

'Sexting' no worse than spin-the-bottle: study

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A mobile user sending a text message. Youths exchanging nude photos of themselves over cellphones, known as "sexting," should not face child pornography charges, as some have in the United States, a humanities conference heard Tuesday.

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Peter Cumming, an associate professor at York University in Toronto, presented a paper on children's sexuality at the 78th Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences defending the practice as a modern variation on "playing doctor or spin-the-bottle."

"Technology does change things, and there can be very serious consequences" Cumming said.

"But that obscures the fact that children and young people are sexual beings who have explored their sexuality in all times, and all cultures and all places.

"A distinction has to be made between nudity and child porn," he added.

The annual conference, held this year at Ottawa's Carleton University, brings together 8,000 researchers from around the world to discuss the latest social trends.

Sexting -- a combination of the words "sex" and "texting" -- made headlines earlier this year after students in a dozen US states were charged with child pornography for sharing nude and semi-nude photos with friends and classmates.

In March, three teenage girls sued a Pennsylvania prosecutor who accused them of peddling "child pornography," after a teacher discovered a waist-up image of two girls covered just by a bra, and another image of a girl topless.

District Attorney George Skumanik called for the girls to undergo five weeks of behavior courses and take a drug test or face [prosecution](#), according to a letter apparently sent to the teenagers' parents.

The American Civil Liberties Union, a cosignatory to the complaint, said Skumanik's threat was unconstitutional, and prosecution could have landed the girls on the sex offenders register, blighting future job prospects.

In other cases, a "bored" Florida boy was charged for sending a photo of his genitalia to a female classmate, while another was listed as a sex offender for emailing nude photos of his 16-year-old girlfriend to her family after an argument.

According to a survey by a US family planning organization, published in December, 20 percent of American teenagers said they had participated in sexting.

Cumming said that to consider labeling a teen a sex offender because of a sexting incident -- a label that will stick for life -- defies common sense.

"It would be very unlikely to see dozens of news stories announcing that some children were caught playing spin-the-bottle, or doctor, or strip poker," he said in his presentation.

"Yet many of the cases brought forward have been on the same level of innocence and experience as those activities. In other words, kids are playing spin-the-bottle online."

Cumming also argued that such online activities are safer than traditional sexual games because there is no immediate physical contact and thus are less likely to lead to pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

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