

A Parent's Guide to Dealing with 'Sexting'

What to do and how to handle it

What to do if you're worried about your children sharing inappropriate or explicit pictures of themselves and others

It can turn into every parent's worst nightmare: – their child taking explicit or inappropriate pictures of themselves, sharing them with others via the internet or their mobile phone and losing control of the image in the process. This is increasingly common amongst young people and there are a variety of reasons for it – some of them quite naïve and exploratory and others as a result of threats or coercion.

So what is sexting?

Taking and sharing inappropriate or explicit pictures or videos is often referred to as sexting. It's an activity that young people (and adults!) are engaging in at quite a rate.

Young people are used to sharing and documenting their lives online. It's very easy to hit the 'send' button before actually pausing to think about the consequences.

If you find that your child has been involved with an incident, this guide will help you know what to do and how to handle it.

Steps to take if your child has shared an inappropriate or explicit image or film of themselves

The steps below will help you to work through how to deal with the incident and how to take control.

Step 1 – Offer reassurance and try not to panic

- This is a lot easier said than done, especially if the image or film has been shared widely, – but there are things that you can do.
- Offer reassurance to your child, tell them you are going to help them lock down the image and control the circulation.
- Explore the facts tentatively with them.
- Keep the evidence, you may need it later.

Step 2 – Ask them who they have shared it with

- It may be appropriate for you to contact the person with whom they have shared the image. It may be embarrassing for them to admit this to you so be cautious about handling this.
- If they don't know how widely it's been circulated ask them who they shared it with initially.

Step 3 – Inform the provider/web site

- Most images are shared via mobiles but they can be shared on social networking sites.
- If the image/film has been shared on a web site/social networking site get in contact with them and report the image and or film.
- If the image or film has been shared via a mobile get in contact with the provider (Vodafone, O2, etc.) as you may want to change the number/PIN of your child's current mobile so that they won't receive any unsolicited contact.

Step 4 – Inform the authorities

- Get in contact with the local police. This is especially important if you think that your child may have been coerced into sharing the image.
- If you think your child has shared the image willingly and it is a misplaced romantic gesture that has gone wrong you may not want to inform the police. This is really a judgment call and you will want to think about how best to handle the incident. You may want to contact your child's boyfriend or girlfriend and or their parents and consider how best to resolve the situation and control the circulation of the image or film.
- **If the image has been shared with an adult, inform CEOP**
www.ceop.police.gov.uk/report

Step 5 – Inform the school/college

- Get in contact with your child's school and inform them about what has happened. They will be able to help you to control the circulation and support your child.
- If the image or film has been shared with someone who attends the school they will be able to work with you to approach them directly. They can help with reinforcement and control.
- If you suspect that your child has been coerced into sharing the image as part of sexual exploitation or bullying you must also inform the school. They will follow child protection and safeguarding procedures and will be able to assist you in supporting your child as things progress.

It's really hard to tackle this issue as a parent and you and your child will be terribly worried. You can take control, you can manage the circulation of the image and you can help them through this.

Make sure that your child is offered support, whether this is by you or someone else.

Also remember that context is everything, so it's important that you understand as much as possible about why they have done it and in what capacity. This may not be straightforward, as the child may be embarrassed or worried that they are going to get into trouble. It may be that you need to bring in third party support to help establish the facts. Don't be afraid about doing this whether it's the school, friends, other external support or even the police.

Top tips

Talking about sexting

Prevention is better than cure. If an incident does happen there are things that you can do but its best to tackle the issue head on. Here are some useful tips to get you started!

Talk about sexting

Talk about the consequences of sharing images like this, make it real, draw on things that have happened. Even if a young person does this innocently, they may fall out with their boyfriend or girlfriend and lose control of the image. Do they really want to take that chance? They may get a criminal record and this could affect their prospects going forward.

Once it's out there, it's out there

Although there are things that can be done to control the circulation, inevitably you lose control over your own image. Ask your children if they'd be happy for complete strangers to see an image of themselves.

Pressure

Teenagers in particular are under pressure to be cool, pressure to wear the right clothes, pressure to fit in...this is another pressure that they may well feel from boyfriends, girlfriends, adults and friends. Young people should be encouraged to consider the implications, stand up for themselves and do what is right, not what is expected of them. After all, they will need to live with the consequences.

Responsibility

If your child receives an image like this they need to think long and hard about what to do with it. How would they feel if the image was of them? They should report it to the school/police/tell their parents. It is likely that if they have received it others will have to.

Steps to take if your child has received or passed on an inappropriate or explicit image or film

If you are worried that your child has passed on or received an image or film, you can help. The steps below will help you to work through how to deal with the incident and how to take control.

Step 1 – Ask them who sent it to them

- If you suspect or have been told about an image or film, ask them who shared it with them.
- Reassure them that they are not in trouble but that you think it is important that the circulation of the image is controlled.
- Don't send the image on or share it with others.
- Only view it if you need to.
- If you suspect the image/film has been shared by an adult, act quickly and inform the authorities.
- If you suspect the image has been shared as a prank or a joke or fairly innocently – and if your child knows the person in the image – you may want to inform their parents/the child's school as they may not be aware that the image or film has been shared widely.
- You might also want to keep hold of the phone whilst you find out more.

Step 2 – Inform

- You will need to inform either the police, the Child Exploitation Online Protection (CEOP) Centre (ceop.police.uk), or (if your child knows the person) you could inform their parents or your child's school.
- Whatever you do, make sure that you tell somebody – do not ignore it!

Step 3 – Don't delete it from their phone

- Until the next steps are sorted out don't delete the image from your child's phone. It may be needed later on.
- You may want to keep hold of the phone in the interim and put it in a secure place.

Step 4 – Next steps

- Once you have informed somebody make sure that you talk about the issue with your child in order to reassure them.
- Delete the image from the phone.

Help and support is available, please take a look at the websites listed below

Help and support for you

www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents
www.vodafone.co.uk/parents
www.commonsemmedia.org/advice-for-parents
www.nspcc.org.uk/help-and-advice/for-parents/talking-about-sex/sexting/sexting_wda96795.html

Help and support for your child

www.thinkuknow.co.uk/11_16/control/sexting
www.cybermentors.org
www.childline.org.uk
www.swgfl.org.uk/sextinghelp

To contact the authors or this document, please email:

Charlotte Aynsley aynsleycharlotte@gmail.com **Sharon Girling** sharon.girling@girlinghughes.com

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