

# Sexting & Nude Photographs



What actually constitutes *sexting*? How can understanding the phenomenon help us keep teens from making irreversible decisions to share compromising photographs?

Sexting is increasingly prevalent among teens, no longer a practice we can afford to think of as confined to other people's neighborhoods. Yet, it also confuses many parents who can think of no real corollary from their own childhood.

The following case focuses on sexting, beginning with Allie's first-person account. Allie describes the pressure she felt and why she ultimately gave in to the requests to send nude photographs. She goes on to describe how the situation spiraled out of her control and the troubling aftermath that ensued.

The second part of the case takes a closer look at the definition of *sexting*, and invites you to think about where your "hard lines" are as a parent. The goal of the second part of the case is to help you think through a collection of different situations and what you want to communicate to your children about inappropriate behavior.

## Key Vocabulary

### **sexting**

Sending or receiving sexually explicit photos or videos by text message or other digital technologies. Some teens also use the term *sexting* to refer to sending visual imagery about having sex or talking about having sex in great detail.

## The Case, Part 1

The story focuses on Ally, a high school student, and the other reasons why teens may feel pressure to share a sext.



<https://www.common sensemedia.org/videos/allys-story-second-thoughts-on-sexting>



## Consider

- What strikes you about Ally's story?
- How does it align with or challenge your thoughts about teens' sexting?
- Why does Ally ultimately send the nude photograph? What are other reasons a teen might feel tempted to send their naked photo to someone?
- What do you make of Ally's repeated notion that she was a "good girl"?
- How could or should schools respond when students are involved in an issue like Ally's? Did the school have a role to play in Ally's situation?
- Does your school have a protocol for responding to situations like Ally's if they are brought to the school's attention?
- If a sexting issue hasn't come up before, how can you prevent your child from feeling like sexting is a normal part of relationships?

## The Case, Continued

In many ways, the jury is still out about sexting. Different states have adopted different policies and laws (you can find more about your state's laws at [http://mobilemediaguard.com/state\\_main.html](http://mobilemediaguard.com/state_main.html)). Some recurring legal issues, however, include: soliciting photographs from minors, producing photographs (even of yourself), distributing photographs, and possessing photographs. Some sexting-related laws consider minors to be anyone under the age of 18, others define minors as anyone under 16 years of age.

An awareness of the potential legal issues is undeniably important, but the legal context and norms continue to shift and they still only represent one component of the parenting puzzle. Many parents confronting day-to-day dilemmas of raising digital kids are also concerned about content that might have social or practical consequences (getting into college or securing a desired job, for example) and about content that simply doesn't align with family values.

We find it helpful to frame conversations with kids in terms of a stoplight metaphor. This can help you differentiate between "red" content (never acceptable), "yellow" content (not okay for our family, or at this age and stage), and "green" content (okay to share).

For example, you might say that sending provocative text-based messages to a significant other is something that you consider unacceptable (yellow), but represents something that will become a choice for your children when they are adults. Or, you might feel that bikini photos are unacceptable, even though you know many of your daughter's friends upload similar pictures (also yellow). On the other hand, bikini photos might be totally acceptable to you (green), as long as your daughter's privacy settings are set responsibly. In contrast, forwarding on a naked picture of a classmate that your son receives is not okay under any circumstances (red), as it could get him in trouble with school or the law.

Consider the following scenarios, all based on true stories. For each scenario, (1) determine whether you think it constitutes sexting and why (or why not) and (2) determine whether you would situate the behavior as “red,” “yellow,” or “green.” When you’re done, consider how you would rank or group the stories in terms of the severity — which seems most (or least) concerning to you as a parent? Why?

**NOTE:** You may want to do this exercise individually, and then come back together as a group to discuss your reactions.

- ? Jenna, a fourth-grader, adored her younger brother Matt (age 3). Jenna took a video of Matt naked in the bathtub and emailed it to all of her friends with the note, “How cute is my baby brother?!” Her friend’s mom saw the video and was mortified to find it on her daughter’s school-based email account; she called the school immediately.
- ? Keith, an 11th-grader, played on the hockey team and had a private message thread on Facebook with a few of his hockey friends (also all boys). He took a selfie in the locker room after practice — he was naked with just a hockey stick covering himself and pointed up in the air — and uploaded it to the thread.
- ? MacKayla, a ninth-grader, was tagged in another girl’s “challenge video.” In it, MacKayla’s classmate had filmed herself as she poured freezing cold water over her head. In the video, the girl was wearing a white t-shirt. According to the unwritten rules of the challenge, MacKayla had been “tapped” to do the same thing next.
- ? Kellie, a college freshman, posted an album of pictures from Spring Break wearing a very minimal bikini and straddling a male classmate on the beach.
- ? Brad, a 10th-grader, had a great relationship with his girlfriend. During the summer, when they wouldn’t see each other for weeks at a time, they often swapped naked pictures over Snapchat (an app in which photos “disappear” after a few seconds of viewing). Still, he knew it was possible to take screenshots or that the images may not really disappear, so he never included his face in any pictures.
- ? Alia, a college sophomore, had gone to her older sister’s bachelorette party. There were tons of inappropriate props at the party, and one of her sister’s friends had taken a picture of Alia with a giant blow-up penis pointed toward her mouth. Alia was dressed appropriately and it was clear that the prop was a toy.
- ? Jerome and his longtime girlfriend liked to text each other very detailed descriptions of being intimate together – where they would kiss, for how long, and what would happen next. They never traded any pictures, only written descriptions.

Common Sense Media. “Ally’s Story-Second Thoughts on Sexting.” August 28, 2014.

<https://www.common sense media.org/videos/allys-story-second-thoughts-on-sexting>

# Sexting & Nude Photographs

Although there are very real, serious consequences associated with sexting, it's important to also focus on the motivations behind it and the risks associated with the behavior. Understanding the phenomenon can help us prevent kids from using poor judgment and engaging in self-destructive behavior. Sexting is increasingly prevalent among kids — no longer something we can assume only happens to other families. Yet, it also confuses and angers many parents who can't imagine digitally sharing something so intimate.

- **Remind your kids that sexting has long-lasting consequences. It's important to communicate that sexting can hurt everyone involved.**

In many states, sending nude photographs is illegal — particularly when minors are involved. Taking, possessing, or distributing naked images of minors can have significant legal consequences for the sender and the recipient. Second, many schools are still figuring out how to react to sexting, and consequences may range from suspension to expulsion. Regardless of the school's action, students themselves may feel pressure to change schools after such pictures get out, as the social ramifications can be devastating.

- **Remind kids that any private messages can be made public online.**

Even if your kids insist that they completely trust the recipient, once they press Send, they lose control of the message. Help kids think through the “what-ifs”: A recipient loses his or her phone; a friend scrolls through another's messages; a parent checks a kid's phone; the recipient changes his or her mind; the relationship circumstances change. Any message or photo can be copied, screenshot, or forwarded. Sexts can be used for bragging rights or even for revenge. Emphasize that there are just too many real risks that they can't control.

- **Explain to your kids that sexting is not a normal or common behavior.**

Boys tend to believe that other boys are readily receiving sexts from their female peers. We've heard stories about teenage boys keeping naked images on their cell phones that they found online as evidence of “sexts they've received.” Often this idea can pressure boys to ask for sexts as a marker of masculinity and sexual desirability. Kids also may be tempted to engage in sexting because they desperately want to experience and “prove” their closeness with others — and they are still learning how to navigate these close relationships and express their feelings appropriately. *Take this as an opportunity to talk about other ways to communicate attraction and closeness.* Explain that it's normal to want to show someone that you care about them — and even to want to impress a crush — but there are far less risky ways to do it than sending a sext. And anyone who asks for one does not have your best interests at heart.

# Sexting & Nude Photographs

Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

## **Prove you trust me**

Devon opened his cellphone and saw a picture of a girl without a shirt on. He couldn't see her face, but saw the text message sent with the picture: "Fwd if you think Rachil is a slut!" Rachil was in Devon's Spanish class and he immediately cringed, imagining how ugly this was going to be for Rachil at school tomorrow. Rachil had sent the picture to her ex-boyfriend because he promised they would get back together if she proved she trusted him. She sent it to him and they got back together, but a few days later they got into another fight and broke up. Jose forwarded the picture to his friends. Then, the picture spread like wildfire.

- ? What is your gut reaction to this story? What parts of the story seem most realistic to you?
- ? Why do you think Rachil decided to send the picture? What could she have done differently if she really wanted to get back together with her boyfriend?
- ? What is a misconception you think adults have about sexting?
- ? What would you have done in this situation if you didn't know Rachil? If you were Rachil's friend? If you were Rachil herself?