Sexting: The issues and how to address them

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Learning Outcomes

- What is sexting and is it a problem?
- Is sexting a problem or is it normal?
- How do we support youth?
How common is sexting?

- 1a Sent sext of self to someone: 9% boys, 8% girls
- 1b Sext of self was forwarded by recipient: 26% boys, 20% girls
- 2a Received sext created by sender: 32% boys, 17% girls
- 2b Forwarded sender-created sext: 16% boys, 12% girls
- 3 Received sext forwarded by other: 28% boys, 14% girls
How Does Sexting Change with Age and Gender?

- Sexting increases with age
  - Receiving
  - Sending
  - Sharing
- Boys more likely than girls to engage in online sexting and risky sexual behaviour and report instrumental motivations
- Girls more likely to sext under pressure or to gain partner or increase popularity
- Sexual minorities engage in more sexting, particularly gay men
Why do Youth Engage in Sexting?

• Social goals
  - Popularity
  - Imitating friends
  - For males conform to social pressure
  - Trust and commitment in long distance relationships
Sexual Goals

• Flirting or show affection
• Initiating sexual activity
• Getting attention
• Arousing a partner
• Foreplay
• Excitement
• Fun and joking around
• Masculine sexual strength
Consensual Sexting

• Normal expression of sexuality through technology
• Private means to explore relationships
• Easier to explore identities
• Sexting correlated with sexual orientation, development, and LGBtQ more likely to engage
• Develop competencies to form, manage, and maintain relationships
• Healthy ways to discuss sexual health
But it is not always healthy

- May court but does not always positive
  Related to digital violence
- Females repeatedly asked, pressured, or coerced to send images
- Related to offline harassment and sexual coercion
- Implication coercion not limited to in person and perpetrators may use images to cause further harm
Harmful Motivations

- Pressure by partners and friends
- Embarrassing someone
- Being relational aggressive
- Seeking revenge
- Gendered sexual harassment
Risks Associated with Sexting

• Deviant approach adolescent risk prone and positive correlations between sexting and:
  • Risky behaviours
  • Substance abuse
  • Emotional problems
  • Interpersonal and mental health issues
  • Gateway to sexual activity
  • Related to multiple partners
  • Promotes inappropriate peer norms around expected dating or sexual behaviour

• No causation
But Girls are at Greater Risks From Sexting

- Men more likely to report consensual sexting versus women non-consensual
- Females greater risks for their sexts to be shared
- Qualitative studies repercussions in form of slut shaming or spotlighting girls
- Non-consensual sharing of sexts is girls fault
- LGBTQ greatest risk of having sexts shared
Girls Double Bind

- Media-driven environment pressures girls to be popular, party, & be sexually attractive
- Pressure to self-objectify in self-presentation online
- Pressure to send explicit images of themselves to boys & men
- Culture where girls harshly judge other girls' online behaviour & self-presentation
- Rejected &/or punished for being “slutty”
- Criticized for “trying too hard” to appear cool/popular
- Blamed for their own sexual harassment online
- Criticized for taking & /or sharing explicit images of self; blamed for images being shared without their consent
- Criticized for wearing either too much or too little clothing
Females are often blamed need to confront gender roles

Agree or Strongly Agree
Disagree or Strongly Disagree

- Woman's fault for sending sext
- Man's fault for sharing sext
- Fault of third party for sharing sext
Blaming Girls

“It happens to girls the most where a girl decides to make a dumb mistake & sends a picture, like a nude picture, to someone” (G10 girl)

“A lot of girls like, especially when it comes to boys, they want to please boys by sending them pictures & saying certain things that end up getting on the internet & so many people see it” (G10 girl)
Invisibility

- Girls’ victimization attributed to their poor judgment
- Narratives focused on how girls’ behaviors should change, which often functioned to erase boys’ culpability and roles
- Even when boys & girls engaged in similar behaviors the power of gender norms & stereotypes led to discounting boys’ behaviors while problematizing these same behaviors by girls
- Influence of gender norms and stereotypes used to make sense of gendered & sexualized bullying & cyber bullying, was typically invisible
Invisibility to Adults

“[m]y friend got called a slut & a stripper in front of 2 teachers & they did nothing, they just looked at the person & looked away & they heard everything. She went to the washroom crying & got in trouble because she went to the washroom” (G7 girl)
Challenge victim-blaming attitudes

It’s the original sender’s fault if a sext gets shared around. They shouldn’t send sexts if they don’t understand the risks.
Gendered Stereotyping

- Participants emphasized these stereotypes even when their own descriptions did not fit
  - e.g., a participant who described a boy using ‘guilt trips’ to coerce a girl into sharing intimate images, depicted boys as bullying physically

- Participants rarely mentioned or acknowledged the behaviors or existence of the perpetrators, most of whom were boys (according to the students)

- Images described as ‘getting out’ or ‘ending up on the internet’
Build on existing social norms around privacy

- Okay for a friend to post a good picture of you without consent
- Okay for a friend to post a bad or embarrassing picture of you without consent
- Okay for a friend to share a sext of you without consent

Strongly disagree | Disagree | Undecided | Agree | Strongly agree
Gender Surveillance and Policing

Reinforcing traditional and stereotypical gender norms in others by rewarding behaviours that conform to norms and stereotypes and chastising behaviours that defy them

“I don’t think many guys are [cyberbullied] unless it’s like they’re gay or they’ve done this or that, but for girls, it’s mostly about appearance & it’s mostly trying to get inside their brain & trying to get them to think like that. So you say you’re fat, you’re ugly, you’re stupid. I get that a lot because I’m blonde, so it’s always like, you’re really stupid because you’re blonde” (G4 girl)
Implications

- Without tools to unpack, girls may be more likely to blame themselves and each other for failing to achieve impossible standards of appearance and behavior.
- Adults must recognize and challenge the social norms, stereotypes, and discourses that inform their responses to sexting.
- Adult acceptance of contributes to culture that perpetuates gender inequality and promotes gendered violence and sexualized aggression.
- Interventions must challenge these norms and discourses that privilege boys and foster a culture in which girls are sexualized and objectified.
New Understanding

• Because boys’ behaviour is often invisible or normalized, interventions must address boys’ understanding of their responsibility

• Important to recognize that gender inequality, sexualized violence, and pervasive gender norms has detrimental effects on boys, men, and sexual and gender non-conforming young people
WHAT INTERVENTIONS CURRENTLY EXIST?
Main themes found in 10 interventions:

- Abstinence
- Legal risks
- Safer sexting
- Focus only on girls
- Focus on boys and girls
- Anti-sharing

The bar chart shows the frequency of each theme from 0 to 10, with "Legal risks" being the most frequent and "Safer sexting" being the least frequent.
Practise Implications

1. No going back to technology era so need to embrace for good
2. Adolescents today are empowered
3. Prevention programs start early in preadolescence
4. Focus on improving knowledge of sexual development and deconstructing ideal body image
5. Pay close attention vulnerable groups
6. Deconstruct gender stereotypes and media ideals
7. Increase awareness about online context- false sense of privacy and easiness of disinhibition and aggression
8. Focus on future consequences problem solving, interpersonal sensitivity, and empathy
Priorities for Intervention
Social norming: Communicate low rates of sexting and sharing
Priorities for Intervention:
Challenge attitudes that blame victims and excuse sharers
Priorities for Intervention
Supporting youth who are victimized: Provide tools for mitigating harm from shared photos
We Need to do More

- Most schools do not have response to sexting and typically actions occur after the fact
- Definition of sexting, privacy and sharing issues, and legal consequences training
- Put in sexual health curriculum - possible consequences, strategies for maintaining healthy relationships, the relationship of sexting to other risk behaviour may reduce risk
- Educational opportunities for teachers,
- Policy development