

Sexting protocol

Definition

There are a number of definitions of sexting but that given by the *'Sexting' in schools: advice and support around self-generated images* defines it as images or videos generated by children under the age of 18 or of children under the age of 18 that are of a sexual nature or are indecent that are shared via internet connected devices (e.g. tablets and mobile phones). Possessing or distributing an indecent image (an image of a sexual nature where a person who is under 18 or appears to be under 18 is naked, semi-naked or in underwear) is a criminal offence under the Sexual Offences Act (2003).

Incidents of sexting by and between young people usually occur when a young person has taken an explicit photograph of themselves and sent it to their boyfriend or girlfriend via their mobile phone. Alternatively, young people may create and distribute images as a way of seeking sexual attention. This type of sexting is referred to as Experimental.

Aggravated sexting is either where an adult is involved or where there is only youth involvement but that there is some intent to harm or where the images are taken without consent, 'reckless misuse'.

Risks

There are many reasons why a young person might get involved in sexting. Exploring sex and relationships is a natural part of adolescence. However, sometimes they might be put under pressure to either take pictures of themselves or pass on those taken by others: many young people now accept this behaviour as normal.

Young people may also be coerced into taking and sending images by an adult or someone they've met online.

As the young people have no control over how and where images and messages might be shared online by other people, sexting can leave them vulnerable to bullying, humiliation and embarrassment, blackmail for further images, and even to self-harm and suicide. It should be noted that these types of self-generated images are more commonly being found in collections of images stored by child sex offenders.

Indicators

It is likely that one or other of the parties involved in the sexting, or possibly a third party who has seen or is aware of the image, will disclose the existence of the image to an adult.

The following questions should be asked to decide on appropriate action?

- Is the young person disclosing about receiving an image, sending an image or sharing an image?
- Is the image potentially illegal or inappropriate?
- How widely has the image been shared?
- Do they know where the image has ended up?
- Are there other young people involved?

Protection and Action to be taken

Sexting should be covered in the relevant organisational policies: for example, internet safety, acceptable use, behaviour, child protection and safeguarding, anti-bullying policies. There should be clear sanctions where the policies are breached.

Enquiries into any sexting incident must be carried out according to the relevant organisational policies and procedures and should always be recorded by the child protection officer/safeguarding lead.

Searching a device

An image may have been potentially shared via multiple devices and websites. It is important to establish the location of the image, but be aware that this may be distressing for the young person involved.

Teachers and schools have powers to examine, confiscate and store a device if it is believed to contain indecent images. However no material may be printed from the device or shared with another device. The image should not be viewed unless there is a clear reason to do so and the device should be stored securely. Devices should not be searched until relevant colleagues and senior management team have been informed.

Dealing with the incident

- Ensure the incident is recorded
- Carry out a risk assessment in relation to the young people involved
- Make a referral to children's social care if high-risk incident
- Contact the police if appropriate. It is generally proportionate to refer any incidents to the police
 - which involve, or possibly involve, adults;
 - where there are any illegal images;
 - where there is aggravated sharing of images.
- If there is an indecent image of a child on a website or social networking site, you should either report this to the relevant website or if there is a risk of abuse of the child then you should report it to the local police force or directly to the CEOP (child exploitation and online protection agency) website so that law enforcement can assess and if necessary expedite the incident with the relevant provider.
- If there are inappropriate images of a child on a website or social networking site, contact the Professionals Online Safety Helpline run by the UK Safer Internet Centre for assistance in getting these removed.
- Images found on a mobile phone or other electronic device can be deleted unless it is necessary to pass them to the police.
- Put the necessary safeguards in place for all the young people involved, e.g. appropriate education, counselling or parents being informed.

Police action

As per the Association of Chief Police guidelines, Dorset Police will treat most incidents of sexting between young people as a safeguarding issue to be dealt with via an educational response.

Contacts with the police will be routed to the Safe Schools and Communities Team who will provide the education on a 1-to-1, small group or larger group basis.

Where there is any suggestion of coercion or adult involvement then the incident will be routed to the Safeguarding Referral Unit to investigate to see if a criminal justice response is required. Following the investigation, an educational response may be provided. Please contact the police via the 101 non-emergency number.

Issues

Although many Esafety campaigns are aimed at reducing the danger to young people from strangers, sexting is predominantly an issue relating to pressure from a young person's peers and friends so different approaches may be required to support young people facing these issues. In addition, elements of cyberbullying and coercion may be present and young people may face isolation or bullying if they try to resist taking part in sexting.

While sexting behaviour is often regarded by young people as the norm and nothing to worry about, the consequences can be devastating for young people. Technological advances mean that once an image has been shared on the internet it may be viewed and shared by others outside the original peer group. Of particular concern is the increase in the number of self-generated images now being identified by law enforcement when searching devices belonging to online sex offenders.

Further Information

Searching, screening and confiscation: Advice for headteachers, school staff and governing bodies (February 2014) available from

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/279245/searching_screening_confiscation_advice_feb14.pdf

'Sexting' in schools: advice and support around self-generated images: What to do and how to handle it (March 2013) available from CEOP at

<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/Teachers/blog/Dates/2013/3/Sexting-in-schools-What-to-do-and-how-to-handle-it/>

NSPCC (2012) A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting'. Available from

<http://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/qualitative-study-sexting/>

Educational material can be found at http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/14_plus/need-advice/selfies-and-sexting/