



Why Kids Sexting May Not Be as Big a Problem as We Thought

By Bonnie Rochman Monday, December 5, 2011

There's been no shortage of hand-wringing over the menace of "sexting" among kids, but new research finds that parents' concern may be largely overwrought: only 7% of children ages 10 to 17 created, appeared in or received a sexually suggestive photo in the past year.

Further, contrary to fears that nude photos created and sent by children are ricocheting across the Internet, only 1% of photos that kids created or appeared in were graphic enough to be considered child pornography, the researchers found. Past data on the topic has been far more foreboding, showing that up to 1 in 5 kids sext. But those findings may have been inflated: one study included 18- and 19-year-olds, whose images would technically not be considered child porn.

Most kids, it seems, have a fair amount of common sense when it comes to what kinds of images to send from their cell phones, according to the new research published Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*. "Parents should take this as good news," says lead author Kimberly Mitchell, research associate professor of psychology at the Crimes Against Children Research Center (CCRC) at the University of New Hampshire. "A lot of times good news is not as newsworthy, but the theme is that overall kids are pretty smart and savvy. They appear to know this is not an appropriate thing to do."

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In the first of two studies appearing in *Pediatrics*, researchers from CCRC canvassed 1,560 kids between the ages of 10 and 17, asking them if they had ever sexted — defined here as taking nude or nearly nude pictures of themselves or receiving similar photos of other kids under 18.

Of the children who said they had sexted, most had participated in somewhat more PG-rated versions of the pastime: the vast majority of their images did not show breasts or genitals; many involved sexy clothed poses or were taken in underwear or bathing suits. Only a fraction of these images may have violated child pornography laws by showing naked breasts, genitals or bottoms.

Few of the images or videos went viral. Only 10% of sexts ended up being distributed to people other than the intended recipient. "That's lower than most people will expect," says Mitchell. And just 3% of children who received an explicit image forwarded it on or posted it online. The researchers found that kids were most likely to sext at ages 16 and 17.

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In the second study from CCRC, researchers analyzed the rate of crime occurring in 675 sexting cases investigated by the police, and found that most investigations yielded no arrests of juveniles. Cases

involving adults resulted in arrests 62% of the time, but in youth-only cases the percentage was lower. There were arrests in 36% of incidents that involved "aggravating factors" — instances where children may have used the photos to blackmail or taunt others. In more stereotypical sexting cases, in which kids took and sent photos to attract attention or as part of a romantic relationship, 18% resulted in arrest. In the small number of cases in which police decided teens must register as sex offenders, researchers found that the teens had also committed additional crimes such as extortion and forcible rape.

Of course, the reassuring numbers don't mean that it's not important to drill into your child that sexting — regardless of the recipient — is a really bad idea. For one thing, taking sexually explicit pictures of minors and distributing them is a crime. But ultimately what may be the most significant deterrent is the threat of humiliation. "What resonates with teens is that it could be pretty embarrassing," says Mitchell. "You think you may be sending something to your boyfriend, but then you break up, and who knows."