

Sexting Among Teens Is Not Always Harmful

Sexting. 2015.

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Article Commentary

Anne Collier, "'Noodz,' 'Selfies,' 'Sexts,' etc., Part 1: A Spectrum of Motivations," netfamilynews.org, May 7, 2013. Copyright © 2013 Anne Collier. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Based in northern California, Anne Collier is editor of NetFamilyNews.org and codirector of ConnectSafely.org, a website and forum that provides information on youths and the Internet.

To some teens, the term "sexting" to describe sending and receiving nude photos on smartphones can be alienating because it treats the activity as a deviant or criminal behavior. But a new area of research contextualizes sexting beyond crime, viewing it as an experimental or consensual act between teens. Indeed, sexting may involve a broad spectrum of motivations, such as pushing boundaries in "Truth or Dare" games, to bond and identify within a group, and as part of flirting or foreplay. Also, it may be used to connect in long-distance relationships; to guard the safety of closeted lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals; and to abstain from actual physical contact for cultural or religious reasons. To better guide young people, adults must understand these motivations and recognize that sexting is not always harmful.

Despite what we see in news headlines, there is no single term that people who share nude photos use, according to Australian researcher and author Nina Funnell, who has interviewed some four dozen 16- to 25-year-olds about it. Especially not "sexting," she said in a talk I got to hear in Sydney this spring (their fall [in 2013]). Using the term tends to alienate young people, she said. And there are many more *motivations* for "sexting," as adults have come to call it, than there are terms for it. More on that in a moment—first a bit of background....

Until 2011, when Janis Wolak and David Finkelhor at the University of New Hampshire published the first typology of sexting, it was seen and treated as a single undifferentiated and mainly illegal practice. Wolak and Finkelhor significantly advanced understanding of the practice when they created two categories of "youth-produced sexual images"—"Aggravated" and "Experimental"—based on their review of "550 cases obtained from a national survey of law enforcement agencies." The cases all involved "images of minors created by minors that could qualify as child pornography under applicable criminal statutes."

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This was a major step forward because 1) it opened up thought to the idea that sexting isn't just deviant or criminal behavior and 2) it opened up "experimental" or consensual sexting as an important new area of study. Still, it's helpful to note that Wolak and Finkelhor's study was of sexting cases that involved *law enforcement*, which both makes it all the more significant that the "experimental" category emerged and makes it all the more important to understand that category better (and possibly rename it) by studying it outside the context of criminal law.

Out of the Crime Context

I'd say the next step in our collective understanding of sexting was psychology professor Elizabeth Englander's finding that much of the harmful kind of sexting is coercive, and "any discussion of coercive sexting should be made in the context of sexual harassment," she reported in a study she published last year—so we need to educate young people about what sexual harassment is in the digital age so they can protect themselves better not just from prosecution or a betrayal of trust but also from sexual harassment and manipulation.

But it's equally important for parents and educators to understand that not all sexting is harmful—or even experimental. More and more, it's also just the latest way people of all ages use imagery in consensual sexual activity. So we need to understand sexting better in the context of sexual health and adolescent development, including healthy risk-taking.

Sexual Health and Healthy Risk-taking

So now the vital next phase: Nina is one of the researchers doing the important work of filling in the picture on the "experimental" side (though she found the word to be problematic) through interviews with people who engage in it. She's talking with teens and adults mostly ages 16-25, but some older ("into their 60s"), she said, "both male and female, and a mix of heterosexual, bisexual and same-sex-attracted." This qualitative research will go into a book she's working on.

What she has found is that sexting involves a broad spectrum of motivations. "Based on my interviews with young people, I've found that the range of motives around sexting is as complex and multifaceted as you would expect to find in relation to any other sexual activity," Nina wrote me in an email after her talk, and not all the motivations are sexual, she added.

The Motivation Spectrum

Among the motivations she's heard from interviewees are: "pushing boundaries" (in games like "Truth or Dare"); "group identity bonding (sharing images in a group as a 'trust game' in order to develop a sense of group solidarity)"; "testing out one's desirability or sexual power with either a stranger or a prospective partner"; flirting, foreplay (turned up by Pew Internet in 2009), or a purely digital sexual activity in its own right [in person or online]; a way for partners in a long-distance relationship to stay connected; safety for LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] partners who haven't yet come out; and safety for cultural or religious reasons (when physical contact is not allowed before marriage).

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"We shouldn't ever make assumptions about why a young person might engage in a particular behavior, because their reasons are highly diverse and individual," Nina wrote. They can also be highly localized.

Why Better Understanding Helps

"In a particular school, you might get one particular group of 8-10 boys who all share nude images of girls without consent as a way of 'bonding' [what Wolak and Finkelhor would probably call 'aggravated sexting'] and, while that is accepted within their micro group, meanwhile the rest of the students [in their class] are dead opposed to it." [She's talking about the overall protective social norms of the larger community (which deserve acknowledgment and support from adults) around an anti-social group dynamic).]

"That sort of thing to me demonstrates how values and 'unwritten rules' are negotiated at a very, very localized level," Nina added, pointing to the challenge of educators: that "top-down approaches would be unlikely to generate much behavioral change for those 8-10 individuals." By "top-down approaches," she's referring to general anti-sexting campaigns and directives from authorities. "The spectrum of motivations must be better understood before we can develop meaningful educational resources," she wrote.

The vast majority of teens already have plenty of positive social norms in place—norms they've been exposed to all their lives, starting in their families and practiced at school, online, wherever they interact. The adults in their lives will be much better-equipped to guide them if we understand that practices such as sexting aren't single undifferentiated new "threats" but rather spectrums of tech-related behaviors just as affected by social norms as social experiences that have nothing to do with technology. And we'll also be much better able to guide them—and to enlist their help when problems arise—if we acknowledge and support the intelligent norms and values they are already practicing.

A little more on the researcher I feature in this post: Nina Funnell was awarded the Australian Human Rights Commission award in 2010 and was a finalist for Young Australian of The Year for her work in sexual violence prevention. She contributed to the book *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry* and is currently working on a book about sexting.

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