

CHILD SAFETY BLOG

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December 20, 2011

Adults Are Worrying More than Kids Are Sexting

We've all heard stories about the unthinking transmission of sexually explicit material via telephone texts. We've even been a bystander to the more notorious episodes (two words: Anthony Weiner).

But when the willing participants in such naughty trafficking are children, there is less smirking and more worrying.

But a recent study in the journal *Pediatrics* concluded that kids don't text sex stuff as much as conventional thought suggests.

"Sexting"—sending or receiving risqué or even explicit photos or videos on a cellphone—is legally fraught when it involves a minor. It's a criminal offense. It's child pornography.

Researcher Kimberly J. Mitchell co-authored two studies in *Pediatrics*, one of which estimates that in 2008-2009, police in the U.S. investigated 3,500-some cases of sexual images sent by adolescents. In 1 of 3 of those cases, an adult received them.

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But there doesn't appear to be an epidemic of kids sending naked photos of themselves to here, there and everywhere, including the Internet. As a story on Reuters.com noted, youth sexting isn't as common as earlier polls indicated.

A 2008 survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that 1 in 5 teens has sent or posted online nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves. Mitchell and her colleagues got much smaller numbers in a 2010 national survey. According to phone interviews with more than 1,500 children 10 to 17 years old, only 2.5 in 100 had appeared in or produced nude or nearly nude photos or videos. And only 1 in 100 did so if only sexually explicit material -- naked breasts, genitals or rear ends -- was included. Around 6 or 7 in 100 adolescents said they'd received such images or videos.

"Overall, our results are actually quite reassuring," Mitchell told Reuters. "With any sort of new technology that kids become involved in there is a tendency to become easily alarmed. What we are instead seeing is that sexting may just make some forms of sexual behavior more visible to adults."

Her advice to parents is to make sure their kids understand the legal risks (being busted for transmitting child porn) and the digital risk of Internet exposure. If someone is a sexting recipient, delete the text immediately and certainly don't redistribute it.

A spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy was gratified by the study's finding, but also a bit skeptical. Bill Albert told Reuters the numbers didn't surprise him because researchers surveyed younger kids as well as teenagers. As he pointed out, "I wonder if teens are being as truthful as they might be. ... It's a good opportunity to sit down with your kid and talk about it."

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