

Addressing Youth Sexting: A Public Health Approach



Introduction

As the use of electronic devices, social media, and the internet have increased substantially over the past decade, so too has concern about youth engaging these devices in risky ways. Specifically, concern over youth sexting has become a much-publicized issue. Parents' concerns about their children's sexting may be grounded in discomfort with children engaging in sexual behaviors at all or grounded in distress about potential short-term and long-term consequences associated with such behavior. Indeed, recent high-profile legal responses to youth sexting have included the prosecution of youth for sexting under child pornography statutes. Under Massachusetts law, a youth who engages in sexting can be prosecuted for distributing child

pornography for example; a felony that carries a sentence of up to 20 years in prison and possible sex offender registration.^{1,2,3,4,5} However, the use of these punitive approaches misses the mark in preventing youth from engaging in these risky behaviors.

Despite these mounting concerns, much remains unknown about youth sexting and scholarship on this issue remains relatively scant. The purpose of this policy paper is to briefly describe what we know about sexting and to offer recommendations for how Massachusetts can more effectively address these behaviors by promoting sexual health and well-being.



What is sexting?

Sexting refers to the use of electronic devices, like phones or tablets, to send sexually suggestive or explicit messages. However, the term sexting is more nuanced than that definition might suggest. Scholars, policymakers, parents and children can differ in their definitions of what constitutes sexting or even what can be described as sexually suggestive or explicit.

Sexting covers a range of behaviors, content, and underlying motivations. For example, sexting can refer to the creation of sexual content, the decision to send sexual content to someone else, requesting sexual content from another, or forwarding sexual content from one person to a third party. **Sexual content** can involve text, images or videos, or a combination of text and visual content.

Youth engage in sexting for a variety of reasons, including as part of sexual experimentation⁶ or consensual sexual behavior occurring in a romantic context, which may represent risky but developmentally normative behavior.⁷ Sexting also has the potential to be harmful, especially when related to bullying, intimidation, or other abusive contexts.⁸ Youth lack the cognitive and developmental skills to be able to understand the long-term consequences of sexting and are vulnerable to online harassment and victimization. As a result, engaging in sexting has been linked to negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, substance use, and other risky sexual behaviors.^{9,10}

How common is youth sexting?

Because of the difficulty in defining sexting, it is also difficult to estimate its prevalence. Research in this area is particularly limited. One recent meta-analysis (i.e., a study of studies) by Madigan et al. (2018) assessed 39 studies conducted between 2008 and 2016 that examined sexting by youth between the ages of 11 and 17.¹¹ Of 34 studies examining the prevalence of sending a sext, the authors reported an average prevalence of 14.8 percent. Among 20 studies examining the prevalence of receiving a sext, the authors found an average prevalence of 27.7 percent. The authors also noted that the prevalence of sexting has increased over time, with more recent studies reporting larger prevalence estimates.

Madigan et al. located a smaller set of studies that examined the prevalence of youth forwarding sexts (5 studies) or having a sext forwarded without youths' consent (4 studies). Prevalence estimates from these studies suggest that approximately 12 percent of youth engage in forwarding a sext without consent, whereas 8 percent of youth have a sext sent without their consent. These results were consistent with the 2019 meta-analysis by Mori et.al.¹²

Based on these recent estimates, it seems that although most youth are not engaging in sexting, a meaningful proportion of youth are, and even more youth will likely hear about or be exposed to this behavior in some way. Therefore, young people need the tools necessary to navigate these experiences in healthy ways.

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How should we prevent and respond to youth sexting?

There may be an impulse to respond to youth sexting by assigning blame to the technology or seeking criminal justice solutions. However, it is important to remember that technology is a facilitator of behavior, but not the cause of it. Further, technology changes, often quite quickly. As a result, approaches that focus solely on denouncing a specific technology, website, or application without regard to the underlying factors motivating these behaviors are likely to be ineffective or outdated.¹³

Focusing purely on punitive, after-the-fact responses also does nothing to protect youth or prevent those at risk to send or distribute these materials from engaging in these behaviors. Therefore, we recommend that Massachusetts take a public health approach to address youth sexting. In the public health model, the focus is on preventing unwanted behaviors by understanding and addressing the factors that give rise to them.¹⁴ Under this framework, we recommend the following initiatives:

- 1. Establish a commission to synthesize, disseminate, and promote research on sexting.** Studies on youth sexting are often not accessible to key stakeholders, including parents, educators, and policy makers. The goal of the commission should be to provide stakeholders with a systematic review and synthesis of the literature on sexting, with particular emphasis on identifying its scope, underlying motivations, and the associated psychosocial and environmental factors that increase the likelihood of sexting, as well as those factors that are protective against engaging in risky sexual behavior. Access to the emerging literature on sexting will better guide decision-making across stakeholder groups. The commission will also identify critical knowledge gaps in the sexting literature and engage local stakeholders (e.g., universities, research firms) to conduct research on these identified areas.
- 2. Support the development, testing, and dissemination of evidence-based programs.** We recommend investing in programs that educate youth and communities and establish specific interventions to reduce the effects of identified risk factors and enhance the

effectiveness of protective factors associated with sexting. Evidence-based treatment and educational programming that focuses on increasing youth awareness and building essential skills should be made available to provide young people the necessary tools to make good decisions about sexual behavior using digital media. Further, programs that prioritize primary prevention would be more cost-effective than relying solely on responsive approaches.

- 3. Revise legislation to reflect knowledge base and best practices regarding youth.** We recommend that laws related to sexting be revisited to reflect consequences appropriate to the age of the alleged “perpetrator”. Specifically, we recommend new legislation that will ensure that anyone age 17 and younger who has been referred to the District Attorney’s Office for transmitting or distributing “indecent visual depiction” is met with age appropriate interventions. They should be screened and diverted to a pre-arraignment educational program designed to target the risks, needs and responsiveness (RNR) of each youth. Youth who do not meet the requirements of the diversion program should be mandated to undergo a comprehensive assessment focused on sexting behaviors, followed by a requirement to comply with recommended treatment or other interventions.¹⁵

Conclusion

Addressing youth sexting is an important and timely policy goal. It is also important to understand the considerable changes in psycho-sexual-social development that occur in adolescence. While engaging in risky behaviors like sexting can be a normal part of adolescent development, the social, health, and legal consequences associated with this behavior can be substantial. To help youth avoid the negative consequences of engaging in potentially harmful sexting behaviors, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, local communities, and families should partner to provide young people with the skills necessary to make good choices about their sexual behaviors.

- ¹ Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 272, §28 (2019)
- ² Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 272, §29 (2019)
- ³ Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 272, §29A (2019)
- ⁴ Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 272, §29B (2019)
- ⁵ Mass. Gen. Laws ch. 272, §29C (2019)
- ⁶ Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2014). "Sexting" and its relation to sexual activity and sexual risk behavior in a national survey of adolescents. *Journal of adolescent health, 55*(6), 757-764.
- ⁷ Beckmeyer, J. J., Herbenick, D., Fu, T. C., Dodge, B., Reece, M., & Fortenberry, J. D. (2019). Characteristics of Adolescent Sexting: Results from the 2015 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, 1*-33.
- ⁸ Klettke, B., Hallford, D. J., & Mellor, D. J. (2014). Sexting prevalence and correlates: A systematic literature review. *Clinical psychology review, 34*(1), 44-53.
- ⁹ Chaudhary, P., Peskin, M., Temple, J. R., Addy, R. C., Baumler, E., & Ross, S. (2017). Sexting and Mental Health: A School-Based Longitudinal Study among Youth in Texas. *Journal of Applied Research on Children, 8*(1), 11.
- ¹⁰ Benotsch, E. G., Snipes, D. J., Martin, A. M., & Bull, S. S. (2013). Sexting, substance use, and sexual risk behavior in young adults. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 52*(3), 307-313.
- ¹¹ Madigan, S., Ly, A., Rash, C. L., Van Ouytsel, J., & Temple, J. R. (2018). Prevalence of multiple forms of sexting behavior among youth: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA pediatrics, 172*(4), 327-335.
- ¹² Mori, C., Temple, J.R., Browne, D., & Madigan, S. (2019). Association of Sexting With Sexual Behaviors and Mental Health Among Adolescents A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, Published online June 17, 2019. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.1658.
- ¹³ Harris, A., Davidson, J., Letourneau, E., Paternite, C., & Miofsky, K. T. (2013). Building a prevention framework to address teen "sexting" behaviors. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/grants/244001.pdf>
- ¹⁴ Mercy, J. A., Rosenberg, M. L., Powell, K. E., Broome, C. V., & Roper, W. L. (1993). Public health policy for preventing violence. *Health Affairs, 12*(4), 7-29.
- ¹⁵ Brogan, L., Haney-Caron, E., NeMoyer, A., & DeMatteo, D. (2015). Applying the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) model to juvenile justice. *Criminal Justice Review, 40*(3), 277-302.



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