

CELL PHONE SAFETY

The technology boom and the introduction of the Smartphone have introduced new opportunities and new exposures for our children. As parents, it is important for all of us to understand the *dangers* in order to keep our children safe.

Though cell phones bring a multitude of conveniences and modes to stay connected, for the purposes of this article, I will focus on the perils and causes of concern cell phone use.

Sending inappropriate pictures to other people via cell phones and/or iPads is happening at a younger age and with increased frequency.

SEXTING

“Sexting” is a term that refers to

- sex-related or nude photos taken and shared via a cell phone and/or
- sexually explicit texts typed on and shared via a cell phone.

Inappropriate photos being sent back and forth among youth is happening at home, at friends’ houses, at school, at the arena, at the local rec center, at the park, on the playground etc. and such activity is not exclusive to high school students or to ‘troubled kids’. No child is immune to being asked to send a nude to someone or to receiving a nude or explicit photo. This activity is illegal when minors are involved. Sexual exploitation and child-pornography laws will be applied in addressing this illegal activity.

PARENTS’ RESPONSIBILITIES

What you, the parent, may not realize is that you are responsible for everything that happens on your (minor) child’s device. Since you are responsible for everything on your child’s phone, you have the right to know your child’s passwords, the apps your child is using, the sites your child is viewing and with whom your child is connecting on social media.

There are serious consequences that many parents and youth are not aware of when it comes to “sexting”.

CRIMINAL CODE of CANADA

Under the Criminal Code of Canada:

- If your child takes a sexual or nude photo of him/herself or of another child, your child is **“MAKING CHILD PORNOGRAPHY”**. (Section 163.1 [2])
- If your child sends a nude photo of a youth to someone else, your child has now **“DISTRIBUTED CHILD PORNOGRAPHY”**. (Section 163.1 [3])
- If a nude photo of a person under the age of 18 is sent to your child’s device, your child is **“IN POSSESSION OF CHILD PORNOGRAPHY”**. (Section 163.1 [4])

From a legal perspective, the consequences of children sending and receiving nudes are severe:

- As a youth, there is *likelihood of imprisonment, probation, and being registered as a sexual offender, if tried as an adult* (Ontario Bar Association: child and Youth Law. Brock Jones, Professor of Law, May 9 2016. www.oba.org/Sections/Children-and-Youth-Law/Articles-2016/May-2016/Sexting,-and-Sentencing-and-the-YCJA)
- As an adult, the maximum sentence, if convicted, *is punishable for up to 14 years in prison and being classified as sexual offender for the rest of their lives.* (Section 163.1 [4.1])

SOCIAL and EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

In addition, the social and emotional consequences of sexting are relentless for our children. A nude photo sent to a 'boyfriend/girlfriend' can be later circulated as an act of revenge. Once a photo is shared, there is often no way to prevent it from being re-sent. It can be shared again and again and again....

PRO-ACTIVE MEASURES for PARENTS

1. Talk to your child about the legal, emotional and social consequences of sexting, *before it happens*.
 - An effective guiding statement to share with your child when you are discussing sexting is, "would you want us (mom or dad), your grandparents, your aunt or uncle or teachers to see this photo?"
2. Talk to younger children about online safety.
3. Become friends with as many youth as possible on social media.
4. Talk about pressures to send revealing photos. Let your child know that you understand how they can be pushed or dared into sending something. Tell them that no matter how big the social pressure is, the potential social humiliation can be hundreds of times worse.
5. Everything on your child's phone is your responsibility, become knowledgeable about what is occurring on your child's phones
 - Know your child's password.
 - Look through your child's phone. It is your right as a parent. **Additionally, your name is on the account and, in some instances, you pay the bill.**
6. Talk to other parents...learn from one another. If you don't know how to maneuver yourself through the on-line world, ask others to show you. We are all in this together.
7. Utilize Parental Control Software and apps such as "Net Nanny", "Our Pact", "Circle with Disney" or "Pocket Guardian".
8. It's also a good resource for parents who are uncomfortable dealing directly with this issue is the web site www.commonsensemedia.org This resource gives families the language and support to take texting and cell phone power back into their own hands.

Parenting is hard and it takes a lot of time and energy to stay informed on keeping children safe. Do not lose hope, with positive relationships, open communication and a healthy connection with your child, you will survive and be stronger because of it!

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Division Social Worker. She is a support for schools, students, parents and caregivers to encourage success in school. Tammy advocates for students and provides a link between the student and other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for nearly 20 years and is a mother to 4 children, 3 of which are teenagers.