



UNH study finds ‘sexting’ not so prevalent

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DURHAM — While headline-grabbing cases of teenagers taking naked pictures of themselves have captured the public’s attention, the risqué behavior isn’t nearly as prevalent as some may believe, according to a newly published University of New Hampshire study.

In addition, a second UNH study reports that police nationwide have taken a nuanced approach to the behavior, which some have derided as tantamount to possessing and distributing child pornography, and pursued criminal charges only in cases that involved aggravating factors, like blackmail.

Both studies are scheduled to be published today in the journal “Pediatrics.”

The first study surveyed 1,560 people from ages 10 to 17 about “sexting,” specifically sending, receiving or creating sexual pictures distributed via cell phone, and found that only 2.5 percent of respondents had done such a thing in the previous year, many of them included pictures that would not even qualify as pornographic.

Only 1 percent of respondents said they had seen or taken explicit pictures of private parts.

“One of the reasons we wanted to do this is because there have been studies out there that suggest that 20 or 25 percent of kids are involved,” said the Kimberly Mitchell, a research associate professor of psychology at UNH’s Crimes Against Children Research Center and the lead author of the study.

Mitchell said previous studies were flawed for a variety of reasons, such as surveying people who are 18- or 19-years-old, who are legally of age, or defining “sexting” so broadly that it included sexually suggestive text messages.

Mitchell also said youths tend to be more cautious than many adults believe because they have grown up with technology.

“We find time and time again that kids are fairly smart when it comes to technology; they know the risks and the dangers and what they shouldn’t be doing,” she said.

The next step in the study is to take a closer look at the 1 percent who said they had participated in explicit sexting. Mitchell said she expects that group will fall into a high-risk group that, for a variety of reasons, may be more susceptible to other problems, like substance abuse or depression.

In the second study, which looked at how police are responding to sexting, researchers found that in most cases, police didn’t arrest anyone.

In a survey of 675 sexting cases handled by police agencies nationwide in 2008 and 2009, researchers found that arrests were made in 36 percent of cases that included aggravating factors, like harassment, and that arrests were made in only 18 percent of cases without such factors.

“In most cases, police were lecturing the kids, often calling parents in to deal with it, but not actually formally charging kids or making arrests,” said Janis Wolak, a senior researcher at the UNH Crimes Against Children Research Center and the study’s lead author.

She added: “We didn’t see evidence that police were overreacting in most cases.”

The study also dispelled one major fear: that many of the sexually explicit pictures end up online, leading to much wider distribution. In 85 percent of cases, the pictures were only on various cell phones. Researchers are hoping that, taken together, the two studies will help dispel many fears about sexting. “I hope it provides some reassurance for parents,” Mitchell said.