Sexting and Teens
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Learning Objectives
• Be familiar with the prevalence and teen involvement of teen sexting.
• Describe the unique psychological, social, sexual, and legal consequences of teen sexting.
• Know the mental health nurse’s role in assessment and intervention for teen sexting.

Sexual Access Timeline (Weiss, & Somers, 2010)
• Prehistory to approx 1890—cave art, prostitution, affairs, harems, compulsive masturbation to fantasy
• 1890 to late 1970s—photographic porn, film, porn theatres, strip clubs, bath houses, adult bookstores
• 1977–1990—VCR & Beta, Phone Sex
• 1990–2004—Bulletin Board (BBS) and newsgroups, Chat Rooms, Porn Websites, Webcams, Craig’s List, interactive online sex, online hook-ups & prostitution sites
• 2004 to the present—Smartphones with GPS locators, Social Networking (Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin), Virtual World Sex, Sexting
• And coming your way very soon—Virtual Sex/Teledildonics

The basic issue: as anonymous online connection to sexual content and access to willing partners increases—so do the problems
Sexting Definition

• Portmanteau of sex and texting
• The exchange of sexual messages and/or images between people via cell phone or other digital device
• Term first gained exposure with popular press coverage in 2007
• In 2009: finalist for “word of the year” by New Oxford American Dictionary
• Different terms include “youth-produced sexual images”
• Definition is broad enough to include what is considered child pornography, criminal/abuse aspects, or adult-child exchange
  • Different states have different definitions, statutes, and punishments

Types

• Experimental
  - Self produced sexual images sent between romantic partners, to establish romantic interest, for attention, or other reasons that have no criminal intent
  - May be a form of perceived “safe” sexual experimentation

• Aggravated
  - Criminal/abusive behavior
    • Extortion
    • Threat
    • Video/forwarding without permission
    • Sexual abuse
  - Adult involvement

Teens and their cell phones

• Once used solely by business elite now a necessity for various demographics
• Today’s youth are digital natives
  • 75% of youth ages 12 to 17 have their own cell phones
  • At least 93% have Internet access
• Average us teen sends 1500 texts a month
  • 72% of all teens vs 65% of adults text (2009)
  • 14-17 yr old girls send over 3000 texts a month, 100 per day
• Cellphones facilitate adolescent lifestyle events, act as a lifeline to peer group
• Peer communication is essential adolescents’ identity formation
• Saving particular photos and choosing phone decor project personal narrative
• Inherent nature of texting allows more bravery than in person or in real-time conversation and creates a unique persona
• Texting and teenage penchant for risk-taking = perfect storm for sexting
Prevalence of Teen Sexting

- Initial survey results were from non-peer reviewed sources
- National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Cosmogirl.com (13-19 year olds)
  - 20% teens sent/posted nude or semi-nude images of themselves
  - 22% of girls and 18% of boys
  - 38% teens report receiving text or images originally intended for someone else
  - 51% of girls and 38% of boys felt pressure to send an image
  - 11% young teen girls (ages 13 to 16) sent/posted messages
- Pew Center/Lenhart, A. (12-17 year olds)
  - 4% of cell-owning teens created and sent a sexual image
  - 15% had received a sexual image
  - 4% of 12 year olds and 30% of 17 year olds received and sent sexting images
  - Increased involvement in sexting if teen is responsible for cell phone payments
  - Parental periodic "checking" of phone didn't affect sexting involvement, but parental restrictions did
  - Also, restriction of number of texts did decrease sexting

Prevalence of Teen Sexting

- Inconsistent results among studies, so prevalence is largely unknown
- The first peer-reviewed study (Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolack, 2012) showed the following:
  - Previous studies/polls may have overestimated the prevalence of teen sexting
  - 2.5% had appeared in or created nude/semi-nude pictures or videos
  - 1% report appearing in sexually explicit images
  - 7% of surveyed youth had received nude/semi-nude pictures or videos
  - 6% received sexually explicit images
  - 61% of youth in a sexual image were girls
  - 72% were older teens (ages 16-17)
  - Most youth self-produced rather than being photographed
  - A notable minority report an aggravated component (usually drug/alcohol related)
  - For some youth, involvement in sexting activities did result in distress (feelings of embarrassment or fear)

Percentage of Students Engaged in Sexting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year in school</th>
<th>Males (n=327) Sent</th>
<th>Received</th>
<th>Females (n=275) Sent</th>
<th>Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ~25% who received a sexual image/video forwarded it on to others (with more males than females)
- ~1 in 7 who sexted reported generally negative feelings about the behavior
- Belief of possible legal consequences to sexting did not deter the behavior
Unique issues with cell phone communication

- Zero production cost allow experimentation without limit
- Digital record/artifact created
- Cannot be retrieved once sent
- No way to control or know who ultimately receives, shares, or stores
- Easy to distribute
  - Person to person
  - Mass communication
- Instantaneous ability to disseminate through digital media
  - Text
  - Email
  - Instant message (IM)
  - Social networking sites, i.e. Facebook, MySpace
- Public vs private domain lines are blurred

Teen vulnerability

- Erikson’s stage of identity formation
  - Experiencing with “who am I”
  - Sexual interest and importance of peers
  - Narcissism and exhibitionism

- Normative increase in sexual energy (Judge, 2012)
  - With puberty comes the emergence of sexual interest and drive
  - Sexual curiosity and exploration combined with poor decision making
  - Line between normative and atypical sexual behavior in adolescents?
  - Healthy sexual exploration or consequences of sexualization of young girls?

Teen vulnerability

- Neurodevelopmental influences (Judge, 2012)
  - Major structural changes in the prefrontal cortex occur until mid 20s
  - Executive functioning is still immature, which leads to poor impulse control, judgment, decision making, and long term planning
  - Neuroimaging shows shifting balance between frontal (executive thinking) and limbic (emotional) systems—underdeveloped integration between emotions and cognitions

- Sexting is an “emotionally driven behavior” (Judge, 2012)
  - Often impulsive without much thought as to potential consequences
Teen vulnerability

- Vicissitudes of teen relationships
  - Best friends one day, “hate” each other the next
  - Emotional reactivity (after a fight, breakup, etc.)
  - Trysts thoughtful
t  - Consideration leading to forwarding of an image without permission
  - Philip Alpert, 18 yr old boy, Fl, 2008
    - Disseminated nude photos of his underage girlfriend during a fight
    - Charged with 72 counts including lewd and lascivious behavior and
distributing child pornography
    - Plead guilty and had to register as a sex offender

- Peer pressure
  - As seen in several high-profile cases
  - Self-production often occurs after solicitation
  - More often females solicited by males
  - Sexting seen as “relationship currency” (Lenhart, 2009)

Psychological Consequences

- Psychological harm primary related to its permanency and potential
  for circulation; resulting in “perpetuity of victimization” (Judge, 2012)
- Social consequences: ostracism, ridicule, social blackmail,
cyberbullying
- Risk for depression, damage to self esteem, self injury, suicide
  - Hope Witsell, 13 yr girl, FL, 2009
    - Sent topless pictures of herself to gain a boy’s attention
    - Photo intercepted by another boy while using phone and distributed to their
      school, high school, & neighboring high school
    - Taunted by classmates, school suspension, grounded by parents for the
      summer
    - Repeated behavior that summer on school trip
    - Punished by school, started cutting herself, school had her sign a no-harm
      contract (didn’t tell parents) on September 11
    - Hanged herself on September 12

Associated sexual behaviors

- Sexting is associated with risky sexual behaviors (Benotsch, 2012)
  - Study on young adults; some adult studies show no correlation
    - Those who reported sexting were more likely to report recent substance, sex with
      multiple partners, unprotected sex, history of STIs
    - 31.8% also reported having sex with a new partner after sexting with that person
- Teens that sexted were more likely to be dating, sexually active,
  engaged in risky sexual behaviors, and use drugs or alcohol before sex
  (Temple, 2012)
- Rather than being a safer alternative to sex, sexting appears to be a
  risky sexual behavior in teens (Rice, 2012)
  - Adolescents who sexted were more likely to report being sexually active
  - Knowing someone who sexted was strongly associated with one’s own sexting
  - Of note, sexting and other risky sexual behaviors were more common in African
    American teens and LGBTQ teens in this study
Legal consequences

– Sexting equates to state/federal child pornography when subject is under 18:
  • Possession
  • Distribution
  • Promoting, coercing, or soliciting
  • Applies even if photo is a self-portrait

– Without specific teen sexting laws, child pornography laws are the fallback
  • As of August 2012, 17 states had teenage sexting laws in place
  • Except Nebraska, all new laws do not discriminate between consensual and nonconsensual sexting

– No 2 states have the same definition or punishment for teenage sexting
  • Punishments range from counseling and community service to jail time and registering as sex offender
  • http://mobilemediaguard.com/state_main.html

(Lampe, J., 2013; Shah, K, 2010)

How Often Are Teens Arrested for Sexting?

• Law enforcement agencies saw an estimated 3477 cases of youth-produced sexual images during 2008 and 2009
• Two-thirds of cases involved an aggravating circumstance
  • An adult was involved in 36% of these cases
  • A minor engaged in malicious, non-consensual, or abusive behavior in 31% of cases
• Arrests occurred in
  • 62% of cases with an adult involved
  • 36% of the aggravated youth-only cases
  • 18% of the experimental youth-only cases
  • 63% images distributed by cell phone only and did not reach the Internet
• Sex offender registration applied in only a few unusual cases
• Overall, arrest not typical in cases with no adults involved

(Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012)

Relationship to pre-sexting mental health issues

– Several research studies show a possible link between problematic internet use to mental health disorders: depression, mania, histrionic PD, anxiety, ADHD (Hua, 2012)

– Individual characteristics that may increase risk (Judge, 2012)
  • Impulsivity
  • Cognitive limitations
  • Substance use
  • Mood instability
  • History of maltreatment
  • Attachment issues and/or disturbed boundaries
  • Strained parental relationships
  • Self harm

(Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012)
Differences in Teens vs. Adults

- Consequences of minors sexting are more severe
  - Legal implications (child pornography)
- More teens report negative experiences from texting
  - Several research studies indicate no psychological ill effects or increased sexual risk for adults engaging in consensual sexting
- More young adults than teens believe sexting is fun and flirtatious
- More young adults use sexting as a joke, compared to teens
- More teens than young adults feel sexting is stupid & dangerous
- Sexting is more common among young adults than teens

Mental health nursing involvement

- Improve our media literacy
- Include this topic in nursing curriculum
- Nonjudgmental assessment
  - Media history taking as part of initial/followup assessments
  - Use knowledge about mental health, substance use, and teen developmental stage
- Teen education/support
- Family assessment and education
- School and community involvement
- Provide intervention or referrals if needed

Psychiatric Nursing Assessment

- Always inquire about use of technology as part of standard evaluation
  - Information should be incorporated in the overall psychological formulation
  - Considered within the context of one's vulnerabilities, risk factors, sexual history
- No standardized instrument but should include
  - Cell phone use—how often and what applications
  - Amount of parental supervision/monitoring
  - Internet use history
  - Sexual history
  - Direct questions about sending/receiving sexual texts with/without images
- Always maintain a nonjudgmental approach!!!!
- Breach of confidentiality if share your concerns with parents?
  - One time vs. regular behavior
  - Discuss with teen before talking to parents
Psychoeducation

- **Parents**
  - Educate parents on common teen use of technology and its importance to teens
  - Narrow the “digital divide”
  - Monitor internet use, social media activities, and cell phone use
  - Talk to cellular service provider about options for parental restrictions
  - Determine specific characteristics of teen might increase need for monitoring
  - What photo-transmitting apps/equipment their teen has and how are they used
  - Encourage overall effective communication (nonjudgmental, open, receptive)
  - Ongoing dialogue vs. one time conversation
    - Start when kids start using technology
    - Focus on the sexual behavior, not simply the technology used
    - Provide “warning signs” of risky technology behaviors or outcomes (including signs of cyberbullying, social ostracism, depression)

- **Schools**
  - Consultant to school system
  - 1/3 of teens who made/received sexting image report school or parental involvement (Mitchell, 2012)
  - Little legal advice exists for schools regarding their role in sexting
  - Mental health nurses can offer psychological and accurate view of the behavior
  - Assist in threading content into school curricula

- **Teens**
  - Share the risks with them
    - Psychological, social, legal, school sanctions, consequences from parent
    - Use media campaigns and high profile examples
  - Ask them what examples or possible consequences they may know about
  - Educate them about controlling who sees their body, reads their thoughts
  - Encourage them to talk to adults about sexting

Be vigilant, but keep perspective!

- Unsure of true prevalence, but significant minority is involved
- Other sexual behaviors are more prevalent
  - Teen pregnancy and sex with multiple partners has decreased
- Is this really a change in teen sexual behavior? Or does the technology simply increase it’s visibility?
- Take home messages:
  - Technology is NOT bad—therapeutic possibilities with electronic format
  - Technology DOES present new, challenging issues
  - Increase our media/tech familiarity
  - Use nursing knowledge to give perspective/insight into this behavior
  - Ask the questions
  - Educate and support DON’T overreact