

Study finds 10% of tweens, teens have 'sexted'

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(CNN) -- "Sexting" -- the practice of taking sexually explicit photos and sending them to peers via cell phones or the Internet -- may be less common among U.S. adolescents than previous research and media reports have suggested, according to a new nationwide study.

In contrast to a widely cited 2008 survey in which 20% of teens reported sending or posting sexual pictures of themselves, the new survey -- in a younger group of Internet users, some as young as 10 -- found that only 10% of teens and tweens had done so. And just 1% reported sending or receiving nude or partly nude images.

"It's still something that we need to talk to kids about, but not all kids are doing it," says Kimberly J. Mitchell, Ph.D., a study coauthor and a research associate professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire, in Durham. "It's a bit reassuring, because a lot of the other studies about this have come up with much larger numbers."

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The new findings, which appear in the January issue of the journal *Pediatrics*, shouldn't be interpreted to mean that sexting isn't a serious problem, says Amanda Lenhart, a senior research scientist at the Pew Internet & American Life Project, in Washington, D.C.

"Even if you look at 1% or 2% of kids in a high school of a thousand kids, that's 10 to 20 kids, and that's plenty of people for whom this is a big issue and for whom this is a troublesome problem in their lives," says Lenhart, who has researched teen sexting but was not involved in the new study. Mitchell and her team conducted phone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,560 Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17. Slightly less than 10% of the participants reported that during the past year they'd created, appeared in, or received "sexually suggestive" images -- a broad category that includes images of kids and teens in underwear, swimsuits, or clothed "sexy poses."

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But the rate dropped when sexting was defined as sending or receiving images showing sexual activity or naked breasts, genitals, or backsides -- all of which may qualify as child pornography, the study notes. Just 1% of the adolescents took a photo or video of themselves meeting these criteria, and 6% received such an image.

As one might expect, older kids were far more likely than tweens to be involved in sexting of any kind, which may explain in part why previous surveys that were restricted to teens have found higher overall rates, Mitchell says.

Sexting among youth raises many concerns, including the risk that an adolescent who sends or posts explicit photos could be prosecuted under child pornography laws. (The study was funded by

the U.S. Department of Justice's juvenile division.) Nude photos can also be circulated without the subject's knowledge, used to bribe or blackmail someone, or end up in adult hands.

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Mitchell and her colleagues, however, found that it was relatively rare for sexual images to "go viral" through a school or community, or even among a group of friends. Just 10% of images wound up being distributed, while 3% of young people who received a nude or nearly nude image forwarded it to others or posted it online.

In a separate study in the same issue of *Pediatrics*, the researchers looked at a sample of 675 police cases involving youth sexting and found it was very rare for pictures to escape the cell-phone realm and be posted on the Internet. "Even though they could get out, it doesn't seem that they're being as widely distributed as we're being led to believe," Mitchell says.

Jill Murray, a psychotherapist in private practice in Orange County, Calif., and the author of *But I Love Him: Protecting Your Teen Daughter From Controlling, Abusive Dating Relationships*, says the findings of Mitchell and her colleagues may not capture the full extent of sexting among young people.

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Even though the researchers assured the survey participants that the interviews were confidential, the kids may nevertheless have downplayed their sexting behavior, she says. "Teenagers are sort of suspicious that they're talking to an adult, [that] an adult's going to report them, or the person conducting the survey has their phone number," Murray says. "I just don't know that the kids were honest."

And the low number of adolescents in the study who reported circulating images doesn't ring true, adds Murray, who says she frequently sees girls who have sent a nude photo to a boyfriend that wound up being sent to all his friends, and their friends, and so on. "If you're a 15-year-old kid that's getting a naked or nearly naked picture of a girl, there's practically no way you're going to keep that photo to yourself. It's almost a biological imperative."

Although encouraging, the new study is a reminder that parents need to monitor their children's cell-phone and Internet use, and explain to them the potential legal implications of transmitting nude images of minors, Murray and other experts say.

"It's important that parents do understand that when you give your kid a cell phone, you're really giving them a lot of power in terms of access and communication," says Caroline Knorr, the parenting editor at Common Sense Media, a San Francisco-based advocacy organization that seeks to educate kids and families about media and technology. "It's just really important to discuss your rules around what the responsible usage of that device is."