



Samaritan Counseling Center

Sexting, Twitter, Snapchop and the Dangers of Instant Connections

In today's world technology changes faster than your young child's shoe size. Keeping up with the phone and the latest apps can be a challenge. On the other hand, in many ways the advances of word technology has made life much easier. With the touch of the button you can find the best restaurants in the area or connect with family and friends. We are always connected.

The advantages of being able to remain connected regardless of where one is or what time it is has led many to feel it is only natural that children and teenagers have a cell phone. But as with many things that are positive with technology, there are also some important concerns. The latest is the "sexting" that has increased among teenagers and young adults in the past seven years. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary sexting is the sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cell phone. It is a blend of sex and texting.

There has been a lot of media attention surrounding sexting as many schools are being forced to acknowledge and deal with the issue. Smart phone apps like Twitter, Snap chat and Kik have made sending pictures and messages easier. Face book has made many young people "braver" to share things they normally would not. In a study done in the Fall of 2008 by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, it was reported that as many as one in five teens had sent sexually suggestive photos of themselves to someone else and a third had received such images. Current research suggests this number is about the same.

Many females use sexting as a way of fitting in with guys. Some see it as a joke and understand very little about how their picture can be used by other people. The danger is also that predators can get the pictures and messages sent. Nothing sent is ever truly private. Many online predators have ways of accessing photos from internet sites. Males share that they are "pressured from friends" to engage in this activity. Sexting has become a normal part of flirting...a cool way to talk to each-other. With the increase of celebrity nude photos being released into the media, sexting has become "glamorized". Mainstream celebrities seemingly have not been ruined by the release of photos, and some have become more famous because of it.

Continuing research on sexting suggests that there is far more of this going on than is being reported, and that many parents are not aware of how their child(ren) are engaged in the activity .

So what can you do?

- First stay calm. This can be scary, awkward, and you may feel unprepared. Take a breath. Moving into a conversation with your child when you are highly anxious, angry, or hurt can be more harmful than helpful. Take some time to think about what you want to say, and how it can be said in a way that will encourage dialogue and understanding is important.
- Do some research if you have to, to help understand what technology your child is using.
- Have open conversations about personal responsibility, personal boundaries, and how to resist peer pressure. Conversations like this should occur throughout your child's development — not just when problems arise
- It's important that you talk to your child about sexting and the many risks that can come with it. Let him/her know they he/she talk to you if he/she is scared or uncomfortable. 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 programs or news stories, to explain the risks. Ask your child if he/she 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.
- Set up some controls right away. When you give your child his/her first mobile phone, outline your expectations and explain the rules of having the phone. Monitor how your younger child can use his/her phone – for example, set up controls to authorize the apps that your child downloads. Know your child's Facebook passwords. Check his/her friends and contacts list often.
- If your child is having issues or has been a victim of sexting please seek help from a trained counselor. The American Academy of Pediatrics: <http://www.aap.org> or the US Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/> can offer online support as well.
- Counselors at the Fresh Aire are able to talk with you and your child as well.

(Article written by: Amy McDonald, LLPC who is a Counselor at Fresh Aire Samaritan Counseling Center: freshairesamaritan.org.; 989-835-7511)