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Teen 'sexting': less common than parents may fear

By Melissa Healy, Los Angeles Times/for the Booster Shots Blog

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Roughly one teen in 100 has personally engaged in so-called sexting, the sending of sexually explicit pictures of oneself via digital media, in the last year. But the senders intended the images to be an intimate message for one special recipient may be surprised: 7.1% of Internet-using teenagers told the authors of a study released Monday they had received at least one such image on their phone or computer in the last year.

The [study](#), published Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*, is the first to make an educated guess at how common the practice of sexting is among teens. Its conclusion: not as common as many parents may think because of widespread reporting on the trend, legal actions against some who engage in it and, in some cases, unfamiliarity with kids' digital worlds.

"The data suggest that appearing in, creating, or receiving sexual images is far from being a normative behavior for youth," wrote the authors, from the University of New Hampshire's Crimes against Children Research Center. The authors seek to reassure adults given to what they call "juvеноia" -- a distrust of the mores and values of youth--suggesting that sexting may not represent a dramatic surge in youth risk-taking behavior so much as making it more evident to adults.

The study is based on a survey of 1,560 children, 10 to 17 years old, who use the Internet. Older teens were far more likely than younger children to create and send sexual images of themselves, or to receive them. Only 10% of kids who snapped sexually explicit images of themselves actually distributed them to others, and just 3% of kids who received such images forwarded them to others.

Two findings should dampen fears that kids are sexting with abandon: The survey found that children defined sexting more broadly than adults do and that a substantial minority -- about 28% -- of those making or receiving such messages reported them to adults or authorities or were caught getting or sending the messages.

When researchers asked respondents broadly about sexting, 2.5% said they had made or appeared in "nude or nearly nude pictures or videos" of themselves. But when asked more narrowly about sexually explicit pictures showing "naked breasts, genitals or bottoms," only 1% said they had engaged in sexting in the previous year.

Questions designed to elicit details as to the circumstances and actual content of such messages suggest that most are produced as a prank or in the context of an existing romantic relationship, and that many "sexts," as defined by teens, include pictures that show underwear, clothed genitals or skimpy bathing suits. Roughly three-in-ten were created in instances where alcohol or drug use was an aggravating factor.

In 2008 and 2009, there were 3,477 reported cases of sexting that rose to the attention of law enforcement authorities, researchers wrote in a [separate study](#) also published in *Pediatrics*. Roughly

two-thirds of those cases were considered "aggravated." In slightly more than half of such aggravated cases, an adult was involved in creating or distributing the image; in fewer than half, a youth produced or distributed the images with "intent to harm" or "reckless misuse." The cases not considered aggravated were characterized by researchers as "experimental" in nature, with the sexters either in a relationship or engaging in "sexual attention seeking" behavior.

The study bolsters a [conclusion increasingly drawn](#) by adult researchers of teen digital behavior: that digital media have not so much driven sexual risk-taking behavior in teens as provided teens inclined toward risky behavior a new medium for doing so. Bad behavior among teens and younger kids is [far more likely to be mean](#) than it is to be overtly sexual, recent research has found.

"Sexting may not indicate a dramatic change in youth risk-taking or youth sexual behavior," authors Kimberly J. Mitchell, David Finkelhor, Lisa M. Jones and Janice Wolak write. Before authorities contemplate a policy of taking legal action against sexters, the authors added, they should have solid research about how commonly such action is malicious, dangerous or already illegal.

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