

Sexting hasn't reached most young teens, poll finds

30% of 17-year-olds report getting nude photos on their cells

By Donna St. George
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About one in seven American teens with cellphones say they have received nude or nearly nude photos by text message, according to a survey on the phenomenon known as "sexting."

Helping to define the little-understood trend in teen life, the poll found that [15 percent of adolescents](#) ages 12 to 17 have received sexually suggestive photos or videos on their personal cellphones. Just 4 percent acknowledged sending a naked image.

Older teens were more likely to report sexting, with 30 percent of 17-year-olds saying they had received such pictures, compared with 4 percent of 12-year-olds, according to the report by [Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project](#).

The provocative photos are usually sent as part of a romantic relationship -- or one that is wished-for, the study found. Along with being polled, teens were interviewed in focus groups, with their most sensitive answers given anonymously in writing.

"Most people are too shy to have sex," one young high-schooler wrote. "Sexting is not as bad."

Another noted how a couple's breakup led to a girl's naked image being forwarded to "like everyone at school," which he said "ruined high school" for the girl.

Said a high school girl: "If a guy wants to hook up with you, he'll send you pictures of his private parts or a naked picture. . . . It happens about 10 times a month."

Overall, the portrait of sexting that emerges might remind some parents of other risky adolescent behaviors: Even if only a minority of teens are involved, a lot can be at stake for those who are.

"It's a part of teens' lives. It's something they deal with, they grapple with, they talk about," said Amanda Lenhart, senior research specialist at Pew. "Even though the numbers are quite low, I think it is an important issue to be talking about."

School and safety officials warn that parents should be vigilant monitors of their teens' use of technology, and they note an array of [unintended consequences, including legal action in some cases](#).

Locally, officials say sexting has surfaced as a phenomenon in middle and high schools during the past two years. An overwhelming majority of teens own cellphones.

"The technology is there, and unless the technology is going away, the behavior is not going away," said Sgt. Bill Fulton of the Fairfax County Police Department. Fairfax is now giving presentations on sexting in schools. "It's here to stay," he said. "All we can do is educate."

The Pew research, based on a nationally representative telephone survey of 800 adolescents and 800 parents, did not account for instances in which teens pass cellphones around so friends can see their pictures. It also did not include e-mailed images or those posted on social networking sites.

The poll found no gap between males and females in sexting, only age differences. It makes sense that older teens report more sexting, Lenhart said, because as a group they have had cellphones longer and are more likely to be

involved in a sexual relationship.

Looking at parental supervision, the poll did not find any difference in sexting that could be linked to whether or not parents checked the contents of their child's cellphone. But there was a difference when parents limited the number of text messages their teen could send.

Teens with unlimited texting plans were more likely to receive nude photos or videos.

The Pew poll focused on children younger than 18. In the past year, at least three other surveys have explored the phenomenon with slightly older age groups or through online surveys. One of the most recent, [by MTV and the Associated Press](#), found that three in 10 young people were involved in some type of sexting.

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