

Sexting and the Parents' Role in Sex Education

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Opinion

In the digital age in which we live, phenomena that take place in the physical sphere are expressed also in the virtual sphere. This holds regardless of the age group and is especially true for adolescents, who more than any other age group are prone to adopt new technologies. Thus, in the virtual sphere, one finds phenomena such as cyberbullying [1] and online support groups [2], as well as phenomena related to eating disorders [3], communicating with strangers [4], communicating with non-strangers [5], and sexuality [6].

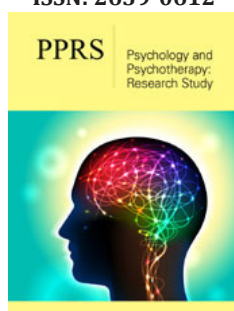
In the professional literature, sexting is defined as sending sexual messages that include both text and nude or seminude photographs to others [7,8]. This phenomenon is not necessarily related to risk behaviors; however, its implications can include risks, particularly if the content is published online or used for sextortion or as revenge porn [9,10]. At the same time, sexting could be the outcome of pressure exerted by one's sexual partner. Previous studies have demonstrated that sexting is common among adolescents and youths [9], yet for the most part, it is not reported to significant adults [5]. Given that parents are often uncomfortable acknowledging the sexuality of their adolescent children, it is not surprising that the majority of adolescents do not receive significant guidance or the necessary education on this topic.

In general, despite the overwhelming exposure to sexuality in the media in general and on the Internet in particular, sex education at schools is on the decline [11,12]; this shifts the onus onto the parents, who are left to address the issue and cope with this role. Indeed, studies have shown that proper communication between parents and children can result in significant learning also on the subject of sexuality, given that parents have the ability to guide their children, provide them with essential information [11] and, in this manner, protect them from risk behaviors. Nevertheless, even in modern Western society, women are still expected to behave modestly and protect their bodies; as a result, boys receive different messages and are educated differently from girls. Girls receive a clear message that they should be wary of publishing revealing photographs of themselves and should take into account the consequences of such behavior, a message that is rarely conveyed to boys.

Before we can cope with the implications of the sexting phenomenon, we must recognize its existence and popularity and provide informative preventive education, rather than reacting out of moral panic. As in the case of sexual intercourse, sexting as an expression of sexuality is not inherently wrong. However, also like in the case of intercourse, those involved in sexting should be mature, aware of its implications, and be motivated by a willful and an informed decision, rather than by outside pressures or a desire to please one's partner. Furthermore, partaking in sexting should be done in a manner that minimizes the risks, in case the photograph is published (e.g., by sending photos that do not include any identifiable or facial features). To help their children attain these goals and act appropriately, parents need to create a meaningful dialogue and explain the implications and risks to their adolescent children. They should also provide very clear rules and limitations, as they do on the topic of sexual intercourse, forbidding their children to engage in sexting, either by exerting pressure on a partner or by acquiescing to pressure from their partner. Likewise, they should forbid them to send sexual photos to someone else without explicit advance consent, as any other form of behavior is considered sexual harassment.

Prevention plays an important part in education. However, along with it, therapy also plays a prominent role. As regards sexting, photographs published online, or content that

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becomes viral, many parents have a difficult time coping with this phenomenon and tend to blame the victim. It has been shown that many victims do not tell others of this event because they are ashamed of facing the adults in their lives [13], or they fear being punished. Under these circumstances, the victim cannot obtain proper treatment. Parents should remember that the focus should be on creating a support network for and conveying acceptance of the young victim. Educational discourse that addresses the potential victim as well as the aggressor, when accompanied by the provision of therapy as needed, can ensure that adolescents have access to reliable information sources about healthy sexuality and can avail themselves of support networks that build resilience and provide a sense of safety.

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