

DENTIFYING DIGITAL DANGERS

Technology creates a boon and a curse for teenagers:
How parents can help their kids understand and protect themselves.

By *Emily Brown*



Strip, snap, send – it’s the tech-age version of the love note. It’s called sexting, a blend of the words sex and texting and includes the sending, receiving or forwarding of sexually explicit images through mediums such as a cell phone, e-mail or Web site.

Nearly 20 percent of teenagers have sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves according to a December 2008 survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Despite innocent intentions, the boobs-to-boyfriend snapshot may end up in the wrong hands, says Carol A. Shelly, a Doylestown-based attorney and chairman of the Bucks County Bar Association’s task force on sexting. In just seconds, a message intended to be private can be transmitted to multiple friends and even strangers on the Web and never deleted.

“Kids don’t think it’s a big deal, that it’s a joke,” says Shelly.

However, sexting has teachers, parents, counselors and lawmakers scrambling for clear direction on how to protect kids from a trend that has led to social embarrassment, cyber bullying, criminal prosecution, targeting by sexual predators and even suicide.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center referred to sexting as the new “relationship currency” and outlined basic sexting scenarios in which images are sent between two different partners in lieu of, as a prelude to, or as part of sexual activity. Sexts are often sent to take the relationship to the next level or for entertainment and fun.

STUPID MISTAKES

Last year, in Ohio, 18-year-old Jesse Logan sent her boyfriend a nude picture of herself. When they later broke up, he sent the photo to 100 students at four different schools. The girls harassed Jessie mercilessly, calling her a slut and a whore. She became de-

pressed and was afraid to go to school. Trying to set things right, she went public, appearing on a Cincinnati television station to tell her story, calling it was the stupidest thing she had ever done. In July 2008 Jesse hanged herself in her bedroom.

"The dangers are that once they send anything into cyberspace, including provocative images of themselves, they no longer own or control the item," says Joseph Sciscio, a detective for the Bensalem Township Police Department. "They are putting a lot of trust in someone who might not deserve it. We have seen these images being used to exploit or harass. We have also seen these images being traded by adults who have interest in child pornography."

Sciscio and Shelly presented at a recent symposium hosted by the Bucks County Bar Association to educate on the issues around cyber safety, including sexting.

One of the surprising things to parents, says Sciscio, is that they can be liable for the content on their child's phone. "If parents are found to be in possession of the images at any time, there could be issues."

Furthermore, if charges carry through, sexting can also place teens on a sex offender list. The problem is nationwide: In Florida, Phillip Alpert was arrested and charged with sending child pornography after he sent a naked photo of his 16-year-old girlfriend to friends and family after the couple argued. Alpert, who was 18 at the time, was sentenced to five years probation and registered as a sex offender.

In New Jersey a 14-year-old girl was arrested and charged with possession and distribution of child pornography. If convicted she could face jail time and be forced to register as a sex offender. And in Greensburg, Pa. police brought child pornography charges against six students after officials seized a phone from a student and discovered nude photos.

The serious implications of the charges evoke mixed feelings in parents and lawmakers. Even Shelly, who is committed to raising awareness about sexting, says that the punishment can be stilted. "I think it's ridiculous that he [Phillip Alpert] is registered as a sex offender," she says. "What he did was mean but he admitted he was wrong. He should be punished, but not like a sex offender."

Getting up to speed—

resources for parents

Each family is different and will have a different way of addressing Internet issues depending on what they want to accomplish. For example, there are tools for prevention and active monitoring says Hartman. "A younger kid might need prevention and the older kid might need active monitoring." The important thing is to educate yourself on the technology.

WEB SITES:

www.netlingo.com – Don't know what a tweetup is? What does AFPOE stand for? Check out this handy Internet dictionary so that you aren't among the 95 percent of parents who can't identify chat room lingo. Don't miss the special text message section.

www.aThinLine.org – MTV's site to engage teens in the discussion. Check out the "Redraw the Line" challenge, a contest for teens to discover a solution to help prevent and stop digital abuse. The winning individual will receive \$10,000 and a chance to work with MTV.

www.microsoft.com/protect – Chock full of resources, this portion of Microsoft's Web site also offers an online code of conduct contract for Internet behavior. Hartman suggests using this guide as a point of discussion for junior high kids.

www.cyberangels.org – Launched in 1995, Cyber Angels is an online safety education center that pools tutorials, articles and tips to educate parents.

www.safekids.com – A basic Web site that makes up for its simple design with an array of posts, links and articles aimed at keeping kids safe.

www.connectsafely.org – A project of Tech Parenting Group, Connect Safely provides a comprehensive user-driven platform for educating parents and teens about using Web 2.0 responsibly.

www.missingkids.com – Don't let the name of this Web site scare you away. "It has a wealth of information for how to keep your kids safe," says Stephens. There is also a CyberTipline for parents to report crimes against kids.

BOOKS TO READ:

"**What Every 21st-Century Parent Needs to Know**" by Debra W. Haffner. In the United States, more than three quarters of homes have computers with Internet access. Haffner guides parents through issues from cyberbullying to social networking.

"**Sexuality Talking Points**" by Melanie Davis. Davis helps parents and guardians think about sexual messages and values learned growing up.

MONITORING TOOLS:

• **Net Nanny** –

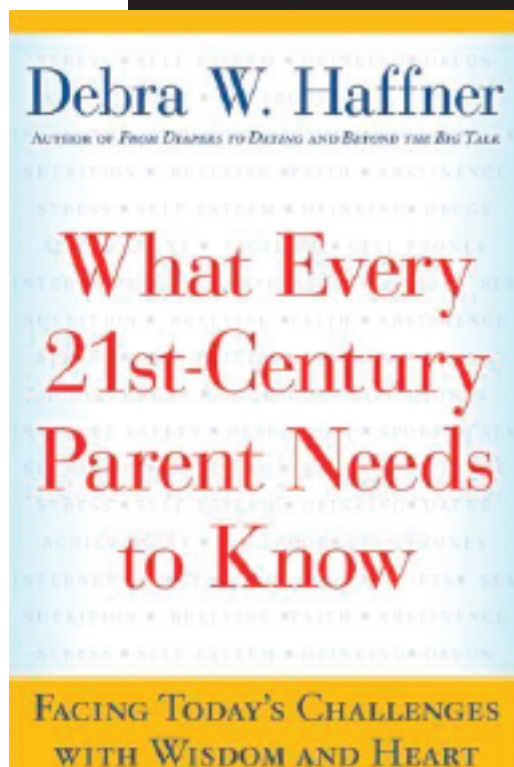
<http://www.netnanny.com/products>

• **Sentry Parental Controls** –

www.sentryparentalcontrols.com

• **Web Safety** – www.websafety.com –

software for your child's PC or cell phone that will notify you if they are sending and receiving potentially dangerous messages





EDUCATION AND PRIVACY

To prevent such scenarios, Montgomery County's Assistant District Attorney Todd Stephens says education is critical to solving this problem. Stephens often gives Internet safety presentations. "We would much rather play a part in preventing this happening than dealing with the ramifications," he says. "The Jesse Logan story shows how the humiliation can ensue and have a deep and lasting effect."

Some parents, however, have expressed concern about privacy issues, asking, "Isn't monitoring kids' digital behavior similar to reading a diary?" Tom Hartman, of Technology Landing Zone, says there is a difference. "The odds of a diary getting into someone's hands is slim to none," says Hartman. "That is their private thoughts. But what they are putting on their phone is not—it can go anywhere and it's the same thing with Facebook or YouTube."

Melanie Davis, a Certified Sexuality Educator and owner of Honest Exchange, a consulting firm devoted to sexual education, advocates looking at photos on a teen's phone, computer and social media sites like Facebook and MySpace. "If you find inappropriate or worrisome images, discuss them and have your child delete them while you oversee the file cleanup." Shelly says she has no qualms about monitoring her son's behavior. "He knows if he deletes the history on his computer he will be grounded." The recent Pew study also found that kids whose parents restricted their text messaging were less likely to send sexually suggestive images.

A small lapse in cyber-judgment could destroy future college and job opportunities as more recruiters scout an applicant's online reputation. Even with the most pristine transcript and record, Shelly has seen young people's dreams crumble because of Facebook photos. Sciscio says that the Bensalem Police Department also

checks the online content of potential recruits before hiring them.

"The decision to send a naked picture is permanent and irreversible," says Stephens. But acknowledging the danger is one step toward preventing the problem."

WHAT ELSE CAN PARENTS DO?

The good news is that most teens, 80 percent of them, are not in the habit of stripping down, snapping photos and sending out images says Davis. Dr. Barry G. Ginsberg, Director of the Center of Relationship Enhancement in Doylestown, says parents can combat digital abuse by staying actively involved with their kids and practicing what he calls "authoritative parenting."

In a *Good Morning America* interview, Patricia Nordin, the mother of 15-year-old Ashley Garcia, who sent a nude photo to boyfriend and endured teasing from other girls, said in a video interview, "As a parent you sit and think, you know, what is my kid doing today...what are they doing at this party... are they going to drink, are they going to try drugs? In all honesty never in my mind did I think a picture, you know? It's just something you don't think about."

Nordin was part of a town hall meeting broadcast on ABC News that encouraged parents to do their homework to help prevent the trauma suffered by her daughter. One way to get involved is to establish boundaries and rules about cell phone and Internet use.

"First, be clear what the boundary is and why it's necessary," says Ginsberg. "Negotiate an agreed-upon consequence if there is a violation and follow through on the agreed procedures."

In addition, talk to your kids early and honestly. "Yes, it can be awkward to imagine that your child may want to be sexually arousing someone," says Davis. However parents need to be more concerned about safety than sounding awkward. While there is no fixed age to begin talking with your child, many experts agree that starting early is a good thing. "There were parents of first, second and third graders at the symposium," says Shelly.

MTV also is chiming in on digital abuse. Producers announced in December they would help tackle digital abuse by launching a multi-year initiative called "A Thin Line" which will target sexting, cyberbullying and digital dating abuse.

And even though the characters and consequences may vary, parents, educators and law enforcement are seeing just how digital footprints, unlike bathroom stall scrawl or love note doodles, can last forever.

"The decision to send a naked picture is permanent and irreversible," says Stephens. "There aren't too many decisions that kids make that are 100 percent, but this is one of them, and they (the kids) don't pay enough attention." ▼

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