



'Sexting' Not Very Widespread Among Kids, Teens

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Sexting does not appear to be a common behavior in children and teens, and usually does not result in legal trouble when only minors are involved, two studies showed.

In a survey of adolescents ages 10 to 17, less than 10% reported appearing in or creating nude or sexually suggestive images or receiving such images in the preceding year, according to Kimberly Mitchell, PhD, of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center in Durham, and colleagues.

Only 2.5% had appeared in or created (as opposed to having received) these images, a percentage that dropped to 1.3% when a strict definition of sexually explicit -- something that could be classified as child pornography -- was used, the researchers reported in the January issue of *Pediatrics*.

In a separate study, led by Janis Wolak, JD, also at the New Hampshire center, the researchers found that most cases of youth sexting that came to the attention of law enforcement did not result in arrests, except for incidents involving adults.

Although the results are somewhat reassuring, Mitchell and colleagues wrote, "receiving and thus possession of potentially illegal images among young people is widespread enough that education about this and its consequences is strongly warranted."

An increase in the number of sexting cases has raised concerns about the legal consequences of making and possessing child pornography -- including the possibility of a minor being charged with a sex crime and getting placed on a sex offender registry -- and about the youth's reputation and future prospects after an image is placed in a forum where it potentially will be seen by employers, academic institutions, family members, and friends.

It is unclear, however, exactly how widespread the practice is among minors due to variations in the definition of sexting.

To explore the issue, Mitchell and colleagues conducted a cross-sectional, national telephone survey of 1,560 adolescents ages 10 through 17 and their parents.

Estimates of creating or receiving sexual images varied depending on how sexting behavior was defined.

The most inclusive definition had 9.6% of respondents saying that they had appeared in, or created nude or nearly nude images, or had received such images in the past year. Nearly nude images could include people wearing underwear or bathing suits, sexy poses with clothes on, or pictures focused on clothed genitals.

When considering only those sexually explicit images that could be considered child pornography, 1.3% of respondents said they had appeared in or created such images and 5.9% said they had received them.

The most common reason given for sexting was for romantic purposes as part of an existing relationship, although pranks or attempts to start a relationship explained some of the incidents.

Further distribution of the images was not common, occurring in 10% of cases in which the respondent appeared in or created the image and 3% of cases in which the respondent received the image.

"Sexting of explicit images involves a low percentage but still a considerable number of youth," Mitchell and colleagues wrote. "This raises the question of how the law should treat such cases. Subjecting youth to severe penalties for activities that would be legal for an 18-year-old as long as no exploitation was involved is increasingly being recognized as draconian."

To look into how law enforcement typically handles these cases, Wolak, Mitchell, and a third author, David Finkelhor, PhD, surveyed a national sample of law enforcement agencies and solicited details about youth sexting cases handled by police. All of these cases involved sexual images that could be classified as child pornography.

Of 3,477 cases handled over a two-year period, about two-thirds involved aggravating circumstances, either involvement of an adult (36%) or a minor engaged in malicious, nonconsensual, or abusive behavior (31%). The rest of the cases were deemed "experimental," in which the main purposes were romance, attention-seeking, or curiosity.

Arrests occurred in the majority of cases that involved adults (62%), but in a minority of youth-only cases -- 36% of aggravated incidents and 18% of experimental incidents.

Still, "this suggests that some youth may be facing exposure to criminal treatment in cases that might be better handled informally by families and clinicians," the authors wrote.

Sex offender registration was rare for the youth-only cases. Only 5% of the aggravated offenders had to register.