YOUNG CANADIANS IN A WIRELESS WORLD, PHASE IV

RELATIONSHIPS AND TECHNOLOGY: SEXTING

Media Smarts

MediaSmarts

MediaSmarts is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization for digital media literacy. Our vision is that people across Canada have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens. MediaSmarts has been developing digital media literacy programs and resources for Canadian homes, schools, and communities since 1996. MediaSmarts also conducts and disseminates original research that contributes to the development of our programs and resources and informs public policy on issues related to digital media literacy.

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Land Acknowledgement

MediaSmarts acknowledges that it is based on the traditional unceded and occupied lands of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg. With gratitude, we acknowledge the territory to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to building positive relationships with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples from coast to coast to coast.

We strive to ground our research processes in care and reciprocity, and this includes being in a constant state of learning – especially when it comes to understanding the digital well-being and experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities across Canada. We commit to creating and maintaining respectful processes and relationships that recognize and seek to address power imbalances across the digital media literacy landscape.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young Canadians in a Wireless World (YCWW) is Canada's longest-running and most comprehensive research study on young people's attitudes, behaviours, and opinions regarding the internet, technology, and digital media. MediaSmarts has surveyed over 20,000 parents, teachers, and students through this study since 1999. The study is currently in its fourth phase, and this report is the fifth in a series of reports that will be published on our website.

Like in previous phases of YCWW, we designed two surveys – one for students in grades 4 to 6 and one for grades 7 to 11. In both surveys, we organized questions into various categories:

- Digital devices at home
- Screen time at home
- Technology at school
- Online privacy and consent
- Trust

- Relationships and technology
- Handling online problems
- Opinions on various digital topics
- Digital and media literacy
- Demographics

From October to December of 2021, surveys were administered online to 1,058 youth across Canada. A total of 79 students participated in a classroom-based survey, and 979 youth participated in a GenPop (general population) survey.

After several collaborative data analysis sessions, the MediaSmarts research team decided on the following topics and themes for the Phase IV reports:

- Life Online
- Encountering Harmful and Discomforting Content Online
- Privacy
- Online Meanness and Cruelty
- Sexting
- Digital Media Literacy

Phase IV will conclude with a Trends and Recommendations report to be released in 2023.

This fifth report presents findings related to sexting and is the second of two reports focusing on relationships and technology. We share findings related to sending, receiving, and forwarding sexts and highlight what the YCWW Phase IV survey data tells us about young Canadians' motivations and attitudes for engaging in sexting. We also speak to the role of trust and support in sexting behaviours among youth, focusing specifically on the impact of adult involvement and supervision and the desire for further educational support on this topic. Finally, we share resources that are currently available on the MediaSmarts website regarding sexting and highlight current research in the field that expands upon what we offer in this report.

We want to thank all students, parents, teachers, principals, and school administrators across Canada who engaged with this project in one way or another during Phase IV. YCWW remains the cornerstone of our work at MediaSmarts, and we are grateful for the support – in all forms – that sustains it.
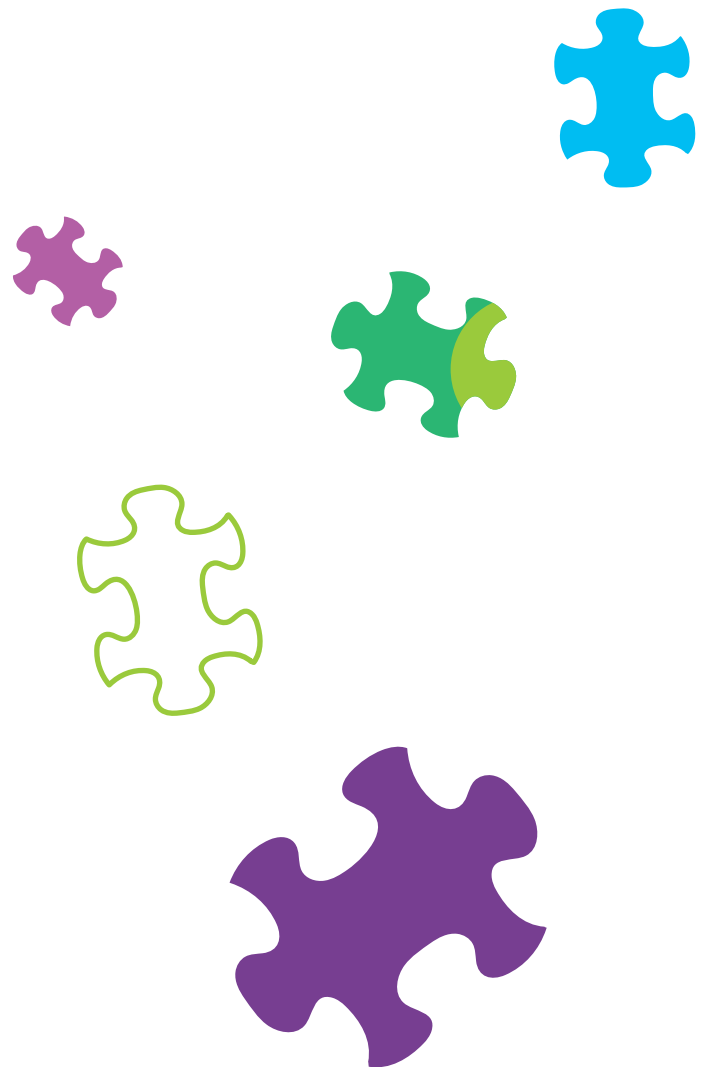
INTRODUCTION

Young Canadians in a Wireless World (YCWW) is Canada's longest-running and most comprehensive research study on young people's attitudes, behaviours, and opinions regarding the internet, technology, and digital media. MediaSmarts has surveyed over 20,000 parents, teachers, and students through this study since 1999.

The findings from YCWW are used to set benchmarks for research on children's use of the internet, technology, and digital media and have informed policy on the digital economy, privacy, online safety, online harms and digital well-being, digital citizenship, and digital media literacy, among other topics. This research is also used to inform other projects at MediaSmarts and at other organizations, including academic institutions, within our vast and growing network of research partners.

The study is currently in its fourth phase. In 2019, MediaSmarts' research team conducted focus groups to get a kid's-eye-view of what is working for young people online and what needs to be changed or improved so that they get the most out of their online experiences. Additional focus groups with parents helped to round out discussions about what is needed to foster (collective) online resiliency. This qualitative work helped us prepare for a quantitative survey that began in 2021.

Phase IV of YCWW culminates in a series of research reports that will be published on the MediaSmarts website. Topics include:

- Life Online
- Encountering Harmful and Discomforting Content Online
- Privacy
- Online Meanness and Cruelty
- Sexting
- Digital Media Literacy

As in previous phases of this study, Phase IV will also conclude with a Trends and Recommendations report.

A departure from previous phases is the inclusion of a longer research methods report as part of the full series of YCWW reports. While each report will contain a brief section on the research method, this separate report offers a deeper dive into the methodological decisions and processes undertaken by the MediaSmarts research team during Phase IV of YCWW. The various pivots and adaptations taken during this phase deserve elaboration and will be of interest to other researchers who have made, and continue to make, shifts in their work due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overview: Young Canadians in a Wireless World

What follows is a summary of the previous three phases of YCWW and an introduction to Phase IV, which began with a qualitative research report published in January 2020.

Phase I (2000-2001) of YCWW involved 1,081 telephone interviews with parents across Canada and 12 focus groups with children ages 9-16 and parents of children ages 6-16 in Montreal and Toronto. The quantitative component of Phase 1 involved 5,682 self-administered paper-based surveys conducted in French and English classrooms in 77 selected schools across ten Canadian provinces.

At the time, parents were excited about the prospects of having their children use new technologies to help them learn and prepare for their future employment; they tended to exercise benign neglect online, trusting their children to come to them if they ran into problems. Youth participants felt that online media were completely private because adults did not have the skills to find them there, and they enjoyed a wide range of creative uses such as identity play and exploring the adult world. They also tended to trust corporations, calling them "friends."

In Phase II (2004-2005), we conducted 12 focus groups with children ages 11-17 and parents of children ages 11-17 in Edmonton, Montreal, and Toronto. Additionally, 5,272 self-administered quantitative paper-based surveys were conducted in French and English classrooms in 77 selected schools across Canada with students in grades 4 to 11. We were pleased that 302 of the 319 classrooms from Phase I participated in Phase II.

Although youth participants still enjoyed many online activities, they were becoming aware of how often they were being monitored online. In response, they developed several strategies to keep their online lives private. On the other hand, adults were beginning to conclude that young people were mostly "wasting their time" playing games and chatting (precisely the things that drew youth online in the first place).

Phase III (2011-2014) involved ten one-hour key informant interviews with elementary and secondary teachers representing five regions across Canada: the North, the West, Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic. In addition to these interviews, MediaSmarts conducted 12 focus groups with children ages 11-17 and parents of children ages 11-17 in Calgary, Ottawa, and Toronto. The quantitative component of Phase III involved 5,436 surveys in school boards and schools in all ten provinces and all three territories.

In this third phase, adults began feeling overwhelmed by the reported dangers their children faced online, especially around cyberbullying. Youth participants indicated that cyberbullying was much less worrisome than adults feared; however, they felt that the protective surveillance they were being placed under in response to cyberbullying,

and other perceived dangers, was stultifying and equated it to being "spied on" by family members and teachers. They also argued that this kind of surveillance made it much more difficult for them to receive help from trusted adults when needed. Youth were also much less comfortable with the corporations that owned the sites and apps they used and questioned the regulatory model of click-through consent that meant others could collect and use their data. For example, 95% of the students surveyed said that the corporations that own the social media sites they use should not be allowed to see what they post there.
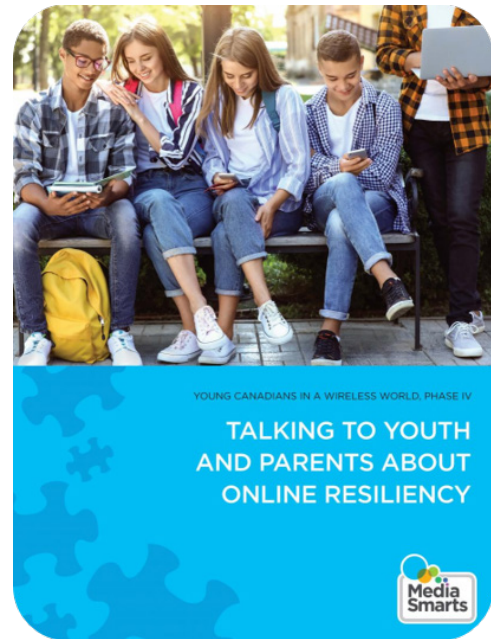
Phase IV of YCWW began with a [qualitative research report](#) that outlines findings from focus groups with youth ages 11 to 17 and a second set of focus groups with their parents in Toronto, Halifax and Ottawa. Generally, we discovered that young people are conscious about spending too much time online or on their digital devices and are also worried about the impact of misinformation on their online and learning experiences. Youth told us that they do not always want to rely on technology in school and some expressed feeling "creeped out" by the various forms of surveillance technology used in the classroom. Other findings related to teacher and parental controls over content and access to technology – both at school and at home – and how young people navigate or sometimes push back against those controls in favour of more creative uses like community engagement and self-expression. We also heard how these controls could contribute to an erosion of trust between young people and the adults in their lives.

Phase IV of YCWW also began with a name change to the project: from *Young Canadians in a **Wired** World* to *Young Canadians in a **Wireless** World*. This change in language speaks to shifts in digital technology and the online world since 1999 from a 'wired' to 'wireless' technological landscape that presents new opportunities and challenges for youth, parents, educators, policymakers, and the tech sector.

The findings from the qualitative portion of Phase IV helped us develop the surveys used in the quantitative portion. The following section on methods will outline the research plan for this quantitative research, the required shifts we made to that plan due to the COVID-19 pandemic, survey design, participant recruitment, data analysis, and a discussion of some limitations and considerations readers should keep in mind as you read through this report.

METHODS

Survey Design and Administration

As in previous phases of YCWW, we designed two surveys to explore the attitudes, activities, benefits, and challenges young people hold and experience when they are online and using digital devices – one for students in grades 4 to 6 and one for grades 7 to 11.[1] We organized questions into various categories:

- Digital devices at home
- Screen time at home
- Technology at school
- Online privacy and consent
- Trust

- Relationships and technology
- Handling online problems
- Opinions on various digital topics
- Digital and media literacy
- Demographics

The survey for youth in grades 4 to 6 had 82 questions, and the survey for youth in grades 7 to 11 had 100 questions. The additional questions in the second survey for older youth covered topics like sexting, pornography, and racist or sexist content.[2]

Also following from previous phases of YCWW, we planned to recruit participants from schools across Canada and hoped to survey between 6,000 and 8,000 students in the fall of 2020. Despite strong support for YCWW and MediaSmarts from school board representatives, fewer than half (n=25) confirmed their participation in Phase IV, citing complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this low uptake, we extended the project timeline and adjusted our recruitment strategy and survey administration options, primarily by including a GenPop survey to reach a total of 1,000 participants.

From October to December of 2021, surveys were administered online, with the support of our partners at Environics Research Group, to 1,058 youth across Canada in two ways:

1. A total of 79 students participated in the classroom-based survey.
2. A total of 979 youth participated in a GenPop (general population) survey.

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1 If you are interested in viewing the surveys used in Phase IV of *Young Canadians in a Wireless World*, please contact our Director of Research at info@mediasmarts.ca.

2 Both surveys, along with all the required consent documents, recruitment texts, teacher instructions and method of analysis, were approved by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board.

Young Canadians in a Wireless World: Phase IV Quantitative Survey Participation			
	Younger Grades 4 to 6 Ages 9 to 11	Older Grades 7 to 11 Ages 12 to 17	Total
Classroom Survey	28	51	79
GenPop Survey	371	608	979
Total	399	659	1058

Data Analysis

To reduce bias in reporting the survey data, MediaSmarts' research team engaged in a collaborative analysis process. We started by reviewing the initial analysis report provided by the team at Environics and used this document to identify the key themes for individual reports. We then revisited the data with our own queries informed by the literature, contemporary discussion and debate around the various topics, and MediaSmarts' established expertise in digital media literacy.

For each report, we identified a lead analyst who offered their initial thoughts on the outline of the report, including the themes and critical data points to be included. Discussion among the research and education teams at MediaSmarts helped confirm (or triangulate) the themes for each report and served to expand on the story we wanted to share based on the survey responses. We then began writing the themed reports based on the outcomes of this collaborative analysis process.

Limitations and Considerations

When we began planning this project in 2019, our initial goal was to reach 6,000 to 8,000 participants. While we did not reach this target—primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic—we still reached over 1,000 survey respondents, thanks to participating principals and teachers and our research firm partner: Environics. Please read this report for full details on our recruitment strategy, including the pandemic pivots we made to reach our study goals.

Of note in this latest phase of YCWW is the additional demographic data (see Appendix A) we collected to help us understand how gender, race, disability, and sexual orientation might influence what young Canadians are experiencing online. We recognize the limits of making definitive claims due to our sample size, but our analysis

of this data reveals important snapshots and stories about young people's attitudes, behaviours, and opinions regarding the internet, technology, and digital media based on these various identity markers. We think this data is especially important given that it was collected during a global pandemic when so much of our lives were thrust online. We will continue to collect these demographic data in future projects and continue to work with other researchers and community partners to enhance and encourage an intersectional approach to digital media literacy studies.

We are also aware of the gaps in geographic representation – especially when it comes to representation from Northern Canada (Nunavut, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories). While complications related to the COVID-19 pandemic are partially to blame, ongoing challenges related to the digital divide in Canada also contribute to this low representation. MediaSmarts remains committed to closing the digital divide and will continue to work with partners on future projects that centre the experiences of young people in rural, remote, northern, and Indigenous communities.

The reports in this series present survey data alongside other research and evidence that support analysis and provide important context. Where it makes sense, we speak to the findings alongside our other research projects and draw on the expertise and insights of other researchers.

Finally, not only will the findings be used to inform a series of recommendations for educators, policymakers, and decision-makers in various sectors, but they will also inform future research projects at MediaSmarts.

We want to thank all students, parents, teachers, principals, and school administrators across Canada who engaged with this project in one way or another during Phase IV. YCWW remains the cornerstone of our work at MediaSmarts, and we are grateful for the support – in all forms – that sustains it.

RELATIONSHIPS AND TECHNOLOGY - SEXTING

This is the second of two reports in Phase IV of *Young Canadians in a Wireless World* focusing on relationships and technology. We have structured the reports in this way to give the appropriate attention and space to topics that require nuanced analysis and discussion: (1) online meanness and cruelty and (2) sexting. Both reports detail young Canadians' experiences in the context of interpersonal relationships and, like other reports in the Phase IV YCWW series, situate these findings with discussions of building trust, support, and collective resilience.

In this report:

- **Sext** refers to a sexy, nude, or partially nude photo.
- **Sexting** is a combination of one or more behaviours, including sending, receiving, or forwarding sexts.

Within the Phase IV YCWW survey, questions related to sexting were only available to participants in grades 7 to 11 (n=659). Overall, the sample size for youth who indicated they engaged in sexting was very small; in most cases, **n=110 or less**. This is consistent with research in the field which concludes that sexting is substantially more common among young adults than among youth.

This report also highlights complex intersections between the sending, receiving, and forwarding behaviours that comprise sexting. For the most part, there are no clear divisions between these behaviours, as young people who engage in one sexting behaviour also engage in others. We speak to these intersections in more detail in the section titled Motivations and Attitudes.

While there is evidence that sexting is not an inherently harmful activity, it does involve some risks, and significant harm is possible when sexts are shared without the original sender's consent. We encourage you to keep these nuances in mind as you read this report.
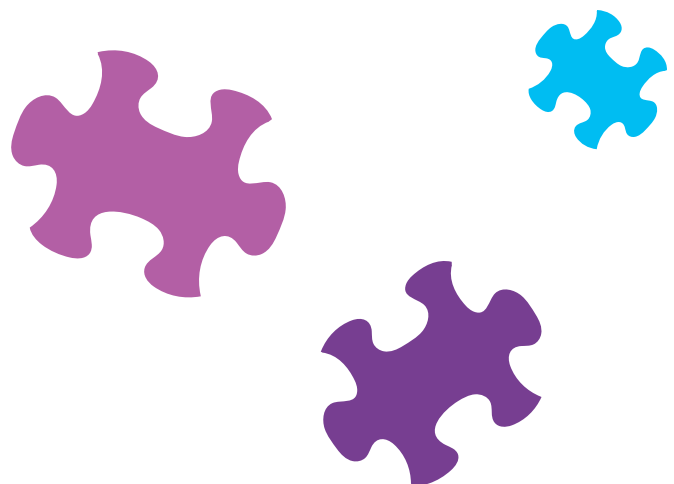
Sending Sexts

One in ten youth in grades 7 to 11 have sent a sext. Most send them to someone they are in a relationship with.

Only 3% of youth report sending a sext to someone they do not know at all.

One in ten (9%) youth in grades 7 to 11 (n=659) say that they have sent a sext (see **Figure 1**). Of those who report having sent a sext (n=60), the majority say they sent them to someone they were in a relationship with (63%). Others indicated that they had sent sexts to people they only knew online (33%), someone who later became a romantic partner (27%), or someone they knew offline (27%). Only 3% reported that they sent a sext to someone they did not know at all.

Figure 1: Sending Sexts
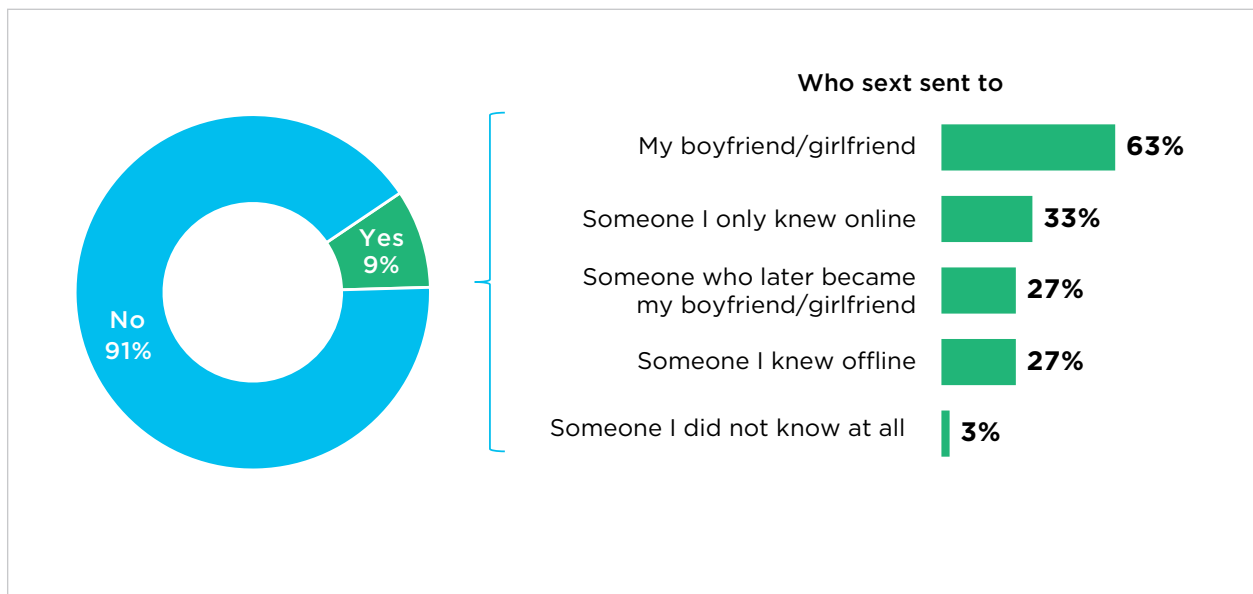
We have included some additional analysis on sending sexts here with the caveat that **only 60 participants** in this study reported engaging in this behaviour.

Not surprisingly, older youth are more likely to report sending a sext (12% of 14 to 17-year-olds, compared to 5% of 12 to 13-year-olds). Older youth who send sexts are most likely to send them to someone they are in a relationship with (68%), followed by someone they only know online (30%). Youth ages 12 to 13 who have sent sexts, by contrast, are equally likely to have sent them to a romantic partner (46%) and an online-only contact (46%).

LGBTQ+ youth are also more likely to report sending a sext (20%, compared to 8% of heterosexual youth), as are **youth with a disability** (21%, compared to 6% of youth without a disability). **Racialized youth** are more likely to send a sext to an online-only contact (42%, compared to 27% of white youth) and someone they know offline (47%, compared to 20%).

Rates of sending sexts have remained consistent over the last two phases of YCWW, with 8% of youth reporting engaging in this behaviour in Phase III (2013) and 9% of youth reporting sending sexts in Phase IV (2021).
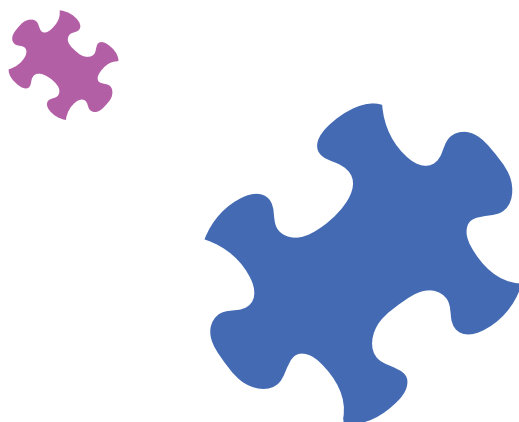
LGBTQ+ is inclusive of any participant who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, questioning, or any other diverse sexual orientation.

In the Phase IV survey, we asked youth to self-identify regarding race (see Appendix A for a breakdown of the response categories). When we say 'racialized' throughout this report, we are referring to youth who identified as Indigenous, African/West Indian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, or South/Latin American.

In the Phase IV survey, we asked participants to self-identify regarding physical disabilities, intellectual/cognitive/learning disabilities, and mental illness. The breakdown for each is available in Appendix A. When we say disability throughout the report, we are referring to any of the three categories.
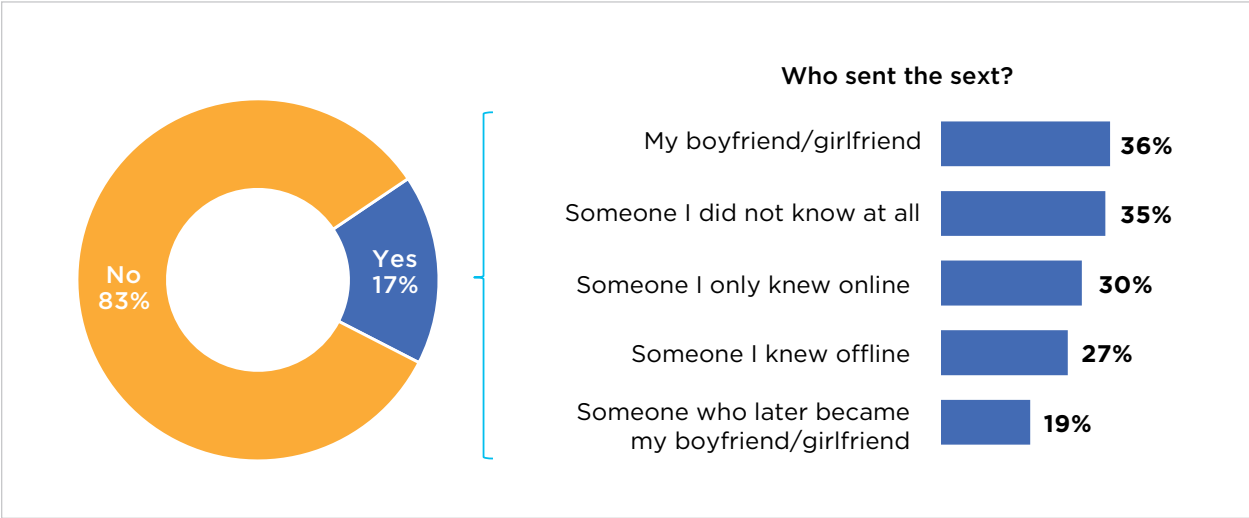
Receiving Sexts

Just under two in ten youth in grades 7 to 11 say that they have received a sext.

Just under two in ten (17%) youth in grades 7 to 11 (n=659) say that they have received a sext from someone else (see **Figure 2**). Of those who report having received a sext (n=107), the responses were nearly evenly split regarding the sender: 36% said they received it from someone they were in a relationship with, 35% from someone they do not know at all, 30% from someone they know only online, and 27% from someone they know offline.

Figure 2: Receiving Sexts

Once again, we include some additional analysis here with the reminder that **only 107 participants** in this study reported receiving sexts.

Older youth (19% of 14 to 17-year-olds, compared to 13% of 12 to 13-year-olds), girls (18%, compared to 14% of boys), and racialized youth (20%, compared to 17% of white youth) are somewhat more likely to report having received a sext. LGBTQ+ youth (37%, compared to 15% of heterosexual youth) and youth with a disability (32%, compared to 12% of youth without a disability) are considerably more likely to report receiving a sext. Additionally, 20% of transgender youth (n=5) and 60% of gender-diverse youth (n=5) report receiving sexts.

Girls are significantly more likely to receive a sext from someone they do not know (50%, compared to 13% of boys), while boys are more likely to report that they receive sexts from someone they are in a relationship with (41%, compared to 33% of girls). Older youth (38% of 14 to 17-year-olds, compared to 11% of 12 to 13-year-olds) and racialized youth (43%, compared to 26% of white youth) are more likely to report receiving a sext from someone they only know online. LGBTQ+ youth (50%, compared to 33% of heterosexual youth), white youth (41%, compared to 33% of racialized youth), and youth with a disability (45%, compared to 30% of youth without a disability) are more likely to report receiving a sext within the context of a romantic relationship.

Rates of receiving sexts have decreased since the last phase of YCWW, with 24% of youth reporting receiving sexts in Phase III (2013) and 17% of youth reporting receiving sexts in Phase IV (2021). However, of note is the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III, the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV, the sample size was 1,058.

Forwarding and Forwarded Sexts

Four in ten youth say the person they sent a sext to forwarded that sext to someone else.

Just under two in ten youth say that they have received a sext that was forwarded to them by someone else.

Three in ten youth say they have forwarded a sext.

In this section of the report, we present findings from the Phase IV YCWW survey related to forwarding and receiving forwarded sexts. As with the previous sections, we preface this analysis with a reminder to keep in mind that we are referring to small sample sizes.

First, we asked participants whether a sext they sent to someone was forwarded to anyone else. Four in ten youth who have sent sexts say the person they sent it to forwarded that sext to someone else (n=58). Three in ten youth say they do not know if a sext they sent was forwarded by the recipient to someone else (n=58) (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Had a sext forwarded
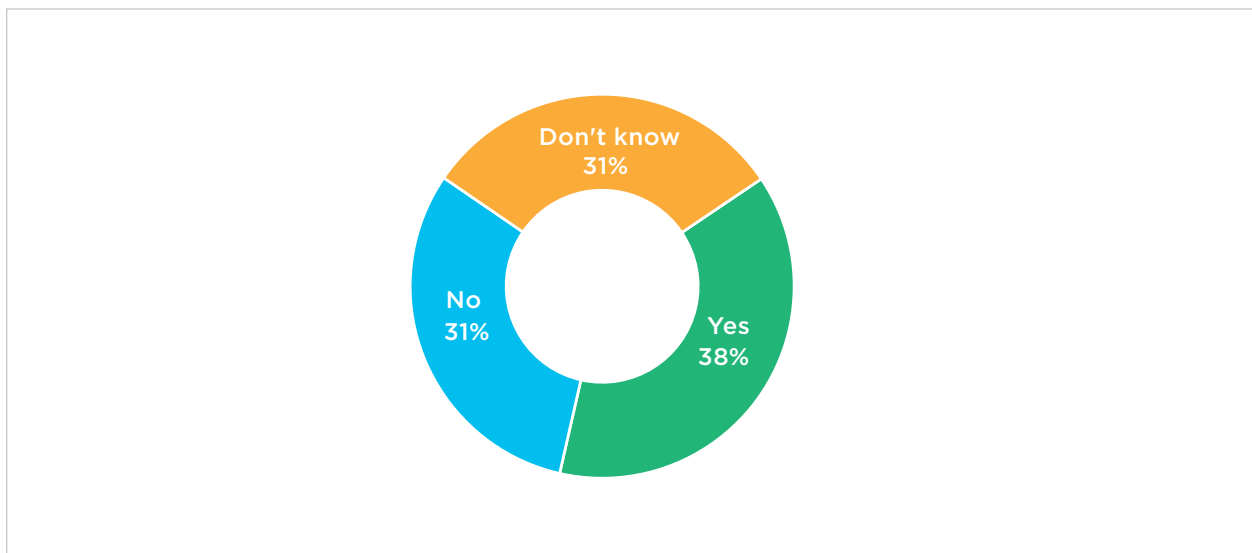
Boys (57%, compared to 29% of girls), racialized youth (68%, compared to 29% of white youth), younger youth (47% of 12 to 13-year-olds, compared to 35% of 14 to 17-year-olds), and heterosexual youth (39%, compared to 33% of LGBTQ+ youth) are all more likely to say that someone forwarded their sext to someone else.

Rates of having sexts forwarded by the intended recipient to someone else have increased since the last phase of YCWW. 24% of youth reported their sexts being forwarded in Phase III (2013), while 38% of youth reported having their sexts forwarded in Phase IV (2021)[3].

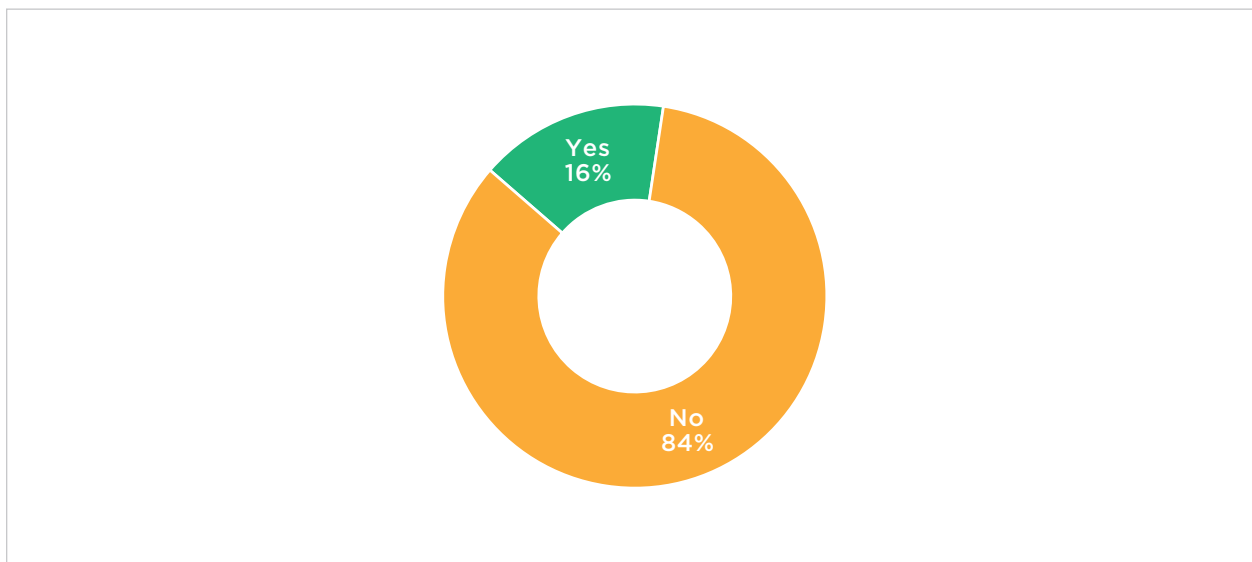Next, we asked whether youth in grades 7 to 11 had received a sext that was forwarded to them by someone other than the original sender. Just under two in ten (16%, n=108) say that they have received a sext that was forwarded to them by someone else (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4: Received a Sext that was Forwarded

Older youth (20% of 14 to 17-year-olds, compared to 11% of 12 to 13-year-olds), racialized youth (23%, compared to 15% of white youth), LGBTQ+ youth (25%, compared to 16% of heterosexual youth), and youth with a disability (30%, compared to 12% of youth without a disability) are all more likely to have received a forwarded sext. Additionally, 40% of transgender youth (n=5) reported receiving a sext forwarded to them by someone other than the original sender.
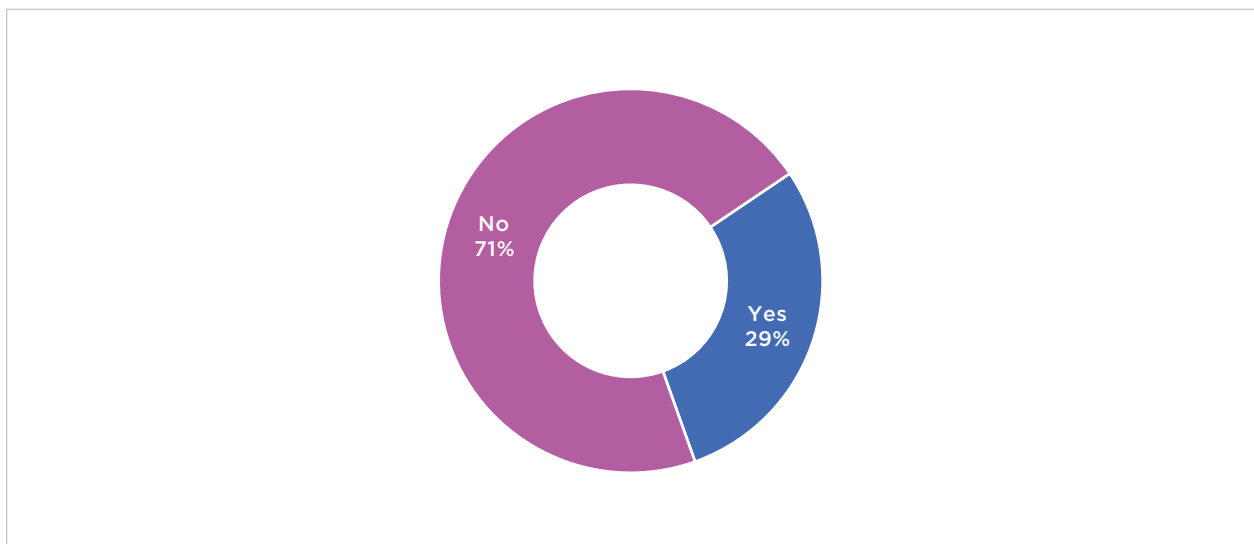
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3 Of note is the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III, the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV, the sample size was 1,058.

While, as noted above, more youth report having their sexts forwarded than in Phase III, reports of receiving forwarded sexts (by someone other than the original sender) have decreased: 21% of youth reported receiving a forwarded sext in Phase III (2013), and 16% of youth reported receiving a forwarded sext in Phase IV (2021)[4].

Finally, we asked participants in grades 7 to 11 who reported receiving sexts (n=107) whether they had ever forwarded a sext they received to someone else. Three in ten (29%) said they have forwarded a sext they received to someone else (see **Figure 5**).

Youth who have forwarded sexts (n=31) are the smallest group discussed in this report, so particular caution is required in interpreting results.

Figure 5: Forwarding Sexts

Boys (36%, compared to 26% of girls), younger youth (33% of 12 to 13-year-olds, compared to 28% of 14 to 17-year-olds), racialized youth (36%, compared to 26% of white youth), and youth with a disability (42%, compared to 19% of youth without a disability) are all more likely to report that they have forwarded a sext they received to someone else.

Compared to the previous phase of YCWW, the rate of forwarding received sexts has increased: 15% of youth reported forwarding a sext in Phase III (2013), and 29% of youth reported forwarding a sext in Phase IV (2021)[5].

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4 Of note is the difference in sample size between the two phases: in Phase III, the sample size was 5,436, and in Phase IV, the sample size was 1,058.

5 ibid.

Motivations, Attitudes, and Other Factors

Similar to what we saw in the context of online meanness and cruelty, sexting behaviours (sending, receiving, forwarding) overlap, and our analysis reveals a complex intersection of experiences. Overall, our YCWW Phase IV survey data analysis indicates that sexting occurs primarily within the context of a romantic relationship. Keeping in mind that for questions involving sexting behaviours, the **sample sizes are very small (n=110 or less)**, we find no clear divisions between sexting behaviours – suggesting that young people who engage in one sexting behaviour also engage in others. For example:

- youth who have sent a sext are more likely to receive a sext and vice versa;
- youth who have sent a sext are more likely to forward a sext and vice versa; and
- youth who have received sexts forwarded by someone other than the original sender are more likely to send and forward sexts.

The one exception to this overlap in sexting behaviours is a small subset of youth, 1 in 10 (n=110), who report receiving sexts despite never having sent one.

Additional analysis related to sexting reveals the following:

- All participants (n=60) who report sending a sext have their own smartphone, and all say they keep their phone in the bedroom at night. However, it should be noted that only a small minority of youth with their own phones (10% of our entire sample of 1,058 youth) or who keep their phones in their bedrooms (12% of our entire sample) send sexts.

- Youth who have sent sexts (n=60) are much more likely to say they have talked to people they met online but have never met in person (93% have done this at least once, compared to 63% of those who have not sent a sext). In particular, 45% say they do this at least once a day, compared to 21% of those who have not sent a sext.

- Youth who engage in sexting report deleting content about themselves and asking others to delete content about them more so than youth who are not engaged in sexting.

- Youth who engage in sexting are more likely to use fake accounts or impersonation online compared to youth who are not engaged in sexting.

- Youth who engage in sexting are more likely to use privacy settings compared to youth who are not engaged in sexting.

While our analysis began to reveal connections between online meanness and cruelty and sexting, this highlights the need for additional qualitative research with youth to better understand the nuances of these connections.

In the Phase IV YCWW survey, we also asked participants in grades 7 to 11 (n=659) whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- People will say mean things about girls who post photos that are too sexy or revealing.
- People will say mean things about boys who post photos that are too sexy or revealing.

While few participants agreed with either statement (see **Figure 6**), we note that *more* youth agreed with the statement that people will say mean things about girls who post photos deemed too sexy or revealing online than with the statement that people will say mean things about boys who do the same.

Figure 6: Online Interactions

People will say mean things about girls who post photos that are too sexy or revealing*

■ Agree with statement

13%

People will say mean things about boys who post photos that are too sexy or revealing*

■ Agree with statement

6%

*These questions were only asked to participants in grades 7 to 11 (n=659)
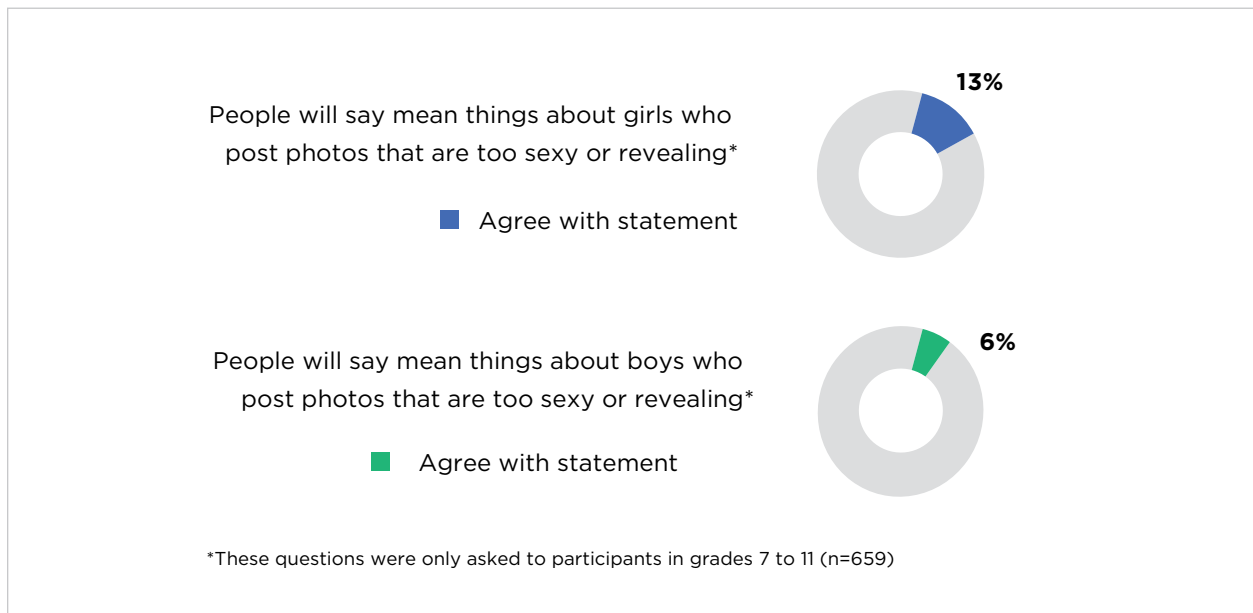
Next, and again, keeping in mind that the **sample sizes are small (n=110 or less)** for questions involving sexting behaviours, we note some important trends regarding youth who engage in sexting and their sense of **digital well-being**:

- Youth who engage in sexting are less likely to say they know how to protect themselves online.
- Youth who engage in sexting are more likely to worry about spending too much time online.
- Youth who engage in sexting are less likely to agree that the internet is a safe place.

Digital well-being is about making the best uses of digital technology and about integrating digital technology into everyday life in positive and meaningful ways.

Trust and Support

Adult Supervision and Screen Time

Specific to sexting, the less time youth spend online with adults, the more likely they are to engage in sexting:

- 12% of youth who say they never go online at home with a parent or other adult present report sending a sext, compared to 10% who rarely have an adult present and 6% who usually do.

- Similarly, 23% of youth who never go online at home with an adult present have received a sext, compared to 19% of those who rarely do and 10% of those who usually do.

- However, there is no relationship between having an adult present and receiving forwarded sexts (sent by someone other than the original sender.)

Adult supervision also seems to play a role in how youth use sexting to initiate relationships. For example, young people who usually go online with an adult are much more likely to send sexts to and receive sexts from those who later become their romantic partners. Alternatively, youth who never go online with an adult report higher rates of receiving sexts from strangers.

Unlike parental involvement, participants who reported using technology to manage or limit their screen time are more likely to engage in all sexting behaviours (sending, receiving, and forwarding):

- Youth who use technology to manage screen time are more than twice as likely to have forwarded a sext they received (44%, compared to 21% of those who do not use an app or device to limit screen time).

- Youth who use technology to manage screen time and who have sent a sext, are more than three times more likely to have it forwarded by a recipient (68%, compared to 21% of those who do not use an app or device to limit screen time).

Rules

Our analysis reveals that youth with household rules in all the categories we asked about in the survey are:
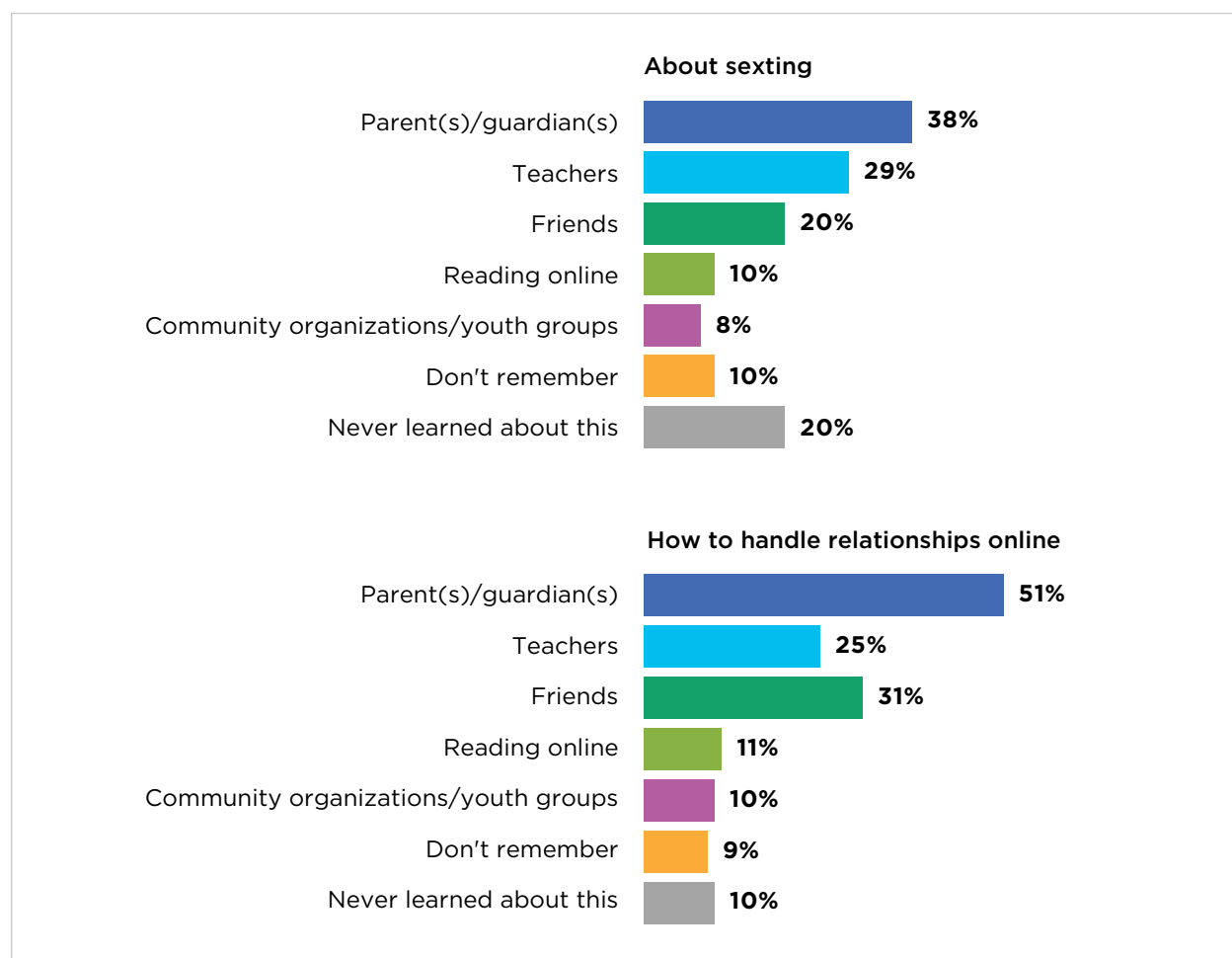
- less likely to engage in sending sexts;
- less likely to report receiving sexts; and
- less likely to report receiving forwarded sexts (by someone other than the original sender).

Our analysis also reveals that youth who said their school has rules about cyberbullying are less likely to have forwarded sexts than those whose schools did not have rules.

Support

For youth in grades 7 to 11, parents or guardians play a predominant role in learning about sexting and handling relationships online, followed by teachers and friends (see **Figure 7**).

Figure 7: Learning About Sexting and Relationships

About sexting

Category	Percent
Parent(s)/guardian(s)	38%
Teachers	29%
Friends	20%
Reading online	10%
Community organizations/youth groups	8%
Don't remember	10%
Never learned about this	20%

How to handle relationships online

Category	Percent
Parent(s)/guardian(s)	51%
Teachers	25%
Friends	31%
Reading online	11%
Community organizations/youth groups	10%
Don't remember	9%
Never learned about this	10%

Very few participants in grades 7 to 11 reported wanting to learn more about issues related to sexting and relationships (see **Figure 8**). Only 9% said that they want to learn more about how to handle relationships, 7% said that they want to learn more about how to send sexts safely, and 7% want to learn more about what to do if a sext they send is then shared with someone else without their permission.

Figure 8: Further Learning About Sexting and Relationships
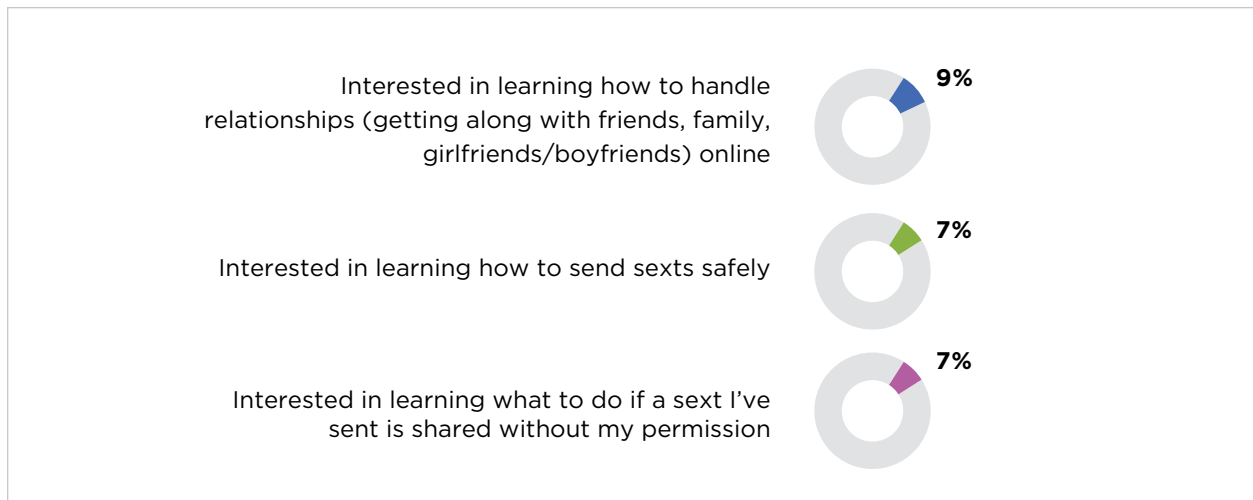
Girls are slightly more likely to want to learn about what to do if a sext they send is shared without their permission (9%, compared to 5% of boys). Girls are also slightly more likely to want to learn more about how to handle relationships online (10%, compared to 8% of boys), as are racialized youth (12%, compared to 8% of white youth), youth with a disability (15%, compared to 7% of youth without a disability), and LGBTQ+ youth (15%, compared to 8% of heterosexual youth).

Overall, youth who engage in sexting behaviours (sending, receiving, and forwarding) are less likely to agree that they have people in their lives who can help them with online problems. This finding is particularly concerning, especially if we consider instances where sexting behaviours lead to harm – like non-consensual intimate image distribution – and demonstrates the importance of building and fostering collective resilience so that we are all better prepared to respond to issues related to sexting and supporting youth as they navigate relationships and technology.

Collective resilience is the ability of a community or group of people to collectively respond to or recover from changing and sometimes stressful or adverse environments. In the online context, this can be expressed as a young person's ability to: participate in safe and inclusive online communities, draw strength and support from the people around them, foster trust, and engage in meaningful dialogue.

NEXT STEPS

This report presented findings from **small sub-samples (n=110 or less)** of youth who engage in sexting. While we cannot draw definitive conclusions about *why* young Canadians are sexting based on this data, we want to note some important findings regarding the contexts in which youth sexting occurs.

Overall, our YCWW Phase IV survey data analysis indicates that young Canadians are primarily engaged in sexting within the context of a romantic relationship. For example, when it came to sending and receiving sexts, romantic partners are the primary recipients and senders of those sexts. The next most common context in which youth reported sexting was to develop intimacy with an online-only contact or someone they hope to become a romantic partner. This finding is consistent with MediaSmarts' previous research on sexting, which found that it can be a means through which youth develop intimacy. Again, noting the small sample sizes for sexting behaviours, the trends in Phase IV of this study are consistent with research on youth sexting which has found that typically, it occurs in three contexts: in place of sexual activity (especially for younger youth who are not yet sexually active); to show interest in someone a young person would like to date; and as proof of trust and intimacy.

While it is uncommon for youth to *send* sexts to people they do not know at all (only 3% of youth reported sending a sext to a stranger), of note are the youth who indicated *receiving* sexts from strangers. Participants reported that they were almost as likely to receive a sext from a stranger as they were an intimate partner, and the rates of receiving sexts from strangers were particularly high for girls and gender-diverse youth.

Altogether, these findings call for more research to better understand the associated risks and protective factors for youth sexting to support building collective resilience among young Canadians. As we stated at the outset, recognizing that sending sexts to willing recipients is not by itself a harmful activity, we need more (especially qualitative) research on this subject to help us better understand *why* youth engage in sexting. MediaSmarts is currently a partner on two qualitative youth sexting studies, and we look forward to sharing the results of those studies in the coming months.
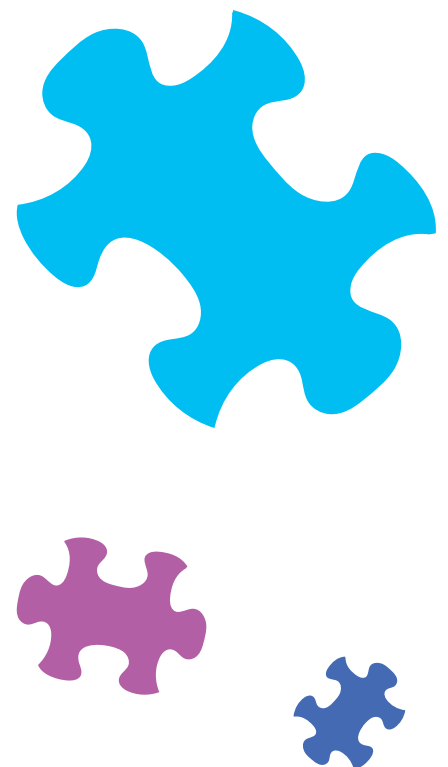
We also note the need for resources for youth, parents, and educators related to sexting that prioritize a sex education approach and differentiate between consensual and non-consensual sexting. Research has shown the need to remain connected to how young people perceive the support available to them, especially regarding non-consensual intimate image distribution. Otherwise, as research has also shown, the risk is that youth might avoid seeking support from adults due to fears of overreaction, victim blaming and shaming, and criminalization.
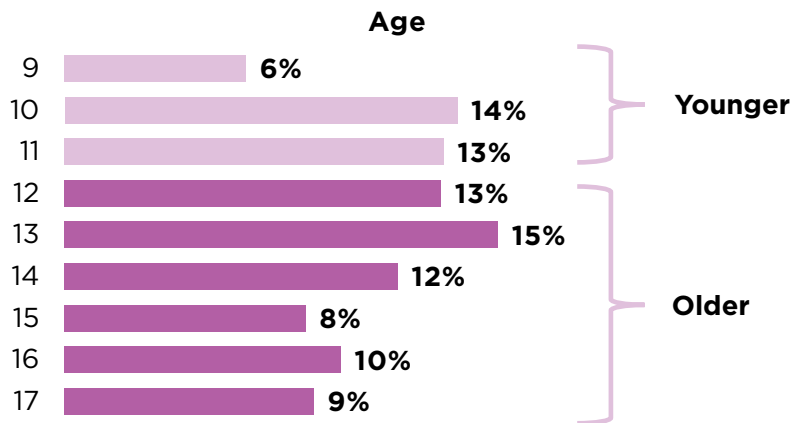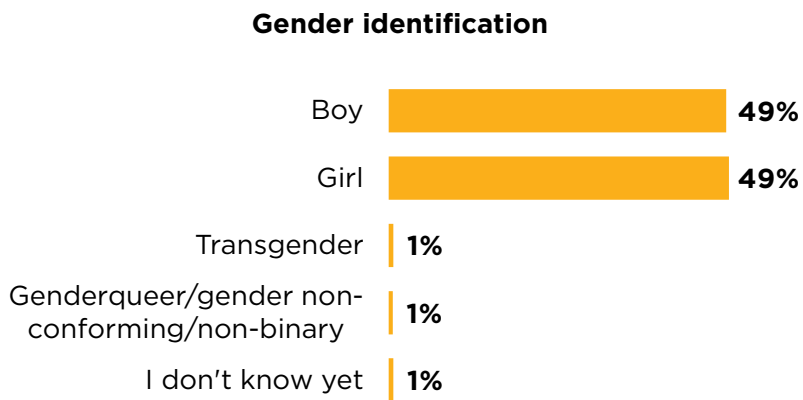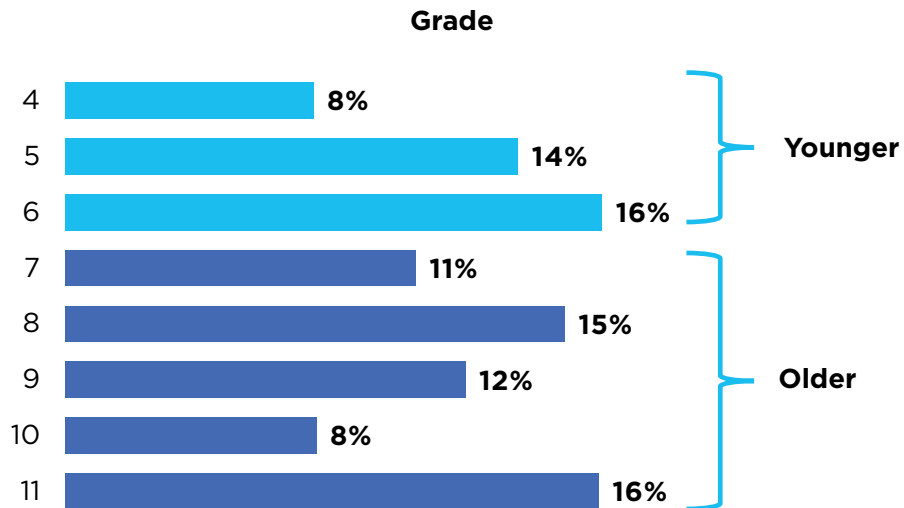
In our own efforts to build collective resilience and provide support and resources for youth, families, teachers, and communities grappling with how best to respond to this issue, MediaSmarts has the following resources available on our website:

- Tip sheet for youth who have had a photo shared without their consent.
- Tip sheet for parents to help them approach conversations about sexting with youth.
- An overview of responses to sexting for schools, parents, and policymakers.
- *There's No Excuse*, a home and classroom resource that confronts the most common ways youth convince themselves it's okay to share other peoples' sexts without consent. It consists of four short videos, a lesson plan for grades 11 and 12, and tip sheets and guides for parents, coaches, and community leaders.

We hope the YCWW Phase IV reports, including the qualitative findings, will help us better understand what is working and what needs to be changed or improved so that young Canadians get the most out of their online experiences. This research will inspire future projects at MediaSmarts and within the broader research community. In addition, a final trends and recommendations report will provide educators, policymakers, and other critical decision-makers in government, the technology industry, education, and community organizations with the foundation to build and support collective digital resilience and well-being for young Canadians.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Demographics

Grade

Grade	Percentage
4	8%
5	14%
6	16%
7	11%
8	15%
9	12%
10	8%
11	16%

Grades 4–6: Younger
Grades 7–11: Older

Gender identification

Gender	Percentage
Boy	49%
Girl	49%
Transgender	1%
Genderqueer/gender non-conforming/non-binary	1%
I don't know yet	1%

Age

Age	Percentage
9	6%
10	14%
11	13%
12	13%
13	15%
14	12%
15	8%
16	10%
17	9%

Ages 9–11: Younger
Ages 12–17: Older

Province of residence

Province	Percentage
NF	1%
PEI	0%
NS	2%
NB	2%
QC	24%
ON	36%
MB	3%
SK	4%
AB	14%
BC	12%
NT	2%
YT	0%
NU	0%

First language

Language	Percentage
English	71%
French	24%
Cantonese/Mandarin	2%
Other	3%

Identifies as having a physical disability

Response	Percentage
Yes	13%
No	79%
Prefer not to say	9%
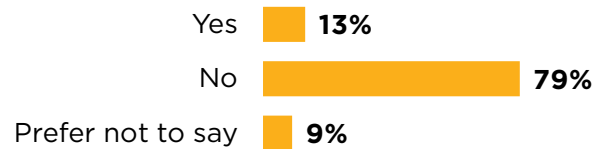
Identifies as having intellectual/cognitive/learning disability

Response	Percentage
Yes	13%
No	77%
Prefer not to say	9%
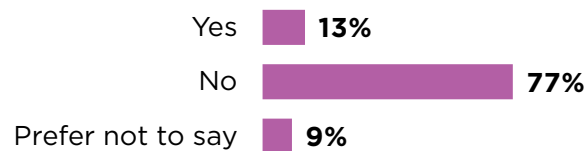
Identifies as having a mental illness

- Yes **16%**
- No **75%**
- Prefer not to say **9%**

Race identification

- European (White) **69%**
- Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.) **10%**
- Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis) **7%**
- South Asian (East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, etc.) **4%**
- African/West Indian (Black) **4%**
- Middle Eastern (Iranian, Iraqi, Saudi Arabian, etc.) **2%**
- South/Latin American (Mexican, Puerto Rican,... **2%**
- Other **3%**
- I don't know **3%**
- Prefer not to say **3%**

30% racialized

Sexual orientation

- Heterosexual **86%**
- Bisexual **3%**
- Gay or lesbian **2%**
- I don't know yet **6%**
- Prefer not to say **2%**

14% LGBTQ+