

Teens, social media, and 'sexting': What to tell parents

Shailesh Jain, MD, MPH, ABDA

Children and adolescents who have unrestricted use of the internet and cell phones are at increased risk for being exposed to sexually explicit material. One study found almost 1 in 5 high school students have "sexted"—sending a text message with sexually explicit pictures—and almost twice as many reported that they had received a sexually explicit picture via cell phone.¹ More than 25% of students acknowledged forwarding a sexually explicit picture to others; >33% did so despite knowing the legal consequences, including being arrested and facing pornography charges.¹

Concerned parents may seek advice on how to prevent their child from receiving or sending sexually inappropriate material on the internet or on their cell phones. You can help parents keep their children safe by sharing the following tips from The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)²:

Keep up with technology. Advise parents to become familiar with popular social networking websites such as Facebook. Creating their own Facebook page and "friending" their child may help them facilitate a conversation about their individual online experiences.

Enable privacy features. Instruct parents to install parental controls on their child's computer. Explain to parents that these monitoring systems can help them check their child's e-mail, chat records, and instant messages. Many social networking sites have privacy features that can help block unwanted users from contacting a child.

Check up on your children. Parents should let children know they are aware of their online presence and will be keeping an eye on them. They should periodically check a child's chat logs, messages, e-mails, and social networking profiles for inappropriate content, friends, messages, and images. Instruct parents to teach their children that nothing is private once it's posted on the internet. Suggest keeping the child's computer in a public location such as the family room or kitchen.

Limit time spent online. Explain to parents that they should limit their child's internet and cell phone access.

Combating 'sexting'

Suggest to parents that they explain to their child in an age-appropriate manner what sexting is before giving their child a cell phone. The AAP² recommends that parents make sure their children understand the legal ramifications of sexting. A child who is caught sexting could be arrested, which may hurt his or her chances of being accepted into college or getting a job. A simple way to reduce a child's opportunities for sexting is to restrict his or her access to a cell phone during social situations where peer pressure could influence behavior.

References

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2. American Academy of Pediatrics. Talking to kids and teens about social media and sexting. <http://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/pages/Talking-to-Kids-and-Teens-About-Social-Media-and-Sexting.aspx?> Published June 2009. Updated March 2, 2011. Accessed August 14, 2012.

Dr. Jain is Regional Chair, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, Permian Basin, Odessa, TX.

Disclosure

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