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Kids sexting less common than thought, study says

By [Janice D'Arcy](#)

Explicit “sexting” by kids may be far less prevalent than previously thought, and police intervention may also be less common according to two new reports published online today in the journal [Pediatrics](#).

The first survey finds that only about 1 percent of children 17 and younger have texted explicitly pornographic images. That’s a significantly lower percentage than previous studies have found, such as one that reported [as many as 20 percent of kids participate in sexting](#).

(A recent [Pew study described in an earlier post](#) pegged the percentage of children ages 12 to 17 who had sent sexts at 4 percent and who had received them at 15 percent.)

The second Pediatrics report is a survey of police departments that found police intervention rare, especially in cases where minors considered the sexts as romantic or were seeking attention.

“One thing we’ve learned from all the research we’ve conducted about youth and technology is that most kids tend to use computers, the Internet, and cell phones quite responsibly,” said [Kimberly J. Mitchell](#), a research assistant professor of Psychology at the [Crimes against Children Research Center at University of New Hampshire](#), who worked on both reports.

She said other studies sometimes include older teens or more vague terminology, which leads to results that suggest a far larger problem than actually exists. In turn, that leads to over-reactions by parents and people who work with children.

“Sexting is often portrayed as yet another sign of the hyper-sexualization of youth and extreme risk-taking. This is contrary to several indicators of youth sexual behavior that have been improving (e.g., teenage pregnancy rates and the number of youth with multiple partners),” Mitchell said.

Still, the amount of sexting in this age group is subject to interpretation. When researchers broadened their definition to include the sending of sexually suggestive images, as opposed to images that would violate child pornography laws, the number who admitted to the practice jumped to 9.6 percent.

The second study, on police intervention, sheds new light on the public policy debate over sexting laws. It found the vast majority of arrests involved adults or minors who were acting maliciously.

Also, very few of the sexters ended up on a sex offender registry list. Only one case of the 675 studied resulted in a juvenile who had not committed a crime in addition to sexting being placed on a registry.

Overall, police currently deal with a relatively low number of sexting cases nationwide annually (1,750). The caseload is similar to that of juvenile homicide (1,675).

The report cites a few specific cases where it seemed parents had lost their heads over the issue. One mother called the police after she found on her daughter’s phone a “sext” from a friend. She ended up asking the police to fully prosecute both her daughter and the friend. Other parents called

police when they found a sexually explicit video from the boyfriend of their 17-year-old gay son on his phone.

The researchers concluded in the second report, that many sexting cases would be better termed “experimental” than criminal.”

The studies might tone down the rhetoric on the issue and remove the tendency for hysteria. Particularly at a time when parents are allowing children more and more access to new technology. (Or used technology — a recent [PBS KIDS survey](#) found that almost a quarter of parents plan to re-gift their personal tech devices to their young children this year.)

The more common cases, it seems, are not the horror stories of exploitation and abusive bullying. Those exist, too. But for many parents and school officials, the reports suggest, the issue might be best addressed with level-headed conversations about what’s appropriate and acceptable technology use.

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