

Talking to Your Kids about Sexting

— Tip Sheet

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

SENDING SEXTS

SHARING SEXTS

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Sexting is most likely to have negative consequences when the person sending the sext has been pressured into doing it.

- **Talk about the characteristics of a healthy relationship:** Ask your kids if they think it's ever appropriate to harass, embarrass, isolate or control their partner. Make sure they know that these behaviours are **never** okay.
- **Teach and model healthy emotional habits:** Encourage them never to post or reply to something in anger, but to “walk away” from the situation and wait until they've cooled down.
- **Talk about gender roles:** Explain how girls and boys may feel they have to act in certain ways because of established gender roles: youth (especially boys) are more likely to share sexts without the sender's consent if they believe in stereotypical attitudes towards sex and gender, such as that women should be less career-oriented than men or that men cannot control themselves sexually.
- **Prepare them to resist peer pressure** when their friends ask them to share sexts. Let them know that friends might ask them to do this, and give them permission to use you as the bad guy (“I can't do that – my parents would ground me for life if I did!”).
- **If you think your child is in an unhealthy relationship:** Be clear that you think the relationship is unhealthy, but don't try to push them into leaving it. Instead, encourage them to spend more time with family and friends. Talk to your child's friends to see if they have similar concerns.

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- **Talk to your kids about consent:** An essential part of healthy relationships is understanding the need to make sure you know your partner *consents* to anything sexual – whether it’s sexual activity or sharing an intimate image. Make it clear to your kids that sending a sext does not mean the sender gives up their right to privacy and dignity, or their right to decide what happens to the image.
You can also **model** consent for your kids: for instance, make a habit of asking before you post pictures of them online.

SENDING SEXTS

Don’t just talk to girls about sexting. MediaSmarts’ research shows that boys are just as likely to send sexts as girls, and boys’ sexts are more likely to be forwarded.

- **Talk about how uncommon this kind of behaviour is:** Youth may be motivated to engage in sexting if they believe “everybody is doing it,” so it is important for them to understand how rare these activities really are. (In our research, only a quarter of 16-year-olds said they had sent a sext.)
- **Talk about digital permanence:** Whenever kids are sharing personal things about themselves, they should keep in mind that these could easily end up being seen by people they didn’t want them sent to.
- **Encourage your child/teen to ask themselves the following questions about what they are sending:**
 - Is this how I want people to see me?
 - Could somebody use this to hurt me? Would I be upset if they shared it with others?
 - What’s the *worst* thing that could happen if I shared this?
- **Discuss appropriate ways of showing you care for someone:** Kids may think that sharing a nude or sexy photo with a girlfriend or boyfriend – or someone they hope will be their girlfriend or boyfriend – shows they love or trust them. Remind them to ask the questions above before sending something this personal.
- **Remind them they shouldn’t do anything they don’t want to:** Tell your kids that if somebody asks them to send something they are not comfortable doing, they have the right to say no. No one who loves or respects someone will pressure or threaten them.
- **Remind them of the importance of consent:** Just like they should never *share* a sext without the subject’s permission, kids should never *send* a sext to someone who doesn’t want to see it either. At the very least it can be embarrassing to get a sext you didn’t ask for, and at worst it can be considered harassment.
- **If a sext they sent has been shared, help them deal with it:** Sharing a sext without the sender’s consent is against the law in Canada, and a judge can order all copies of the image to be taken down. There are a lot of other steps you can take to help as well: see our [Guide for Trusted Adults](#) for more advice.

SHARING SEXTS

MediaSmarts’ research suggests that sexts that are forwarded reach a fairly wide audience, so it’s important that kids understand how big an impact sharing sexts can have.

- **Challenge excuses for sharing:** Youth who share sexts often find excuses to tell themselves it’s okay. Make sure your kids don’t fall for these four kinds of excuses:
 - finding a way to view sharing as being actually positive: “When a girl’s sext gets shared, it shows other girls the risks”

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- denying the harm of sharing: “Sharing sexts is so common, nobody cares about it”
- shifting responsibility away from themselves: “If I share a text with just one person and then he shares it with others, it isn’t really my fault”
- blaming the victim: “A girl shouldn’t be surprised if her sexts get shared after a breakup”
- **Encourage your child/teen to ask themselves the following questions when someone shares a sext with them:**
 - Did the person in this picture mean for it to be shared?
 - If it came from someone other than the original sender, did they have permission from the person who’s in it?
 - How would I feel if somebody shared something like this with me in it?
- **Tell them if what they received makes that person look bad, would embarrass them, or could hurt them if it got around, don’t pass it on!** They shouldn’t assume that “everybody’s already seen it”: sharing a sext, or something else that would be hurtful, is just as bad every time.
- **Tell your kids it’s okay to say no:** A lot of people – boys especially – get pressured by their friends to share nude photos of their girlfriends or boyfriends. It can be hard to stand up to this pressure, but you have to think about how much giving in could hurt you and your girlfriend/boyfriend.
- **Treat everyone with respect online:** MediaSmarts’ research suggests that youth who forward sexts don’t think of it as being wrong. Talk about ethical decision-making and how to respect others online, making sure to be clear that sharing sexts or other personal material without someone’s permission is hurtful and wrong.