can be very severe. There have been several news stories reporting students who have had nude photos of themselves distributed school-wide and subsequently committed suicide. Hope Witsell, a middle school student from Florida, committed suicide at the age of 14 after a topless photo of herself was stolen from the intended recipient. She was bullied relentlessly both in person and online.

In a focus group study conducted by Lippmann and Campbell in 2014, 43 students ages 12-18 voiced their concerns about engaging in sexting behaviors and how actions are perceived differently depending on the gender of the individual depicted in the photo. This particular group of students provides a much more complete picture of what students are doing today. One out of every five students in the group reported sexting in the past. Half of them reported receiving explicit content. It is very startling to think 12-year-olds, sixth graders, may be sexting or receiving inappropriate content on their mobile devices.

The male students participating in the group repeatedly stated girls who sext are “insecure and attention seeking sluts with poor judgement.” As surprising as these comments are, girls also judge other female students very severely as well. The female participants in the focus group stated they believed their female peers who partook in sexting did so as a demonstration of their “sluttiness” and it served as evidence of their “lack of self-respect.”

# Legal Consequences

- Currently 20 states have introduced a “sexting law” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015)
  - Iowa does not have a “sexting law”
- Iowa currently enforces both “pornography production” and “pornography distribution” charges in sexting cases (Iowa Code Chapter 728)
  - Several Iowa cases have resulted in felony charges

In 2005, the Iowa Supreme Court convicted an 18-year-old student attending Perry High School of a serious misdemeanor after he was found guilty of sending a photo of his genitals to a 14-year-old classmate. He was fined \$250, sentenced to a year of probation, and had to register as a sex offender.

The legal consequences of sexting are severe. In some cases, the moment of indiscretion results in a lifetime of unintended consequences. The case I just described occurred 10 years ago. You may be wondering if the Iowa laws have changed since then.

According to Iowa Code Chapter 728, any individual who disseminates obscene material to a minor is guilty of a public offense and a serious misdemeanor charge. Other consequences potentially include possession of child pornography, a serious offense. Students in Iowa have been convicted on felony charges. For example, any student who takes a photo of themselves and sends it to another person, may be charged with production of child pornography. Adolescent girls in the State of Iowa have actually been charged with this crime, which is more serious than pornography distribution.

Additional consequences in this state may include a \$25,000 fine per incident and/or inclusion on the Iowa Sex Offender Registry.

Many states have pushed to bring lawmakers' attention to these laws that have been called “unfair” and “outdated.” So far, 20 states have made amendments to these

laws. These 20 states have decided to make sexting a misdemeanor and reconsider the child pornography charges. Sexting laws allow sexting to be considered legal if two individuals involved with the situation are in a consenting relationship and the sexual content is not distributed to other outside parties.

Iowa lawmakers met in February 2015 to consider such a possible change to current laws. No laws have been amended as of this date.



# Recommendations for School Counselors

## **Prevention Strategies:**

- 1) Create a supportive and positive school climate
- 2) Initiate the formation of a school crisis team
- 3) Inform all stakeholders of school policies regarding sexting

Based on these key facts, it is extremely apparent that this is a relevant issue for educational institutions. Our students are engaging in these “risky” behaviors and often do not anticipate the serious consequences potentially affecting them.

The next few slides will provide recommendations and effective strategies for school counselor to help prevent sexting situations and respond appropriately when it does occur in their school.

One of the most important steps in preventing sexting scandals and fostering an effective learning environment, is making a focused effort to develop a positive and supportive school climate. All stakeholders in the district and school building should believe trustworthy relationships exists. Counselors and administrators can utilize the existing curriculum such as PBIS, Seven Habits, or Character Counts to expand on this idea. Using an existing curriculum allows all educators the opportunity to continue to strive for a positive school philosophy.

Secondly it is important to enlist a sexting crisis team. A crisis team is composed of teachers, administrators, school psychologists and counselors, parents, law enforcement members, and trusted community members. This team would work to develop appropriate training programs and help to equip parents with the tool to talk to their children about sexting, and also develop a systematic plan to refer to in a time of crisis. Another important task for the crisis team to consider is developing a school policy or code of conduct that describes a plan to follow if sexting occurs on and off school grounds. Law enforcement can also work with the school to discuss proper

protocol to take when confiscating devices or collaborate to monitor common areas within the school to develop an awareness of students' activities.

Upon developing a policy to follow in the event of sexting, it is of vital importance that all parents, students, and staff are aware of the policy. At the beginning of each academic year, the school counselor can hold an orientation or information night to inform all parties. Law enforcement members can also be available to answer parent/guardian questions on the legal background of sexting. Counselors will need to continue to promote an awareness of sexting throughout the school year by utilizing student handbooks, newsletters, and the school website.

# Recommendations for School Counselors: Continued

- 4) Assess student risk
- 5) Inform and educate staff members, parents, and the community about key sexting facts
- 6) Incorporate sexting education into existing counseling curricula
- 7) Equip students with the skills to report cyberbullying cases involving sexting

Counselors should also assess risk level among the student body. At the beginning of each school year, counselors can distribute a needs assessment survey to address students' perceptions related to their self esteem, ability to resist peer pressure, develop an awareness of whether students have supportive networks, etc. Counselors can also beginning to assess the level of knowledge students have pertaining to the code of conduct and legality of sexting.

Similarly to educating others about the code of conduct, counselors can also be proactive by disseminating information about sexting throughout the year. It is important to equip all stakeholders with the information to support students. Also counselors need to stay current with their state sexting laws to provide accurate information to parents/guardians. Counselors can also provide resources and helpful tools to parents to support their child.

Part of a counselor's role is to provide proactive and preventative services. School counselors can utilize the existing curricula to educate students about digital citizenship, responsible Internet usage, appropriate online behaviors, and how to combat cyberbullying. Even at the upper elementary ages, counselors can use age appropriate explanations of what types of photos are appropriate and acceptable text messages to send.

Many schools desire to teach students how to be upstanding citizens and avoid being passive bystanders. Counselors and administrators can equip students with the confidence and tools to identify and report instances of cyberbullying involving

sexting. Students should have the opportunity to approach trusted adults anonymously and report any information they may have.

# Responding to a Sexting Crisis

## **Interventions:**

- 1) Report all information (even suspicions) immediately
- 2) Administrators, not teachers or other staff, should confiscate mobile devices if law enforcement is unable
- 3) Do not examine or search any electronic devices
- 4) Contact primary students and families involved

After developing a concrete plan to follow, all staff need to follow specific steps in the event of a sexting crisis. Even if staff members hear rumors or have a nagging suspicion but no concrete evidence, it should be reported to administrators.

Once information is reported, the crisis team will assume their respective roles. Staff members should request administrators personally confiscate the device if law enforcement is not present. It is very important that all educators should not even look through a cell phone log as this can potentially unexpectedly result in a child pornography charge. Law enforcement members are the only individuals who should locate photos or search text messages.

According to school policy, contacting parents may be mandatory. Law enforcement will need to remain in constant contact with the school and crisis team. The school will need to consider whether meeting with the parents separately from the child is a more effective means to gather information about the case.

Upon gathering information, counselors will want to meet with students who are in the photo or who received it to provide any counseling services. Counselors also need to be aware of their limits and potentially work with families to refer to outside counseling services.

# Responding to a Sexting Crisis

- 5) Consider the motivation behind the sexting behavior
- 6) Deliver discipline according to school policy
- 7) Provide resources regarding outside counseling
- 8) Check-in with students/parents on a regular basis
- 9) Document all interventions and services

The crisis team will need to use the information gathered to gain a clearer picture of the motivation behind the sexting instance. There will most likely be a difference in how the school handles punishment depending on whether the photo or text was sent between individuals in a relationship or if the photo or content was designed and distributed to intentionally harm another person. Again, it is extremely important the crisis team consider these different situations when developing the plan for response.

Warnings and discipline should be delivered according to school policy. It is important to consider each event on a case-by-base basis. It also depends on how many times this has occurred for each student and the severity of the punishment should coordinate with the number of offenses.

The effectiveness of consequences delivered by school depends on the situation and some methods are more desirable than others. Sources suggest in-school suspensions may be a more effective method of discipline rather than out of school suspensions. Outside of school suspensions may allow a child to be at home with no supervision and access to electronic media. The crisis team can discuss whether an in-school suspension may be a better plan of action. In school suspensions can serve as educational or training opportunities for students. Involved parties can learn how to avoid these behaviors in the future and if possible, parents can also attend and learn skills to monitor their child's cell phone activity and potentially prevent future sexting crises.

If the school is fortunate to have a mental health professional on staff, they can

provide counseling for students who have been affected by the situation. It is important to minimize the emotional and social consequences in the aftermath of a sexting situation.

The intervention process never truly ends after a sexting event occurs. Students and parents will need to be checked-in with on an ongoing basis. Check-ins will need to be more frequently in the immediate aftermath and can be reduced after a time. The emotional effects of sexting can be long lasting and even permanent, especially for the individual in the photo. Continue to emphasize the fact that the school is available as a resource over the long term should parents or students require additional assistance. Counselors can also collaborate with other staff members to develop a system to alert each other should they notice sudden changes in a student's behavior.

All interventions should be appropriately documented and noted. A secure file should also be kept on hand for future reference. It is important to work with law enforcement in regard to what information should be documented. The crisis team will also need to evaluate their actions and determine what changes may need to take place in future situations.

# Conclusion

Preparation and a proactive stance are the key strategies for school district success in preventing and responding to sexting situations.

Sexting behaviors among teens are rapidly increases and this presents many challenges for schools and educators. Social, emotional, and legal consequences often accompany sexting incidents. Despite the challenges, school districts have many ways to prepare for and anticipate sexting crises. A high level of preparation and attention are key to preventing sexting behaviors and equipping students with the knowledge to become responsible digital citizens.