



Archdiocese of Dubuque

Office for Protection of Children

1229 Mt. Loretta • P.O. Box 479 • Dubuque, Iowa 52004-0479

Phone (563) 556-2580 FAX (563) 556-5464

Email: dbqcopc@arch.pvt.k12.ia.us

Sexting: What You Need to Know - What You Can Do

Adapted from a series of articles by Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D.

Sexting is happening in schools; yes, even in the Archdiocese of Dubuque.

As thoughtful Catholics and responsible adults, it is our job to teach our children respect for their own bodies and those of others and to provide them with a moral compass for their life. This article is intended to educate you about what a substantial number of middle and high school students are doing and the risk this behavior is to their moral and spiritual wellbeing.

What is Sexting?

We define sexting as “the sending or receiving of sexually-explicit or sexually-suggestive images or video via a cell phone.” Most commonly, the term has been used to describe incidents where teenagers take nude or semi-nude (e.g., topless) pictures of themselves and distribute those pictures to others using their cell phones (although it is also possible to distribute such images via social networking sites, email, instant messaging programs, and video chat). The images are often initially sent to romantic interests or partners but can find their way into the hands of others, and this is ultimately what creates the problems.

High Profile Tragic Incidents

It may appear that sexting is exploding in frequency because several high-profile incidents have garnered a significant amount of attention in the media. In particular, the suicides of Jesse Logan and Hope Witsell catapulted adolescent sexting behaviors to the forefront of national social conscience. Jesse Logan was an 18-year-old girl from Ohio whose ex-boyfriend circulated nude pictures of her to a large number of their high school peers, leading to extensive and unremitting verbal cruelty. Two months later, she committed suicide after suffering scholastically and relationally as a result of the humiliation and abuse she received from classmates. Hope Witsell was 13 years of age when she sent a topless picture of herself to a boy she liked. The image quickly found its way onto the phones of other students. Her journals indicated the vicious name-calling (e.g., “slut” “whore”) she endured for weeks before it became too much for her to handle. She ended her life two weeks into her eighth grade year.

Sexting—A Continuum of Behaviors

It appears that sexting occurs along a continuum, ranging from what could arguably be considered typically teenage behavior to significant and intentional victimization of others. First, whether we like it or not or whether the actions are consistent with Church teaching or the values any of us would promote to our young people, sending and receiving sexually suggestive pictures is happening between teens and younger. While not condoning this behavior, it is important to understand that, as they see it, it is just behavior between two consenting teenagers with a shared romantic interest. In some ways, in this new era of technology, this behavior is not unpredictable. Adolescents tend to explore and experiment with their sexual identity and boundaries while growing into full adulthood, and they may simply be utilizing the technology with which they have grown comfortable to accomplish that end. Next on the continuum would be sexting that involves some measure of harassment, pressure, or ill will. An example of this would be when a boy compels a girl to send a topless photo of herself with the argument that “if you really loved me, you would do it.” Another instance would be when a girl breaks up with a boy because he cheated on her, and then she sends a private picture he sent her to the rest of her friends. Distributing his sexual picture, intended only for her, was a malicious act intended to get back at him for his infidelity.

Continuing forward along the continuum would be sexting that involves active solicitation, either by a boy or a girl, for attention (in particular, that of a sexual nature). Adolescents who attempt to present themselves in a certain desirable way may create nude or semi-nude pictures and videos of themselves—under the influence of no others—and may distribute them to convey a number of related messages. They may hope that recipients consequently view them as hot, sexy, fun, adventurous, risk-taking, “up for a good time,” and worth pursuing romantically. While clearly misguided, this may be done in a relatively innocent manner. That said, some instances of sexting as solicitation may involve a teenager willing to prostitute himself/herself through the sending and posting of self-created sexual content to attract buyers of sexual services.

Finally, this basic continuum ends in the most serious type of sexting behavior—that involving the intentional exploitation of others for sexual or material benefit. One example would be the case of Anthony Stancl, a New Berlin, Wisconsin 18-year-old who impersonated two girls (“Kayla” and “Emily”) on Facebook and befriended and formed online romantic relationships with a number of boys in his high school (again, while posing and interacting as a girl). He then convinced 31 of those boys to send him nude pictures or videos of themselves. As if that weren’t bad enough, Anthony, still posing as a girl and still communicating through Facebook, tried to convince more than half of these boys to meet with a male friend and let him perform sexual acts on them. If they refused, “she” told them that the pictures and videos would be released on the Internet for all to see. Seven boys actually submitted to this horrific request. Stancl was convicted on several charges of assault and child pornography.

How do our Archdiocese of Dubuque Schools Handle this Issue?

Our school administrators and educators work with school resource officers and local police departments. Law enforcement collects any evidence and investigates the incident to determine its nature. Administrators and educators never forward, copy, transmit, download, place on a USB thumb drive, or show any non-law enforcement personnel any evidence collected from a personal digital device, cell phone, and/or computer after the initial discovery of sexual content, or at any other time during the investigation.

The primary students involved, as well as their parents, are contacted. School counselors and administrators work together to help families deal with the trauma and stress of the incident.

It is critical to identify the motivations behind the behavior. For some, the picture or video was sent without forethought and betrays their developmental level of immaturity and the belief that such a practice is harmless, funny, normative adolescent behavior, or somehow necessary to gain attention and validation from another student (or their peer group). For others, the images were distributed in order to intentionally humiliate or otherwise inflict harm on another person and can be considered cyber-bullying, sexual harassment, blackmail, extortion, stalking, or the dissemination of child pornography.

What Should You Say to Your Child About Sexting?

Talk to your child about this issue. Do they think this happens in their school? Discuss what they can do if they receive an inappropriate photo from someone. First and foremost – DELETE the photo! While kids are unlikely to report to adults if a close friend is engaging in this behavior, they can understand the need for someone to take action when the behavior is escalating into bullying and humiliation of someone.

What if their boyfriend/girlfriend asks them to send a photo of themselves? How can they handle this?

It is difficult to effectively counter what society is hammering into the minds of adolescents. If the dominant message our kids hear is that teen sexuality leads to romantic love, personal fulfillment, popularity, and celebrity status with very little (if any) public or personal fallout, they will continue to push the proverbial envelope and the line between right and wrong in this area will be increasingly obscured. Cultivating in youth a deeper measure of self-respect, for example, is one such way to insulate them against participation in sexting and help them to stand firm when faced with very strong peer and cultural pressures.

Parents are encouraged to visit www.cyberbullying.us and check out the numerous free resources for parents and schools.