

SEXTING

Sexting is a relative new term. Two years ago there was no definition of the word. Now sexting is defined as sending sexually explicit photos or messages of themselves or others to their peers. This can be accomplished using cell phones, computers, web cams, digital cameras and some video game systems. In June 2009, a survey found that 19% of teens surveyed had sent, received or forwarded sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photos through text messages or e-mails. The practice of sexting can lead to legal and psychological consequences.

It's illegal. If a minor is caught sexting, they can be arrested. If the person sending the photo is eighteen years old and the person in the photo is a minor, the adult can be charged with Sexual Exploitation of a Minor by Electronic Means. (TCA 39-13-529) This is a felony and can result in jail time, probation and possibly being placed on the sex offender registry.

Sexting is degrading and cruel. Once the images are out there in cyberspace, they can't be returned and are there forever. It could lead to a lifetime of embarrassment and humiliation. Anxiety and depression are common also. It could start out as a joke, peer pressure or sometimes impulsive behavior or flirting. Sexting can also have an effect on a teen's future, ability to be admitted to college or be hired for jobs.

What can parents do? It begins with awareness. Become more involved in their children's lives. Educate your child on the dangers and ask them what they know about it. Be supportive and stay calm. While respecting their privacy, perform an inspection of their phone or computer. If a suspect photo is discovered, make sure it has not been sent to anyone else. The parent must make the decision to notify law enforcement but be aware that the possibility that charges could be filed against anyone involved. As a parent, you must do what you think is necessary. Confiscate the phone or computer and place limits on it's use.

If you're a teen and receive a photo, do not send it to anyone else. Talk to a parent or trusted friend. If the photo is from a friend or acquaintance, someone needs to speak with that person and tell them the possible consequences. Sexting is a growing threat to teens. Parents should approach it with the goals of prevention, education and if necessary, intervention and punishment.