



Talking to Your Teen About Sexting

Bonus Download to Episode #33
of the Speaking of Teens podcast

DISCLAIMER: I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I say in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child's mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child's pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder. If they display signs that they may want to harm themselves, please call 988 for assistance or 911 for an imminent threat. The information provided in this guide does not, and is not intended to, constitute legal advice; instead, all information available herein are for general informational purposes only.

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Speaking
of
Teens

We established in episode 32 (and in previous episodes about other risky behaviors) that scare tactics, education and warnings will not keep all teens from sexting. Not only do experts believe it's a normal part of sexual exploration but their brain is simply wired to take risks during adolescence, despite knowing the possible consequences.

So, as with any risky adolescent behavior (drinking, vaping, driving, and texting, etc.) in addition to explaining the risk and potential consequences, establishing boundaries and reiterating your family values regarding such behavior, you need to teach them how to minimize the risk if they *do* decide to engage in this activity.

Sexting should be included in other conversations you have with them about things like safe sex, healthy relationships, consent, peer pressure, self-respect, personal boundaries, digital citizenship, and online safety.

You can start the conversation as you would any other serious topic...in the car and with a question. Seriously, the car is the best time to talk to your teen and late at night is another great time (and if you're in the car late at night, even better!) You could start with something like, "I listened to an interesting podcast the other day about sexting and teenagers. I just wondered if you knew of anyone who's had a nude picture of them shared with other people?"

Remember that any more than a couple of sentences about a serious subject without their engagement, and it's a "lecture" and they will simply tune you out. Don't make it a "big talk". Handle it as you would any other serious topic - small bits over time.

SEXTING

What Your Teen Needs to Understand to Minimize the Risk of Sexting

If you receive a sext, never send it to anyone else and do not show it to anyone (it could even be against the law, especially if the person in the photo is a minor).

If you receive a sext, delete it immediately. Never store nude photos of anyone, even yourself, on any of your devices, because they can be discovered by someone (or even hacked). If such photos are discovered by police, legally, you or your family could possibly be charged with a crime like possessing “child pornography” (even if the photo is of you).

Never send a naked photo to someone unless you get consent from them via a message or text (that’s a “pre-sext” apparently). If you send them a sext without asking, it could be against law and might get you in a lot of trouble.

If you ever do decide you want to send a “sexy” photo to someone, think about sending one that is more “suggestive” than actually showing private parts. You can strategically cover private parts with clothes, stand behind something, (you could hold a sign in front of you that says #imtooyoungtosex!)

Never pressure someone to send you a nude photo and never allow someone to pressure you into sending a sext. Sending a sext is not a way to prove affection for someone. People are worth more than their body parts. You have a responsibility to yourself and to others to never be involved in coercive sexting.



Never send a sext to someone you don't know well (especially if you've only met them online). There are lots of people out there who "catfish" for a living and many even belong to gangs of criminals from other countries. You never really know who you're talking to online.

They pretend to be someone your age that you'd want to talk with (they often are not a lot older, or they learn how teens talk to each other so they can fool you, like one 40-something year old youth minister did when he pretended to be a young girl).

They may even send you a nude photo first (a random one they've found on the internet) and then ask you for one in return.

They might also offer you something first (like money, bitcoin, game codes, even a modeling contract!

As soon as you send your photo, they start threatening you. They say they'll post your photo online, send it out to your friends and family, even hurt you or your family, unless you do what they want.

They may want more naked photos (so they can sell them online), they may ask for large sums of money or even ask you to do things on video for them.

The FBI said this happened 10 times more in 2022 than in 2021 and it's even led to several teen suicides.

It's a crime for the other person to do this to you, no matter how it started, where it started, whether they gave you money, etc. You did nothing wrong and will not be in trouble.

Of course, even people you know can show your photo to others or post it online, but it's certainly riskier to send it to people you've never even met.





If someone threatens or pressures you about sending a nude photo of yourself, be sure and gather and keep as much evidence of texts, messages, etc. so you can prove what happened to law enforcement and even to social media sites who might need to delete their accounts.

If you do decide to send a nude photo of yourself to someone, never include your face in the photo. That way, social media sites can't tag you, or if anyone else ever sees the photo, it will be difficult to identify you.

Other things to consider hiding to keep your photo from being identified: birthmarks, jewelry, tattoos, scars (anything at all that could identify your body). Also consider the background of the photo (a poster on your wall, a photo behind you, your bedspread, a view outside your window, a school shirt in your floor, your wall color, etc.) There are so many things people could see in a photo that could identify you.

If you send a photo of yourself, be sure your phone or other device's location services are off for all your social media apps, and make sure your photos are not being tagged with your location or username, and "delete any meta-data digitally attached to the image". (If you and your teen don't know about this, the [Child Safety Hub](#) has some good information.)

Using Snapchat or some other app (like Dust or Confide) that deletes the photo within seconds of it being sent, might be helpful to keep your photo from being shared. But it doesn't prevent someone from screen shotting it, using another device to capture it or someone seeing it over the receiver's shoulder.

If you send a photo to someone, consider putting a watermark on the photo of the recipient's name. That way, if they share it, their name will be on it and it will be easily traced back to them.

What if you Discover Something on Their Phone or Learn They've Been Sexting?

The following 3 tips should be top of mind when dealing with a sexting issue or any risky behavior.

Do not freak out! Remember it's not deviant or even unusual teen behavior. It's just an extension of sexual exploration and you need to let them know you get that. They're likely going to be pretty emotional when you ask them about it so remember our mantra, "connection before correction". Listen, empathize, acknowledge their feelings, help them with their emotion words, etc. Make sure they see that you understand and that you're on their side. And when everyone's calm, you can talk about it. If you go nuts, get angry or upset, cry, shame them, you've just guaranteed that they'll hide things from you a lot better in the future.

Do not punish. While your initial reaction may be to take their phone (or computer or other device they used) please stop and think. That may seem like a logical consequence but remember that a unilateral decision about a consequence is really a punishment to them (not supportive of their autonomy) and will just backfire. Secondly, ask yourself if taking away their phone is actually going to teach them the skills you want them to learn about sexuality, boundaries, online safety? It will not.

Use your discovery as an opportunity. It's much better to use this to start a conversation (not a lecture) about the skills they need to learn. Remember there's been no real harm done if the photo has not been shared beyond the intended receiver. Again, if emotions are high, you need to have this discussion later. Ask a couple of questions to see if they know how to stay safe and try to engage them in an open and calm conversation. You don't have to get everything in at one time. As opportunities arise in the future you can interject additional information. You can also print out the tips for them (especially if they're not very engaged in the conversation - they will have tuned you out anyway).

What if They've Received a Sext/Nude Photo From Someone Else?

In addition to following the 3 tips above, have them delete the images off their phone and any other devices (there could be significant legal consequences) and make sure they didn't share or forward the photo to anyone.

If they *didn't consent to receive the photo in advance*, tell your teen they should talk to the sender (if it's another teen) and explain not to send them anymore.

And before you decide to call the school or the police, STOP. These decisions should be made *with your teen*. This is their social life, reputation, and their emotional and mental health you're messing with, and they deserve to have a say in how this is handled. Get to the heart of the matter and decide as a team what to do about it (if anything beyond asking them not to send more pictures). Was there intent to upset your teen or some sort of malice on sender's part? Was it "innocent" (inasmuch as a nude picture can be)?

Just keep in mind that the school, if contacted, may be required to report the incident to the police. And if the police are involved, there could be serious legal ramifications (even for your own child) depending on the state law. Additionally, remember again that this is generally *normal behavior* and if there was nothing malicious about the sext your teen received and there are no other signs of potential danger, involving anyone else may unnecessarily penalize the sender.

After discussing it with your teen, you may find it more appropriate to contact the sender's parents (if you both feel it's necessary). And if the photos keep coming, determine with your child, whether to escalate your response.

On the other hand, if they received a photo from someone *they don't know*, make sure they don't respond and that the person is blocked on their phone and any platform in which they were communicating (and make sure they know to tell you if this person gets through). Additionally, before reporting the incident, you may want to get local legal counsel in case your child or your family could be implicated somehow.

If receiving the photo has been very upsetting for them, consider seeking out the help of a counselor or therapist.

What if They've Sent a Sext/Nude Photo to Someone, consensually?

Again, remember the 3 tips from above. Make sure they received consent to send the photo to the recipient. Additionally, encourage them to delete the image from their phone and ask the recipient of the photo to do the same. Do keep in mind that surveys show teens rarely posts sexts they've received to social media. If they have actually uploaded it to social media help them delete it from the platform or contact the app to have it deleted (see further details below).



What if They've Sent a Sext/Nude Photo to Someone, Under Pressure (non-consensually)?

If your teen comes to you because they're upset over having sent a nude photo to someone (maybe they were coerced or sent it and immediately regretted it) of course, always follow those first 3 tips, and in this case you should even be *more* compassionate and reassuring (that you love them, you're there to help, etc.) and more careful not to scold, punish, shame. Let them know that you're going to help them.

An issue like this can become a serious mental health matter for many teens so be sure and contact a therapist, 988 for support or 911 if they threaten to harm themselves.

First, figure out exactly what happened. Who is this person your teen sent the photo to? For example, is it another teen they like, and they put the pressure on themselves to send it because they want the other person to like them and they just felt like this was what they needed to do? Is it boyfriend/girlfriend who told them they had to send it "or else"?

If it's someone they know will cooperate and delete the photo, have your teen reach out to ask them to do so immediately. And if they're not sure they can trust the person to delete it, you should consider involving the parents, (but remember, this is a decision to be made jointly with your teen).



What if Someone Shared, Stole, Hacked, or Obtained Your Teen's Photo Under False Pretenses (a sextortionist)?

Again, remember those first 3 tips (don't freak out, etc.). Your teen is going to be extremely vulnerable and distraught, and this will be upsetting for you as well so remember to take a deep collective breath so you can tackle this issue together. They're going to need all the love and support you can muster. And of course, be very mindful of their mental and emotional health and don't hesitate to reach out immediately to a therapist or if they threaten to harm themselves call 988 for support or 911 for an imminent threat.

Now, to tackle the issue, parentstogether.org says you should “find out if and how far the materials have spread” as follows:

“Do a Google search of your child's name, including nicknames, to see what comes up. If your child still has a copy of the photo, you can do a reverse image search (go to Google Images and click the camera icon in the search bar to ‘search by image.’” You can also search each social media platform, but if the image is on a private account, it won't show up in a search.

But parentstogether.org also reminds us that you won't find instances where the image was shared in “Whatsapp groups, private TikTok accounts, text chains, or things like private gaming servers.” They say that doing a reverse image search will not locate it shared this way either. Google search results only show you what's been posted on the open web so the image could have been shared these other ways. They suggest repeating the steps again every few months if you don't find anything, just in case.



If you *do* locate the image (or if you're afraid it's been shared on one of these other apps or platforms), you *could* go to each individual site and go through their specific protocol to request the image be removed. However, you can actually take care of all of it at once by reporting it directly to the [CyberTipline](#) of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). You can also make a report over the phone with them 24/7 at 1-800-THE-LOST.

As long as the image is of a person under the age of 18, the NCMEC jumps to the head of the line with these sites and gets your child's image removed ASAP (on average, within 27 hours)!

Not only that, but the NCMEC also provides support services for you and your child (including peer support and information about financial restitution, etc.) If for some reason you'd rather, you can go to each individual website or app by visiting [this NCMEC webpage](#).



Specifically, What if a Stranger/Adult has Tricked Your Teen Into Sending a Photo of Themselves (this is still considered *non-consensual*) and is Threatening to Share the Photos if They Don't Send Money or More Photos, etc. (sextortion)

I can't reiterate enough to remember not to freak out, don't punish, etc. This situation is extremely precarious for your child. At least a dozen young people have taken their lives in the past year because of a predator extorting them after they unwittingly sent a nude of themselves. Please remember the #1 objective at this time is to make sure your child is safe.

FIRST - Tell your teen *not to do anything* – do not pay, etc. and do not respond to the perpetrator.

Make sure you and your teen work together to make screen shots of all posts, messages, with the dates and anything else identifying like screenname, time, or date. Do not delete anything at all. You will need this as evidence. And before memory fades, have your teen write down everything they remember, including dates, what else may have been said, anything at all they remember so you can hand it over to law enforcement.

Once the evidence is secured, then block the perpetrator on the platform and report them (their account handle) either directly through the platform or [CyberTipline](#). They may be able to be stopped before posting anything online.

If you report through the CyberTipline, they do report to the FBI. However, if you prefer to report it yourself, you can contact your local FBI field office (find it at [fbi.gov](#)) or the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) at [ic3.gov](#).

You can also watch for warning signs that your teen may be experiencing cyberbullying (which may involve sexting).

Excessive use of their phone or other device, including texting

Sudden decrease in use of their phone or other device

Overt emotional responses to what they're seeing on their phone

Being upset immediately after using their phone

Hiding their phone screen when other people get too close

Avoiding conversations about what they're doing on their phone

Closing social media accounts and opening new ones

They begin to withdraw from friends and social gatherings

They seem depressed and no longer seem interested in what they once were



Hey there!

I'm Ann Coleman and struggled parenting my son during his teen years. After turning things around, I continued studying the science of adolescence and of parenting adolescents. I made the switch from attorney to parent educator and podcaster to help you avoid the mistakes I made.

If you enjoyed this Guide you may be interested in **PARENT CAMP**, which will help you strengthen the relationship with your teen, decrease the conflict and improve their behavior. Check out the **PARENT CAMP** membership and learn about the course, the weekly meetups with me, the monthly expert Q & As with subject matter experts who cover everything from drug use to self-harm, and the community forum, weekly challenges, and more.

Ann Coleman



Speaking *of* Teens



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