

Sexting - 2020 Cybersurvey Headline Information

The organisation internetmatters.org commissioned a national survey into sexting and the headline information has been detailed below. For the full report please see the pdf version titled: **InternetMatters – Look at Me - Report**

Internetmatters.org 2020 Cybersurvey Key Points:

Sexting has long been said to be 'endemic' among teens. However, the picture from those aged over 13 in the Cybersurvey is more nuanced:

- Sexting is not widespread among all teens but is worryingly prevalent among those who are already vulnerable offline in other ways. They find themselves in high risk situations facing an array of scenarios and potentially harmful encounters which make their online lives a safeguarding concern, and potentially an amplifier or trigger for their mental health difficulties. Sharers are more likely than teens who do not share nudes to have looked at content talking about self-harm or suicide.
- Among those who shared nudes, 18% were pressured or blackmailed into it.
- Vulnerable young people are far more likely to be pressured or blackmailed to share nudes, often with distressing consequences such as being threatened if they don't send further images, or having their image shared in revenge by a former partner or friend when a relationship breaks up. They are also often bullied or harassed because of the image as others get to see it. Their eagerness to be accepted is exploited by others as they overshare frequently, looking for affirmation or affection. This is noticed by others who exploit it.
- In stark contrast, there are young people who share nudes because they want to within a relationship, do it for fun, or because they thought they looked good. The majority say that nothing bad happened as a result. Some insist they are still happily in this long-term relationship. This renders rules about online safety meaningless in their eyes and they go on to ignore many of them, living as they do in a sexualised world.
- The Cybersurvey found that less than 1/3 of those who share nudes follow the online safety advice they were taught, while 14% say they did not receive it. Effective online safety advice needs to be delivered alongside sensitive relationships education as a life skill.

A glimpse of digital relationships today for young people

The Cybersurvey details both who shares nudes and why. It goes on to explore an ecology of related risks sharers encounter. Drawn from an anonymous sample of young people in schools across the country, here is a profile of life today as a young person. For some teens, technology enables and facilitates relationships without harm, but others suffer intensely. This complexity is a challenge when teaching online safety. It should be taught alongside healthy relationships and issues of consent. Emotional health needs drive some teens to overshare, posting images of all types as they seek to be liked, admired or to escape from loneliness. Others tend to take risks online. Sadly, for both, oversharing and signs of neediness are quickly exploited by others.

A warning signal of high-risk online lives

Sharing self-generated explicit images, videos or live streams may be a signal that a young person is also at risk of harm in other ways. Those who have ever shared their image (sharers) describe a range of other online behaviours and experiences of online aggression which suggests that they were also exposed to further potential harm, both online and offline. These include having images shared in revenge, being solicited by someone who is not who they say they are, someone 'stalking or controlling' them, or someone trying to persuade them into unwanted sexual activity and meeting up face to face with someone they met online. Compared to teens who don't share nudes, sharers are more likely to visit dating and gambling sites or talk to people in chat rooms. They also

experience more cyber aggression, inhabiting a high risk and often threatening online world. However, all this takes place against a backdrop in which the majority of young people who have shared one or more images, claim to have suffered no direct harm from sharing the nude image itself. They appear to trust that their image(s) have not been distorted without their knowledge, despite evidence from the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) that images are frequently misused.

Not all teens are sharing nudes

Despite what adults believe, young people in this anonymous survey told us that sharing nudes is not 'endemic.'¹ It is most prevalent among those aged 15 and over, 17% of whom said they had shared a nude or sexual photo of themselves. But this is far from the whole picture because sharing nudes is far more prevalent among certain groups of already vulnerable young people. More than 1 in 5 of those with an eating disorder and more than 1 in 4 of those in care are sharing these images. Young carers, those who worry about life at home and teens with speech difficulties or hearing loss, all report more sharing of nudes than teens without vulnerabilities. They experience numerous online threats and risks because of their need to belong and connect to others which appears to be exploited. Because children in the vulnerable groups are often known to services or receiving support, agencies may see a disproportionately high number of cases, leading to the impression that all teens are sharing sexual images. The survey findings suggest that there is a risk that this might hide the fact that 'sexting' is so serious for vulnerable teens because it is not as common among the wider teenage population.

Parents and Teens – a different perspective

A disconnect is perceived between adults' view of and advice on 'sexting' and young people's view of 'sharing nudes.' As over 3/4 of teens who have shared images say 'nothing bad happened' afterwards, they might disregard adult online safety advice as it does not align with their experience. Nor does it acknowledge their most common motive for sharing: 'I was in a relationship and I wanted to.' Exploring healthy relationships and consent, rather than responding punitively when young people are found to have shared self-generated images, may be a pathway to helping them. For example, 1/3 of boys held the view that sharing nudes 'was expected in a relationship.' This view could be challenged. In addition, the disinhibition experienced behind a screen could be a subject for debate with young people.

It's not talked about

Online safety advice from parents/ carers and schools is missed or lacking for sharers and their compliance with that advice, if given, is low. Only 39% of sharers learned to stay safe online from their parents or carers, in contrast to more than half of the non-sharers, 58%. Compared to their peers who did not share nudes, the sharers are:

- Less likely to say they learned about online safety at school: 2/3 of sharers learned in school, in contrast to 81% of non-sharers. Significantly, 14% of sharers said they had never been taught about this.
- Less likely to say they follow the online safety advice they were given. Less than one third do so: 31%, compared to 53% of those who do not share nudes.