

## Teens and Sexting: Tips for Discussion in Relationship Education Programs

Cell phones and other electronic forms of communication are more common than ever among teens. Seventy-five percent of teens ages 12-17 own a cell phone and more than half of those teens send texts daily. Text messages are quickly becoming a primary tool for managing relationships. Sexting is the act of sending sexually explicit messages or images via electronic communication, mainly cell phones and computers. Marriage/relationship education (MRE) is a natural setting for providing teens with the tools they may need to make good decisions about sexting.

A 2009 study found that sexting among teens usually occurs within one of these three scenarios:

1. Exchanges of images solely between two romantic partners
2. Exchanges between partners that are then shared outside the relationship
3. Exchanges between people who are not yet in a relationship, but where often one person hopes to be in a relationship with the other person

Marriage/relationship education (MRE) is a natural setting for providing teens with the tools they may need to make good decisions about sexting.

A 2009 Pew Internet Project study estimates that four percent of teens have engaged in “sexting” and 15 percent have received a sexually explicit or suggestive message from someone they know. Sexting occurs most frequently among teens with high cell phone use and is more common among older teens (17 and up) than those who



are younger. Research has found no significant difference in gender regarding who sends “sexts” and who receives them. Both boys and girls were equally likely to have sent a sexual picture to someone they know.

Sexting is alarming because the relative inexperience of teens in romantic relationships may leave them unable to understand that sexting can have serious, life altering consequences. Sexual exploits are more public than ever through social media websites and email. This Tip Sheet will provide MRE practitioners with suggestions for addressing this technological trend in MRE classes and workshops.

First, MRE practitioners will want to understand what motivates teens to engage in this behavior. Teens often participate because they:

1. **Want to please a boyfriend or girlfriend.**  
One teen from the Pew Internet survey said “My boyfriend or someone I really liked asked

for them and I felt like if I didn't do it, they wouldn't continue to talk to me. At the time, it was no big deal."

2. **Think that, "Everyone else is doing it."** While it might seem that way to a lot of teens, research shows this is not true – only a small percentage of teens have ever sent or received a sexually explicit message.
3. **Hope that this will make them seem cool and mature.** Both sexes might believe sexting gets them attention from the opposite sex, which makes the temptation even greater.
4. **Use sexting as an alternative to a sexual relationship or view it as no big deal.** In the Pew Internet survey, one high school boy responded, "Most people are too shy to have sex. Sexting is not as bad." Another teen said, "Yeah, it happens a lot. My friends do it all the time, but it's not a big deal."
5. **May be unsure of the boundaries they wish to place on themselves and their relationships.** Many teens have not thought about their personal boundaries and may engage in sexting impulsively.

## Help Teens Navigate the Minefield

So how can MRE practitioners make sense of this issue with teens? Make it clear that your MRE class is a place to express their true feelings in a setting where they will not feel judged. Some teens who may have participated in this behavior might be embarrassed to discuss this in front of a group. Focus the conversation on general discussion without getting too personal about the private lives of teens.

Guide teens into the discussion by asking them a series of nonjudgmental questions to get them started, such as:

- Do you think sexting is part of a healthy relationship? Why or why not?
- What would you do if your boyfriend/girlfriend wanted you to send them nude photos?
- If you ever received any sexually explicit messages forwarded to you by your boyfriend or girlfriend, how would you feel about that?
- How do you feel about teens who send these messages?
- Do you think you would be able to talk to your parents about sexting? Why or why not?

Share with them a few real-life examples of teens who were caught sexting. Find several news stories by simply searching "teens and sexting" online. This can be a good small group activity. Have them answer the following:

- What would you do if you were in this situation?
- Do you think he/she could have made better choices?
- What should his/her friends have done differently?
- Do you think the punishment was appropriate?

In leading the discussion, MRE practitioners may want to think about highlighting the following points:

1. **Healthy relationships don't involve coercion or pressure; this includes the pressure to look at or send nude pictures via text.** Using the communication skills they are learning in class, have the teens think of a response they would use if they ever receive this pressure from someone they want to date or are dating. You may want to have them practice out loud.
2. **There are less explicit ways with none of the consequences of sexting to show their affection for, or interest in, one another.** For a group exercise, help them come up with alternatives.

3. **The consequences of sexting are as real and life altering as those of actual sex, they are just different.** Even if the teen trusts his/her partner, what would happen if someone stole his/her partner's phone or computer? What if they break-up? The pictures are still there and it takes less than five seconds to send a picture or post it on the internet.
4. **There are legal consequences for sexting in most states.** While teens might not be as captivated by this message, it is still important to stress that some states have taken or are taking action to have this behavior classified as illegal. Across the country, teens caught sexting have been charged with offenses such as disorderly conduct, while others have been prosecuted under child pornography laws. Know your state's laws and the sentencing for the offense. You may even consider having the teens look up your state's (or any other state they may travel or reside in) for this information.
5. **Tell them to delete any messages they may receive.** Under no circumstances should they pass them on to their friends. Receiving or forwarding messages still equals participation and is punishable by law.
6. **Encourage them to speak to a trusted adult if they get any photos or messages (or requests for photos) that make them uncomfortable.** Many teens may receive a text message and feel embarrassed or unsure how to respond. A simple "Please don't send me any more pictures" should suffice. If the sender continues, teens should enlist the help of a trusted adult to solve the problem. Take time in class to have students identify a trusted adult.
7. **Once that image or message leaves their phone, it's gone forever.** When teens hit

"send" they relinquish control over their photos and who sees them. Because it is easy to forward messages, a photo can get around to everyone in school in a matter of minutes. Ask the teens: Is this something they want following them around for the rest of high school – and beyond?

## Conclusion

While research shows that sexting isn't as prevalent as the media narrative might suggest, it is an issue with substantial social and legal consequences for teenagers. MRE practitioners should be very familiar with the reasons why teens send "sexts." Practitioners can also provide teens with the skills they will need to address sexting if they ever feel pressure to look at and/or send sexually explicit pictures of themselves or others.

## Additional Resources

[Teens and Healthy Relationships](#)

[2009 Teens and Sexting Report](#)

[Talking to Teens About Sexting](#)

["Sexting" Teens Can Go Too Far](#)

*The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank Tara Pringle Jefferson, a freelance writer and a social media consultant, for her contributions to this Tip Sheet. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.*