



## Child 'Sexting' Not as Common as Experts Thought

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Sexually explicit material isn't as widespread on kids' cell phones as some surveys have suggested, researchers have found.

But 'sexting' – sending or receiving risqué photos or videos via cell phone – can still mean legal trouble for minors.

"Right now, in most areas, it's a criminal offense," said Kimberly J. Mitchell, a psychologist at the University of New Hampshire in Durham and a co-author on two new reports in the journal *Pediatrics*. "Child pornography is by definition a sexual picture of a minor."

In one study, Mitchell and her colleagues estimate that U.S. police handled nearly 3,500 cases of sexual images produced by adolescents from 2008 to 2009.

Adults were on the receiving end just over a third of the time, while the rest involved only youths. Nearly four out of ten cases led to an arrest, including when the sexting had been "romantic" or "attention-seeking."

Fueled by high-profile scandals, sexting has become a hot topic in the media. Earlier this year, Representative [Anthony Weiner](#) stepped down from Congress after admitting to sexting in which he sent lewd pictures of himself to young women.

For minors, there is the added concern that sexually explicit photos or videos may be considered child pornography, even when sent from a girl to her boyfriend or vice versa.

Mitchell said parents should make their teens aware of the legal risks and make sure they understand that anything they send could end up on the Internet.

"Once it's out there you probably won't be able to get it back," she told Reuters Health.

And for receivers, Mitchell added, "we are recommending they should delete it and they certainly should not distribute it themselves."

But she also cautioned that youth sexting isn't as common as earlier polls have suggested.

A 2008 survey found one in five teens have sent or posted online nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a private organization based in Washington, D.C.

Mitchell and her colleagues got much smaller numbers in a 2010 national survey, however. Based on phone interviews with more than 1,500 children ages 10 through 17, they found just 2.5 percent had appeared in or produced nude or nearly nude photos or videos. That number dropped to one percent if only sexually explicit material like naked breasts, genitals or bottoms was included.

Between six and seven percent of the adolescents said they'd received such images or videos. "Overall, our results are actually quite reassuring," said Mitchell.

"With any sort of new technology that kids become involved in there is a tendency to become easily alarmed," she added. "What we are instead seeing is that sexting may just make some forms of sexual behavior more visible to adults."

Bill Albert, a spokesperson for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, welcomed the new findings.

He said he wasn't surprised by the smaller numbers, given that Mitchell and colleagues surveyed younger kids and interviewed them over the phone while their parents were around.

"I wonder if teens are being as truthful as they might be," Albert told Reuters Health, adding that past surveys have come up with a range of estimates.

"It's nothing to panic about, but it's something to address," he said. "It's a good opportunity to sit down with your kid and talk about it."