

The Problem of Sexting: A Faithful Response for Parents and Church Leaders

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Lucy's mom finds Lucy's cell phone at home while the sixteen-year-old is at school. Feeling guilty, but choosing to look at her child's text messages anyway, Lucy's mom is shocked and saddened when she sees that several photos of her daughter wearing only a bra and panties have been sent to Lucy's boyfriend.

The word *sexting*, in use since 2007, is a word that blends *sex* and *texting*. It began to be included in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* in 2012 and is defined there and in other places as the sending or receiving of sexually explicit words or images by cell phone or e-mail.

Data

According to The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy, 19 percent of teens (age 13–19) have sent a nude or semi-nude picture or video of themselves to someone via e-mail or cell phone. In addition, 31 percent of those teens have received a nude or semi-nude picture or video of someone from that person. Four percent of teens report that they have posted nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves online.

In the same survey, the teens who reported sending nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves were asked what they believe are the reasons teens send or post these images. The most common reason was to be fun and flirtatious (63 percent). Additional reasons were in response to one that was sent to them (44 percent), as a “sexy” present for a boyfriend/girlfriend (43 percent), and “as a joke” (38 percent).

Laws concerning sexting vary among the states that have them. In some states, sexting involving minors is a felony and in others, a misdemeanor. Sexting involves several legal issues, among them child pornography, First Amendment rights, obscenity, and voluntary sexting or coerced sexting.¹ Since 2009, the year the National Conference of State Legislatures began tracking sexting legislation, 20 states have enacted bills to address sexting by minors. To be certain, legislation that addresses sexting is complex and tricky, and any kind of clear legal response is years away.²

Adults are responsible for teaching children the value of the gift of sexuality that God has given humanity. It is a gift to be cherished and to be regarded with respect. Sexting exploits that gift. It can be devastating to the senders, the receivers, and those in the photos. After an image is passed to someone else, that image is “out there” for anyone to see. It can't be unsent, and the person who sent the image never again controls it.

1. legalmatch.com/law-library/article/sexting-laws.html

2. ncsl.org/issues-research/telecom/sexting-legislation-2012.aspx

Biblical and Theological Insight

Scripture is direct about the importance of our bodies and how we use them. In Hebrew thinking, there is no mind-body dualism as in Greek thought. Thus, in the Hebrew language, there is no word for body. Our bodies are an outward extension of our souls. What one does with one's body, one does with one's body, mind, and soul. In 1 Corinthians we are told to glorify God in our bodies.

Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

—1 Corinthians 6:18–20

In Romans we are encouraged to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

—Romans 12:1–2

Sexting is not honoring God with our bodies as it seeks to use them in a way to achieve or build a relationship with a narrowed and incomplete focus.

Christ tells us in Matthew:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

—Matthew 5:27–28

Sexting creates desire, if not lust. It is a reduction of a relationship and the greater gift of intimacy God has given us. It can be questioned if teens equate sexting with adultery. In our highly sexualized culture to which we are exposed daily, the line between flirting and personal pornography is sadly blurred.

In the Reformed tradition, we understand that God gave us the law to convict us of our sin. When we violate God's law, we become less than God intends. Equally important, the law also gives us a way to live and order human life. The law is for building up the body of Christ by saving us from misplaced priorities. Rather than being seen as a source of failure and punishment, the law gives us the opportunity to live and grow in grace. It reminds us of what to do or not to do in order to enable us to live more faithfully.

The dynamic behind sexting is sometimes one of personal power. A sext may be demanded as a “proof of love” or to see what one person can get another person to do to please him or her. It may be sent to gain notice or notoriety, to keep a person in a relationship, or to prove one’s maturity by doing something the youth thinks an adult would do. Sexting may be used as leverage to force companionship or to try to secure a relationship in order to fill the void of loneliness. Sending a sext to others as an act of retaliation for being hurt is an attempt to reassert one’s personal power. Unfortunately, when the consequences of sexting are revealed, there is little room for human restoration. The act cannot be taken back.

The Reformed tradition also holds that God has called us together and we live in community. We are called to consider the effect of our choices on others within that community, whether it is a family, school, or church. In the web of community, when one part is affected, other parts respond. When one member of a community suffers as the body of Christ, we all suffer.

Options and Consequences

Parents and other adults have some good options to help prevent young people from sending and receiving sexually explicit text messages, also referred to as sexts. Parents and youths can create together and sign a covenant regarding cell phone use and behavior. Include relevant issues such as times of the day or night when the youth is allowed access to the phone; not texting, talking, or accessing social media while driving; and how the parents and youth are to be in cell phone contact with each other. To include sexting in the covenant, first help the youth understand what sexting is, why it’s a poor choice of behavior, what to do if a sext appears on his or her phone, and sexting’s possible consequences for all involved.

Youth can have difficulty thinking ahead to the possible consequences of an action. The judgment center of the brain is not fully developed until about the mid-twenties. To help them think through the possible results of sexting, ask them to consider the answers to the following questions. Do I want my parents to see this sext? Do I want my youth minister to see this sext? Do I want my future spouse to see this sext? How would I feel if the person to whom I send this sext sends it to all of his or her friends and they send it to all their friends? “No one will see it” is not a good answer because the sender has no control over a sext after sending it. Anyone could possibly see it or hear about it.

Another good option is to have the youth’s cell phone access password protected. Someone took Heather’s cell phone in calculus class and she did not get it back until the end of the day when she went to the school office and retrieved it from the lost and found. What Heather did not discover until the next day was that someone had used her phone to copy sexually inappropriate photos from the web and then sent them to some guys in the school, claiming the images were of Heather. They forwarded them to more guys. Since the photos originally came from Heather’s phone, it seemed to anyone who received them that the images really were of Heather. Heather was embarrassed beyond belief by these actions and by the subsequent actions required by her, her parents, and her school

to straighten out the situation. If Heather's phone had been password protected, this might have been avoided.

The consequences of sexting can be quite serious. If someone sends or forwards sexually suggestive photos of himself, herself, or others, that person could possibly be charged with sex offenses and, if convicted, have to register as a sex offender, which has negative and long-lasting effects. This would affect many areas of a person's life, including future employment, acceptance into college or the military, and even where he or she can and cannot live.³

A sext can be used by someone to bully, harass, blackmail, humiliate, and intimidate another. It can be wielded as a powerful weapon of coercion, it can define a person's high school years, and it can even destroy someone's career plans and dreams of the future. Some young people have killed themselves because of the pain they experienced as a result of sexting.

If a youth receives a sext, the right action for him or her to take is to report it right away to an adult who can help. Don't forward the sext to anyone. The adult can then contact the proper law enforcement agency.

Reporting the image is not snitching, but doing the right thing by stopping the cruelty involved in ruining someone's reputation; you may even be saving a life and a future.⁴

Healthy relationships are built on mutual respect and love. They involve the element of grace and the providence of God. Before healthy relationships can be formed, one must first begin to understand the love that God has for us. Parents, educators, and pastors can diminish the power and attraction of sexting by diminishing the need for it. Teaching young people of their inestimable worth to God and others reduces the need to seek validation from unhealthy and unfaithful behaviors. It is not easy but it is essential.

3. kids.delaware.gov/pdfs/sexting_teen_toolkit_6-21.pdf

4. Ibid.

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