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Teen sexting of photos may be less common than thought, depending on definition, research says

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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 focused on teens only — not young adults, an age group included in some earlier studies which showed considerably higher sexting participation. The new study suggests texting of sexual photos among younger kids is rare.

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 1 in 5 young people, or 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.

An Associated Press-MTV poll done in August found that 7 percent of teens said they had sent a naked photo of themselves. That result was for older teens — 14 to 17 — and was conducted online.

The latest study focused only on pictures, and asked more detailed questions about the kinds of racy photos kids are sharing

The researchers also 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.