



Study: ‘Sexting’ among youths appears on the decline

By Christine McConville
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Teen “sexting” has triggered jaw-dropping headlines, led to criminal charges and inspired plenty of classroom turmoil, but a new study finds that the electronic messaging of nude images by youngsters may be less common than some people fear.

A new national study shows that only 1 percent of kids aged 10 to 17 have used the Internet or a cellphone to send a nude photo of themselves to others.

Another 1 percent said they’d shared suggestive photos, while 7 percent said they’d received nude or suggestive images.

The results are reassuring, showing that teen sexting isn’t rampant and usually isn’t malicious, said lead author Kimberly Mitchell, a University of New Hampshire psychology professor.

Previous reports said as many as one in five young people — 20 percent — have participated in sexting, but those surveys included older teens and people in their 20s. And the latest study’s authors said texting is somewhat more common among 18- and 19-year-olds than among younger teens.

Researchers focused only on photos, asking detailed questions about the kinds of racy photos kids are sharing, but didn’t ask about sexually charged language.

The researchers did a separate study on how police deal with teen sexting, and it suggests that few kids are being prosecuted or forced to register as sex offenders for sexting.

Nationally, 4,000 teen sexting cases were reported to police in 2008 and 2009, and one-third of them resulted in arrests, researchers say. But most are not ultimately prosecuted. The studies are published today in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Dr. Michael Rich, director of the Center on Media and Child Health at Children’s Hospital Boston, said the studies highlight an issue “about which we as a society have gotten pretty hysterical and probably blew out of proportion.”

Exploring sexuality is normal for teens, 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.”

A former Stoughton High student has sued school officials, alleging they didn’t stop the harassment she endured after sending nude photos to a classmate. In 2009, six Falmouth boys were threatened with child porn charges for texting a provocative photo of a female classmate.

Material from the Associated Press was used in the report.

— christine.mcconville@bostonherald.com