

# Factsheet 4 - Internet use and young people's sexual attitudes and behaviour

## **Sexting, pornification and sexualisation**

'Sexting' refers to *the exchange of sexual messages or images and creating, sharing and forwarding sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through mobile phones and the internet*<sup>1</sup>. The Internet Watch Foundation uses the term 'self-generated, sexually explicit online images'<sup>8</sup> instead of 'sexting'.

The meaning of 'sexualisation' is contested, but one useful definition is: 'the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically'<sup>2</sup>. 'Pornification' refers to the mainstreaming of pornography<sup>2</sup> and is sometimes used instead of sexualisation, a distinction which removes intimacy from sexual activity<sup>3</sup>. Although there is not much research about the effects of new versus traditional media on sexual development, it is proposed that the act of creating or placing oneself as a subject in photos or videos - as opposed to being an observer or audience member - may result in others viewing the content creator as a sexual object. For young people who are experimenting with their sexuality by creating sexual images of themselves, being seen as a sexual object and having this perception reinforced by the circulation of the sexual image might accelerate sexual activity or engage them in more casual or risky behaviours<sup>4</sup>.

A recent survey of 535 14-16 year olds in the United Kingdom found that 40% said their friends had engaged in sexting<sup>6</sup>. According to 27% of respondents, sexting happens 'regularly' or 'all the time'. Nearly a third of young people surveyed said they knew someone who had been adversely affected by sexting and that they require more advice and support on the subject. 70% said they would turn to a friend if they were affected by sexting, whilst 27% said they would turn to a teacher. A separate study of 120 pupils in England aged 13 and 14 found that sexting is considered by this age group to be a common practice, and that fear of being judged by adults led this group to discuss problems arising from sexting practices with peers instead<sup>9</sup>.

## Risks associated with internet access to sexual images

- **Links between pornography and violence against women** – There is evidence that increased or unlimited access to online pornography can be linked to increased violence. Recent figures in Scotland show a rise in young people committing sexual offences, from 6696 sexual crimes in 2010/11 to 7359 in 2011/12. The Head of the National Sexual Crimes Unit in Scotland links greater numbers of young sexual offenders with increased internet access<sup>5</sup>.
- **Online pornography and its effects on young people's understanding of sexual relationships** – Increased access to online pornography increases the risks of children and young people developing their understandings of sexual relationships from watching porn, if this is not mediated by discussions with adults or peer mentors about what they have seen<sup>6</sup>. Viewing graphic, extreme, or violent pornography without opportunities to discuss how such images deviate from safe, healthy sexual relationships could lead children and young people to believe that what they watch online is common, typical or expected sexual behaviour.

- **Sexual images and gender roles** – Girls are more likely to be bullied or coerced into taking and sending sexual images. A recent study of sexting found that girls are more adversely affected, shamed and denigrated by such images, whereas boys are admired for possessing sexual images of girls<sup>1</sup>. It concluded that sexting for girls 'can involve being subjected to oppressive, racialised beauty norms around feminine appearance and body ideals'<sup>1</sup>. The pressures for boys to demand, collect and distribute sexual images of girls can result in such images being treated as a form of currency<sup>1</sup>.

Viewing sexual images online or those sent from mobile phones can shape children's sense of what they should look like, and there is evidence of coercion to take and send sexual images of themselves or their peers<sup>1</sup>. Recent research with 'tweenage' girls has found that they can be adept at critiquing sexualised media images and at the same time give 'painful accounts' of how the images make them feel<sup>3</sup>. Common media portrayals of boys as naturally aggressive, emotionally distant and as instigators of relationships can normalise these traits as typical for boys<sup>7</sup>, creating expectations for both genders that boys will behave according to the accepted view in society. This is problematic when unchallenged, as it sets up oppositional positions between the sexes; also, it could lead to girls' expectations – and possibly acceptance – of boys' behaviour as aggressive and emotionally distant in sexual relationships.

- **Peer pressure to take and circulate sexual images is common in the UK, and seems to be accepted by many young people**<sup>6</sup>. Attitudes towards sexting, if it is seen as a 'normal' part of sexual development by young people, differ from those towards cyberbullying, which implies an act or acts of coercion resulting in harm. If sexting is an accepted practice, young people will perceive taking and sending sexual images as a normal part of their social experiences<sup>9</sup>.

- **Wider implications of taking and sending sexual images of oneself** – There is evidence that some young people have sent sexual images to a boyfriend or girlfriend which, instead of being kept private, have been circulated widely and used for bullying. Sexual images can also be moved from websites on which they were posted to 'parasite websites', which are often created with the main purpose of sharing sexually explicit images and videos of young people<sup>8</sup>. In extreme cases, these images have ended up on paedophile chat sites and forums<sup>3</sup>. Further risks include: young people who take and send sexual self-images do not think of possible long-term consequences linked to the end of an intimate relationship and the subsequent distribution of the image; the permanence of a sexual image once sent and issues of ownership of that image; and the possibilities that the image will be used to coerce the subject into further sexual activity<sup>2</sup>.

## Interventions

- Overcome 'the culture of silence'<sup>1</sup> by talking openly with children and young people about sexual images they have seen or might see online. Critical literacy or media literacy discussions can help children and young people develop skills to recognise, critique and challenge oppressive practices. Open discussions about unequal and potentially damaging sexual practices can lead to greater awareness about risks and to deeper understandings about how media and society shape our identities, experiences and expectations.
- Educating and supporting peer mentors is a key intervention, as young people do not commonly speak to adults about their internet sexual practices<sup>9</sup>. Research shows that children as young as 12 are sexting<sup>1</sup>, so older peer mentors could be an effective way of engaging children in discussions about online sexual practices.
- Improve safety features to prevent children and young people from inadvertently viewing or accessing internet pornography<sup>1,2,4</sup>. This is especially important for vulnerable groups, as recent research in the US found that 46% of disadvantaged youths aged 12-22 were accidentally exposed to sexually explicit websites<sup>4</sup>.
- Apply what we know about cyberbullying risk and protective factors to sexting<sup>1</sup>. Sexting refers to a range of activities which may be linked to bullying, coercion, aggression and even violence<sup>1</sup>.
- Adults need to have a clear understanding of what normal, age-appropriate sexual development means<sup>1</sup>, in order to better identify those attitudes and behaviours we should be concerned about.
- Make children and young people aware that sending or coercing another person to send graphic sexual images with the intent of embarrassing/humiliating/ causing alarm to the other person for their own sexual gratification is an offence under s6 of the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009.

## Resources

*Pleasure vs. Profit: Growing Up in Pornified Scotland*  
[www.pleasurevsprofit.co.uk](http://www.pleasurevsprofit.co.uk)  
(can download film and information pack – great resources links from here..)

*Exposed* – CEOP has produced this 10 minute film aimed at 14-18 year olds about sending sexual images and cyberbullying. [www.thinkuknow.co.uk/teachers/resources/?tabID=3](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/teachers/resources/?tabID=3)

## References

- <sup>1</sup>NSPCC (2012) *Children, young people and 'sexting': Summary of a qualitative study*. London: NSPCC.
- <sup>2</sup>Papadopoulos, L. (2010) *Sexualisation of Young People Review*. London: Home Office.
- <sup>3</sup>NSPCC (2011) *Premature Sexualisation: Understanding the risks*. London: NSPCC.
- <sup>4</sup>Collins, R., Martino, S. and Shaw, R. (2011) *Influence of New Media on Adolescent Sexual Health: Evidence and opportunities*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation. Accessed online at [www.aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/11/adolescentsexualactivity/newmedialitrev/index.shtml](http://www.aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/11/adolescentsexualactivity/newmedialitrev/index.shtml)
- <sup>5</sup>Weldon, V. (2012) 'Online porn blamed for rise in sexual violence', *The Herald*, 27 June 2012. Accessed at [www.heraldscotland.com/mobile/news/home-news/online-porn-blamed-for-rise-in-sexual-violence.17981853?\\_f04a8305cf42ecb7bd5b110adab57ce9f68af30c](http://www.heraldscotland.com/mobile/news/home-news/online-porn-blamed-for-rise-in-sexual-violence.17981853?_f04a8305cf42ecb7bd5b110adab57ce9f68af30c)
- <sup>6</sup>Phippen, A. (2009) *Sharing Personal Images and Videos Among Young People*. Plymouth: University of Plymouth. Accessed online [www.swgfl.org.uk/Staying-Safe/Sexting-Survey](http://www.swgfl.org.uk/Staying-Safe/Sexting-Survey)
- <sup>7</sup>Enck-Wanzer, S. and Murray, S. (2010) "How to Hook a Hottie": Teenage boys, hegemonic masculinity and *CosmoGirl!* magazine. In A. Wannamaker (ed.) *Mediated Boyhood: Boys, teens and tweens in popular culture and media*. New York: Peter Lang.
- <sup>8</sup>Internet Watch Foundation (2012) *IWF Internet Content Analysis Study*. Accessed at [www.iwf.org.uk/about-iwf/news/post/334-young-people-are-warned-they-may-lose-control-over-their-images-and-videos-once-they-are-uploaded-online](http://www.iwf.org.uk/about-iwf/news/post/334-young-people-are-warned-they-may-lose-control-over-their-images-and-videos-once-they-are-uploaded-online).
- <sup>9</sup>Phippen, A. (2012) *Sexting: An exploration of practices, attitudes and influences*. London: NSPCC.