

‘Sexting’: Self-Destructive or Simple Rebellion?

Incident at Los Alamitos middle school sparks debate about sharing of explicit photos by cell phone.

Source: Jaimee Lynn Fletcher / *The Orange County Register*

A growing debate over teens sending sexually explicit photos via cell phones has some asking whether the behavior is dangerous or simply a new form of teenage rebellion. Sending nude photos via text messaging – often called “sexting” – has become a popular flirting technique among teens that some say can have adverse penalties.

“It is so incredibly destructive to the victim,” said Judi Westberg Warren, president of the Santa Ana-based Web Wise Kids. “This has real-life consequences.

“The real-life situation is that kids are not going to make wise choices in keeping those things private.” And in the most extreme cases, some teens have faced felony charges for participating in “sexting”, she said.

Web Wise Kids hopes to offer a solution that could make teens think twice before hitting the send button. The Internet safety company launched a computer program targeted to educating teens about “sexting”.

“It is the first program of its kind to address cell phone issues,” Westberg Warren said. “It is available to about 4,000 educators nationwide to use in their schools.”

A 2008 survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy reported that 39 percent of teens have sent or posted sexually suggestive messages and 48 percent say they have received such messages. Some who have reportedly engaged in “sexting” said they did it to be fun and flirtatious while others said they did it to be sexy or in response to a suggestive message.

Recently an 8th grader at Los Alamitos’ McAuliffe Middle School sent a nude photo of herself to at least one person. District officials said that photo was then circulated around school to a group of students who received in-house suspensions, in which they go to school but cannot attend classes. After the story broke and further media attention ensued, district officials said the students weren’t punished and that school officials are investigating whether or not the messaging had taken place on campus.

Police in February responded to Laurel Continuation High School, also in Los Alamitos, to investigate a similar case involving three students. Police took an incident report and sent the information to the Orange County District Attorney’s Office. Charges were not pursued, said Los Alamitos police Cpt. Bruce McAlpine.

Some teens said that they believe “sexting” is a negative social behavior that can lead to promiscuity among teens.

“I think kids do it to coerce each other into having sex and they hope it leads to the real thing,” said Bobby Prescott, 18, of Tustin. “It’s an immature tactic.”

Teens sending sexually explicit photos have also left lawyers across the country looking to more accurately define the criteria for labeling someone a predatory sex offender.

“This is a new area of the law, said Robert Schwartz, executive director of the Philadelphia-based Juvenile Law Center. “The law is trying to catch up with technology.”

A teenage boy in Allen County, Ind. is facing felony obscenity charges for allegedly sending a photo of his private parts to several female classmates. Another boy was recently charged with child pornography in a similar case. Both cases are expected to be resolved soon and if adjudicated, the boys will likely get probation and some punishment such as possibly having to wear an ankle bracelet or other movement restriction and counseling.

In Greensburg, Pa., three high school girls who sent seminude photos and four male students who received them were all hit with felony child pornography charges. The students all accepted a lesser misdemeanor charge, said Dante Bertani, chief public defender in Westmoreland County, Pa. A felony was reaching too far, he said.

“It subjected them to a lifetime Megan’s Law (sex offender) registration, which is insanity,” he said. “Tell me one boy in the past who hasn’t shared nude pictures and I’ll tell you he’s a liar. We’ve become so puritanical, it’s unbelievable.”

Some child experts agree that threatening serious felony charges is too extreme.

“We’ve become this society that criminalizes adolescence,” said Elizabeth Cauffman, a UCI professor and an expert in adolescent development. “We have this process of what I call unintended consequences of social policy.”

All teens, at one time or another, make unintelligent decisions, some child psychology experts contend. Testing their limits is how young adults learn and grow.

“Teenagers always engage in delinquent behavior,” Cauffman said. “Adolescence is a time of engaging in risky behavior.”

But with instant gratification just a click away, simple teen rebellion is catapulted into an uncultivated forum.

“Now they have the technology to make instantaneous errors,” said Shelli Wynants, a professor at Cal State Fullerton specializing in adolescent and child development. “I don’t think they necessarily think about the fact that this can get out of their hands and out of their control.”

“Sexting” has also become a hot-button issue in the mainstream media. Dozens of stories have been splashed across television screens and newspapers and various talk show hosts have addressed the issue.

Matt Lauer of The Today Show on NBC interviewed an Ohio woman who said her daughter, Jessica Logan, committed suicide in July because of harassment she received after she sent a nude picture of herself to her boyfriend. After the couple split, the boyfriend forwarded the racy pictures of the 18-year-old to a group of girls at her school who “tormented her”. Cynthia Logan found her daughter hanged in her bedroom. Logan told Lauer that she hopes to launch a campaign to promote awareness about “sexting”.

Tyra Banks addressed “sexting” on her talk show. Banks interviewed a panel of five teens ranging from ages 13 to 15, who all said they have engaged in sending “sexts”, to explore the issue and the motivation behind it. Banks wrote in a prepared statement that she hopes the segment will promote better communication between parents and their children.

Some parents agree that communication and education is the key to preventing “sexting”. “We always urge parents to talk to their children about the risks and consequences associated with any kind of sexual activity, like ‘sexting’,” said Patti Christiansen, president of the Santa Ana-based fourth district Parent/Teacher Association. “Research has shown us that teens who receive an appropriate and adequate family life education... become sexually active at later ages.”

Westberg Warren said parents should partner with their child to ensure safe Web and wireless activities.

“We want parents to sit down and talk with their kids about what the consequences can be with the choice they make online, not show the kids fear,” she said. “If they take Internet away, it makes kids secretive about what they do online.”

Cell phone companies have a variety of options that parents can choose to better monitor teens’ cell phone use.

“I suggest that parents take advantage of parental controls that are offered by many cell phone companies,” Westberg Warren said. “Verizon has a real selection of things and they can choose what their kids can be involved in. Unfortunately, parents are simply not going to be able to control everything their kids do, especially on hand held devices, but they can take precautions.”

These are serious issues that are spreading like wild fire. (They) can destroy a person’s life.

Write a thesis statement for this article:

Who is the intended audience?

What is the author’s purpose?

Directions:

- 1. Show evidence of a close reading: highlight areas of confusion, write comments/thoughts in the margin, define vocabulary, etc.**
- 2. Write a one-page reflection in your Writer’s Notebook using the following topics:**
 - a. For some, adolescence is a time of engaging in risky behavior. Why do you think people “sext”? (Simple rebellion? Self-destructive behavior? Peer pressure?)**
 - b. What are the risks and consequences associated with “sexting”? The pictures might remain private during a relationship, but what could happen when the relationship ends?**
 - c. Are felony obscenity charges too extreme for “sexting” offenders? Why or why not? What should the punishment be?**
 - d. Have your parents put any restrictions on your cell phone to avoid “sexting”? If you had a teenager, would you put restrictions on his/her cell phone? Why or why not?**