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Sexting not prevalent among kids, study shows

(AP) CHICAGO — Teen sexting of nude photos online or via cellphone may be far less common than people think, new research suggests.

Only 1 percent of kids aged 10 to 17 have shared images of themselves or others that involve explicit nudity, a nationally representative study found. Roughly the same number said they'd shared suggestive but less graphic photos; while 7 percent said they'd received either type of picture.

The research suggests texting of sexual photos among younger kids is extremely rare but more common among older teens.

The results are reassuring, showing that teen sexting isn't rampant, usually isn't malicious, and is generally not something parents should panic over, said lead author Kimberly Mitchell, a research assistant psychology professor at the University of New Hampshire.

Previous reports said as many as one in five young people — 20 percent — have participated in sexting. But some surveys included older teens and people in their early 20s. And some used definitions of sexting that included racy text messages without photos, or images "no more revealing than what someone might see at a beach," authors of the new study said.

They focused only on pictures, and asked more detailed questions about the kinds of racy photos kids are sharing.

The researchers did a separate study on how police deal with teen sexting of photos. Contrary to some reports, that research suggests few kids are being prosecuted or forced to register as sex offenders for sexting. It estimates that nearly 4,000 teen sexting cases were reported to police nationwide in 2008 and 2009.

Slightly more than one-third of those cases resulted in arrests. About one-third of all cases involved teens and young adults; the adults were much more likely to be arrested.

The studies were released Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*.

The research shows that sexting can range from incidents that some teen health experts consider

typical adolescent exploring — the 21st century version of sneaking a look at dad's Playboy magazine, to malicious cases with serious consequences made possible by today's technology.

For example, one case involved a 10-year-old boy who sent a cellphone picture of his genitals to an 11-year-old classmate "to gross her out." The girl's mother called police; the boy cried when questioned by police, who concluded he didn't understand the magnitude of his actions and left the matter to his parents.

Another involved a 16-year-old girl who said she accidentally posted a nude photo of herself on a social networking site. A 16-year-old boy at her school found the photo and distributed it to 100 people when she refused his demand to send him more nude pictures. He was charged with a felony and was put on probation.

The results suggest that police generally aren't overreacting to teen sexting, said Janis Wolak, lead author of the second study. Some cases that aren't clearly criminal are still worrisome and warrant intervention by parents or others, she said.

In the first study, researchers questioned 1,560 kids nationwide by phone, with parents' permission, between in August 2010 and January of this year. The second study is based on mailed questionnaires to nearly 3,000 police departments and follow-up phone interviews with investigating officers about sexting cases handled in 2008 and 2009.

The studies illustrate how sexting may include a wide range of teen behavior, and highlight an issue "about which we as a society have gotten pretty hysterical and probably blew out of proportion," said Dr. Michael Rich, director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Children's Hospital Boston.

Exploring sexuality is normal behavior for teens and taking pictures of themselves and others is one way "just to find out what it is like," he said. "We've been doing that since somebody scribbled a picture of a nude woman on the side of a cave and the guys gathered around to check it out."

Sexting is different only because it is happening "in an environment that the adult community doesn't understand as well as kids," Rich said.

Dr. Victor Strasburger, an adolescent medicine expert at the University of New Mexico, said parents, schools and law enforcement authorities "need to understand that teenagers are neurologically programmed to do dumb things." Their brains aren't mature enough to fully realize the consequences of their actions, including sexting, until early adulthood, he said.

Instead of prosecution, he said, there should be more emphasis on teaching teens to be responsible with new technology. Kids need to be told "that when you put things online and even when you send them via cellphone, they're potentially there forever."