

Sexting

Advice for parents from NSPCC about talking to your child about creating, sending or receiving explicit images

'Sexting' is an increasingly common activity among children and young people where they share inappropriate or explicit images online or through mobile phones.



It can also refer to written messages.

As a parent, it is important to understand the risks so that you can talk to your child about how to stay safe and what to do if they ever feel scared or uncomfortable.

What is sexting

'Sexting' is the exchange of self-generated sexually explicit images, through mobile picture messages or webcams over the internet.

Young people may also call it:

- Cybersex
- Sending a nudie, picture or selfie.

'Sexting' is often seen as flirting by children and young people who feel that it's a part of normal life.

"It might shock parents, that like, this is what kids get up to, but to them [kids], it's just everyday life. It's just natural. All part of growing up and that sort of thing."
- Young person

How common is sexting

'Sexting' is more common than you may think and has been found to be commonplace amongst children and young people.

There was a 28% increase in calls to ChildLine in 2012/13 that mentioned 'sexting' than in 2011/12 - nearly one every day.

Most young people do not see 'sexting' as a problem and are reluctant to talk to adults about it because they are afraid of being judged or having their phones taken away.

What are the dangers of sexting

Young people may see 'sexting' as harmless activity but there are risks. Taking, sharing or receiving an image, even voluntarily, can have a long-lasting negative impact.

It's illegal

It may be common but 'sexting' is illegal. By sending an explicit image a young person is producing and distributing child abuse images and risks being prosecuted, even if the picture is taken and shared with their permission.

No control of images and how they are shared

It's easy to send a photo or message but the sender has no control about how it's passed on.

*"You can lose control and people's opinions change in a click."
- Young person*

When images are stored or shared online they become public. They can be deleted on social media or may only last a few seconds on apps like Snapchat, but images can still be saved or copied by others.

These images may never be completely removed and could be found in the future, for example when applying for jobs or university.

Vulnerable to blackmail, bullying and harm

Young people may think 'sexting' is harmless but it can leave them vulnerable to:

Blackmail

An offender may threaten to share the pictures with the child's family and friends unless the child sends money or more images.

"I'm really worried about a boy who is blackmailing me over some pictures I sent him. He is now asking me for pictures every day...and threatening to put the pictures on the internet."

- Young person

Bullying

If images are shared with their peers or in school, the child may be bullied.

Unwanted attention

Images posted online can attract the attention of sex offenders, who know how to search for, collect and modify images.

Emotional distress

Children can feel embarrassed and humiliated.

"I've been having a relationship with someone online. I felt like he loved me and I started to feel the same. We started 'sexting' and I sent him pictures but he ended it last week and I feel awful. I have coped by self-harming."

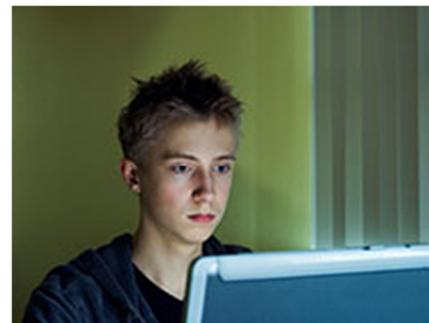
- Young person

How to talk to your child about sexting

Acknowledge that your child probably won't want to talk to you about 'sexting'

It may feel awkward but, as a parent, it's important to explain to your child the risks of 'sexting', how to stay safe and that they can talk to you if something ever makes them feel scared or uncomfortable.

Your child may not want to talk about 'sexting', so we have included some advice from young people on how to approach the conversation below.



Think about the best way of starting the conversation

You know your child best and your approach should be based on your child and your parenting style.

- When you give your child their first mobile phone, outline your expectations and explain the rules of having the phone
- Monitor how younger children can use their phone, e.g. set up controls so that only you can authorise the apps that your child downloads
- Ask your child what they feel is acceptable to send to people and then ask if they would be happy for you or their grandparents to see that photo
- If the answer is 'no', explain that the image or message is probably not appropriate to send
- Make sure your child is comfortable saying no, that they know their body is private and that being asked to 'sext' is inappropriate

Explain the risks of sexting

Tell your child what can happen when things go wrong. Don't accuse your child of 'sexting', but do explain the dangers.

- You may find it easiest to use real-life examples, such as television programmes or news stories, to help you explain the risks
- Ask them if they would want something private shown to the world. Explain that photos are easy to forward and can be copied
- Talk about whether your child thinks that the person who sends a request is likely to be asking other people to do the same

“Well me and my gf do ‘sexting’...we have been doing it for a while, I wouldn’t say it is a problem but you must trust that person and make sure you know what the risks are and what could happen if it went wrong.”
- Young person

'Exposed': the consequences of sharing images

Watch 'Exposed', a video by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), which shows the consequences of sharing images:

Reassure your child you will be supportive and understanding

Let your child know that you are always there for support if they feel pressured by anyone.

What to do if your child has been affected by sexting

If you find out that your child has been 'sexting' they are likely to be anxious about talking to you. Where possible give yourself time to process this information and remember your child will be closely watching your reactions.



- Try to remain calm and supportive
- Reassure your child that they are not alone
- Listen and offer support
- If there is a problem your child will be feeling bad and needs your help, support and advice, not criticism
- Try not to shout or make your child feel like it is their fault
- Don't ask questions like "why have you done it", as your child will feel embarrassed and guilty
- Ask your child what they want to happen. This will depend on the situation but:
 - Take immediate steps where possible
 - Reassure your child that the issue will be addressed even if you need a little time to work out the best course of action for the long term
- Agree a set of actions to address the issue, e.g.
 - reporting the abuse
 - getting additional counselling
- If you have a trusted friend it may be helpful to discuss this with them
- Call the [NSPCC helpline](#) to talk to one of our trained counsellors
- Tell your child they can phone [ChildLine](#) for additional support

Other steps you can take to help keep your child safe

The most important way to keep your child safe is to discuss the dangers of 'sexting' and to be supportive if problems do occur.

You can also set up parental controls on your child's phone to block access to certain sites or monitor your child's activities.

ChildLine has also produced a free app for young people which is designed to provide them with witty images to send in response to a request for explicit images, and advice on how to stay safe.

ChildLine has partnered with the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) to help young people remove images online.

Where to get further help and advice

If you're worried about your child or you need advice about 'sexting' call the **NSPCC's helpline** on **0808 800 5000** to speak to one of our trained counsellors.

If you feel your child does not want to talk to you or another adult they know, you can suggest they call **ChildLine**, in confidence on **0800 1111**.