



# Sexting: How to Talk With Kids About the Risks

By: Yolanda (Linda) Reid Chassiakos, MD, FAAP

Sexting is the sending or receiving of sexually explicit images, videos or text messages using a smartphone, computer, tablet, video game or digital camera. It's not something any parent wants to think about their child doing, and it may be uncomfortable to talk about. But the fact is that sexting is something kids will find out about at some point. This is why it's important to talk about sexting with your child early, so they have the information they need to make healthy decisions.



## How common is sexting?

There has been a significant jump in the number of kids and teens with access to smartphones. According to a 2021 Common Sense Media survey ([https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web\\_0.pdf](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf)), an estimated 88% of 13- to 18-year-olds and 43% of 8- to 12-year-olds have smartphones.

It's not too surprising then that sexting is more common among kids and teens these days. A 2021 study ([https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00558-9/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00558-9/fulltext)) on sexting among youth found these statistics:

- 19.3% had sent a sext
- 34.8% had received a sext
- 14.5% had forwarded a sext without consent
- Females receive more sexts than males
- Older teens are more likely to send sexts
- Older and younger adolescents receive sexts at around the same rate

## Risks of sexting

While sexting has become more normalized among young people, there are many risks involved for kids and teens. These include:

### Mental health and sexual behavior

There are mental health risk factors and sexual behaviors linked with kids and teens who sext, compared to those that don't. Young people who sext are more likely to:

- Have depression and/or anxiety
- Commit minor crimes
- Use alcohol, drugs or cigarettes
- Engage in sexual activity and sex with multiple partners
- Not use contraception

Younger adolescents who sext may be even more susceptible to these risks because of their lack of experience and immaturity. They also tend to be more vulnerable to digital dangers such as bullying or "sextortion." This is a type of blackmail used to get people to send sexually explicit photos or money so that their private information isn't posted online. [Back to Top](#)

## Legal risks

There's also the potential legal trouble kids can get into, whether they're sending or receiving sexts. Some states (<https://cyberbullying.org/sexting-laws>) will even prosecute minors with a felony charge, which can mean up to 20 years in prison. Minors may also be permanently placed on sex offender lists.

## Other risks

There are other risks with sexting too, risks that young people may not think about, including:

- You don't have any control over the video or picture once it's sent. Even people you trust may forward it to others.
- You could be bullied by peers who see the sext.
- You may regret sending a sext, especially if it's shared with others. You may feel humiliation or embarrassment. This can lead to serious emotional distress.
- If your video or picture is posted online, you are vulnerable to attention you don't want from others, perhaps even predators.

## When & how to discuss sexting with your kids

Just as you'd have "the sex talk" (</English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Adolescent-Sexuality-Talk-the-Talk-Before-They-Walk-the-Walk.aspx>), you should also start the conversation about sexting before a problem develops. It's best to talk to your child as soon they are old enough to have a cell phone (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/cell-phones-whats-the-right-age-to-start.aspx>). Keep giving age-appropriate guidance as your child or teen matures. Some tips:

- **Start the discussion—even if you don't think sexting has affected your child or your community.** Ask your child if they've heard of sexting and what they think it is. It's important to first learn what your child's understanding is of the issue. After that, you can add age-appropriate information as needed.
- **Use examples that fit your child's age when giving them information and guidance.** For younger children with cell phones who may know little about sex, let them know that text messages should never contain pictures or videos of people—kids or adults—without their clothes on, engaged in extended kissing or touching private parts. For older children, use the term "sexting" and ask if they've been exposed to nude or seminude images or sexual activities such as "making out"—or more.
- **Be very specific—especially with teens—that sexting often involves pictures or videos of a sexual nature, including nude and seminude photos and sexual activities.** Some sexts can be considered pornography or child pornography. Depending on the state, both senders and receivers could be charged and prosecuted.
- **Make sure kids of all ages understand that sexting is serious and considered a crime in many jurisdictions.** There can be serious consequences for sexting, quite possibly involving the police. Teens may be suspended from school and have labels on their permanent record that could hurt their chances of getting into college or getting a job.
- **Inform your children that texts, images and videos on the internet can remain there forever.** This is true even if they're posted on apps that "delete" after a short duration. Receivers can also share these posts with others, often without the consent of the sexter, and some can even "go viral." Sexters who may have intended their sexts to be viewed by only one individual may find that their photos have been seen by everyone at school after a break-up with a formerly loyal friend. Help your teen resist peer pressure and protect themselves by saying no to sexting—and no to sharing any sexts viewed or received.
- **Monitor headlines and the news for stories about sexting that show the very real consequences for both senders and receivers.** *"Have you seen this story?" "What did you think about it?" "What would you do if you were this child?"* Practice ways for your child to respond if they are asked to participate in inappropriate texting. Encourage your child to come to you with concerns or worries about sexting.

• **Be on the lookout for excessive texting.** This is associated with an increased likelihood of sending and receiving sexts. If you suspect inappropriate behavior, monitor your child's cell phone and talk with them about

who they're communicating with.

[Back to Top](#)

- **Teach your kids and teens digital citizenship.** This includes respect for others and themselves and how to reject cyberbullying (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cyberbullying.aspx>). Invite and welcome your children's questions and conversations. Help them be safe and kind online.

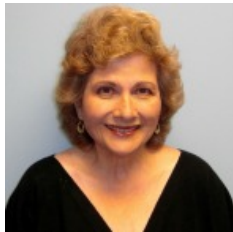
## Talk with your pediatrician

Your pediatrician can help you and your children approach and discuss this important issue. You can also encourage school and local community groups to educate parents, teachers and students about the risks of sexting.

## More information

- [How to Connect with Your Teen about Smart & Safe Media Use \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Points-to-Make-With-Your-Teen-About-Media.aspx\)](/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Points-to-Make-With-Your-Teen-About-Media.aspx)
- [Kids & Tech: Tips for Parents in the Digital Age \(/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Tips-for-Parents-Digital-Age.aspx\)](/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Tips-for-Parents-Digital-Age.aspx)
- [Adolescent Sexuality: Talk the Talk Before They Walk the Walk \(/English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Adolescent-Sexuality-Talk-the-Talk-Before-They-Walk-the-Walk.aspx\)](/English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Adolescent-Sexuality-Talk-the-Talk-Before-They-Walk-the-Walk.aspx)
- [Expect Respect: Healthy Relationships \(/English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Expect-Respect-Healthy-Relationships.aspx\)](/English/ages-stages/teen/dating-sex/Pages/Expect-Respect-Healthy-Relationships.aspx)

## About Dr. Reid Chassiakos:



Yolanda (Linda) Reid Chassiakos, MD, FAAP, has served as a Clinical Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA, and the Executive Director and Chief Medical Officer of the Klotz Student Health Center at California State University Northridge, currently Emerita. A Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Dr. Reid Chassiakos served as a member of the Council on Communications and Media Executive Committee. She is also a fellow of the American College of Physicians. Follow her on Twitter @YReidChassiakos (<https://twitter.com/YReidChassiakos>).

**Last Updated** 7/12/2022

**Source** American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communications and Media (Copyright © 2022)

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.