At National Online Safety we believe in empowering parents, carers and trusted adults with the information they need to hold an informed conversation about online safety with their children, should they feel it is needed. This guide focuses on one platform of many which we believe trusted adults should be aware of. Please visit www.nationalonlinesafety.com for further guides, hints and tips for adults.

What parents need to know about SEXTING

18+

Sexting involves sending, receiving or forwarding explicit messages, images, or videos of a sexual nature. Although mobile phones are the most common vehicle for sexting, the term can also apply to sending sexually explicit messages through any digital media such as email, instant messaging, and/or social media sites. They can be sent to or from a friend, boyfriend, girlfriend, or someone your child has met online. Sexting is often described as the new flirting for children, but it is illegal for anyone under the age of 18. Some of the main platforms it occurs on are Snapchat, Tinder, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram and Kik.

IT IS ILLEGAL

Sexting is illegal if you share, make, take, or distribute an indecent image or video of a child under the age of 18. It is an offence under the Protection of Children Act (1978), the Criminal Justice Act (1988), and under section 67 of the Serious Crime Act (2015). Sexting or 'youth produced sexual imagery' between children is still illegal, even if they are in a relationship and any images are shared consensually.

PERCEIVED AS 'BANTER'

Many young people under 18 see sexting as 'banter' and an easy way to show someone that they like and trust them. Whilst it is a criminal offence, the reasons for taking and sharing can be very innocent and all part of growing up, understanding their own sexuality, and establishing a relationship. However, whilst most images and videos are taken and shared willingly, there can be unintentional consequences, embarrassment, humiliation, and emotional hurt.

FEELINGS OF REGRET

Although some children willingly exchange messages, images, or videos, many may regret sharing them after they've been sent. Once it's out there, there's no going back and your child may feel ashamed, vulnerable, or anxious about the imagery resurfacing later, especially if a relationship or friendship has broken down.

NO CONTROL

Once a photo or video is out there, there's no way of knowing how many people have saved it, tagged it, or shared it. Children like to show off to their peers and, suddenly, an image has gone beyond its intended recipient to classmates, friends, and even strangers. Once an image or video has been shared online, there's nothing to stop it being archived and repeatedly shared.

ONLINE BLACKMAIL OR BULLYING

Sexting can also expose young adults to the risk of being exploited by paedophiles or sexual predators, who then use images to extort additional photos, sexual favours, and sometimes money from victims. Your child may also feel pressured into sexting so they don't come across as boring, or think it's a way to show someone they care for them. They may feel under pressure to give in to repeated requests or feel obliged to share sexual messages and imagery which could then be used against them as a form of bullying or intimidation.

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Safety tips for parents

THINK ABOUT LANGUAGE USE

Teenagers often prefer to use the word 'nudes' to 'sexting'. One reason for this is the normalising of this behaviour; another is that most children always feel a sense of embarrassment when discussing any issue with the word 'sex' in it. Sexting an image could also be described as an 'inappropriate selfie'. Using this term with your child might make the discussion less embarrassing.

BLOCK & PARENTAL CONTROLS

Show your child how to use the block button on their devices and favourite apps to stop people sending them unwanted messages. You can also set up parental controls with your internet service provider or on your child's phone to stop them from accessing harmful content.

EXPLAIN THE REPERCUSSIONS

Let your child know that once they have sent a message, they are no longer in control of it and the messages, images and videos that they may intend to share with one individual may end up where the whole world can have access to them. Even if they completely trust someone, other people using their phone might accidentally see it. And, later in life, it may affect their online reputation, especially if universities, employers or future partners access the imagery.

TALK TO YOUR CHILD

Encourage open dialogue about appropriate information to share with others, both online and offline. Show that you understand that sexting can be about finding out about nudity, bodies and exploring their sexuality, but explain why it's important to think twice before sharing something. Show that you are approachable and understanding and discuss what a healthy and trusting relationship with a partner looks like.

DISCUSS THE LEGALITIES

Children and young people may not realise that what they are doing is illegal. Ensure that your child understands that when they are aged under 18, it is against the law for anyone to take or have a sexual photo of them – even it is a selfie and even when the activity is consensual.

LEARN HOW TO RESPOND

If an image has already been shared, either your child or you should speak to the person that the image was shared with and ask them to delete it. You can also use the report button on a website where the image was posted. Speak to your child's school as they may be able to confiscate phones if they know that they have sexual imagery stored. If you believe the child was forced into sending the message, report this to the police. You or your child can also report the content to a child protection advisor at the CEOP.

Meet our expert

Jonathan Taylor is an online safety expert and former Covert Internet Investigator for the Metropolitan Police. He is a specialist in online grooming and exploitation and has worked extensively with both UK and international schools in delivering training and guidance around the latest online dangers, social media apps and platforms.

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