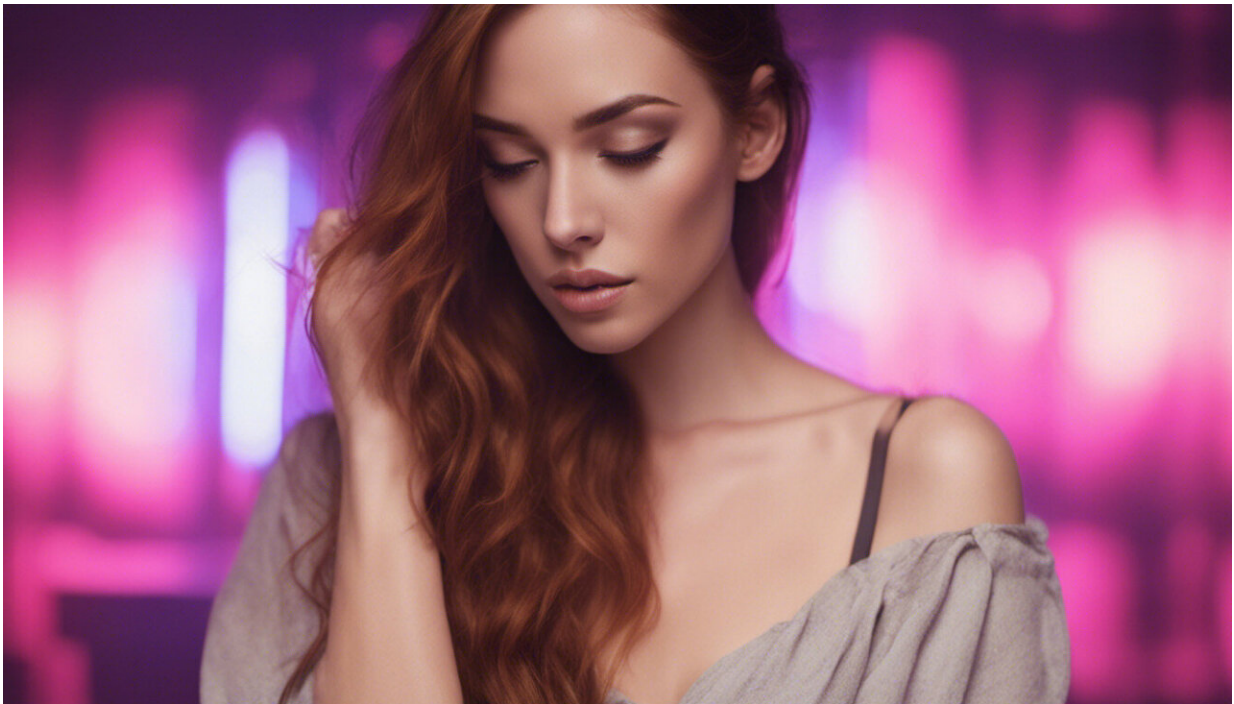


# Bringing pleasure into the discussion about sexting among teens

February 27 2018, by Mary Lou Rasmussen

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

New research on sexting published today in [JAMA Pediatrics](#) finds that sexting has increased among teens in recent years, and increases as youths age.

An estimated one in seven teens send sexts and one in four receive them,

according to the research.

The paper reviews 39 studies conducted between 1990 to 2016 involving more than 110,000 participants. Two studies took place in Australia, and others in countries including the United States, Korea and South Africa.

Researchers examined the prevalence of multiple forms of sexting behaviour according to age, sex, geography, and method of sexting.

A key finding of the study is that: "Sexting is becoming a more common practice among youth; therefore, age-specific information on sexting and its potential consequences should regularly be provided as a component of [sex education](#)."

I agree that sexting should be a part of [sexuality education](#). But who is educating teachers about how to teach about sexting? And is there enough focus on whether sexting can be good for teens who are just beginning to explore their [sexuality](#)?

## **Sex education needs to be more sophisticated**

Sexuality education receives very little attention in teacher education courses and can often slip off agenda entirely because of the [crowded curriculum](#).

[Feedback from students](#) tells us that there is too much repetition in sexuality education, with a lot of focus on biology and respect, but little discussion of [the role of pleasure](#) and how to negotiate sexual relationships.

We know that young Australians are sexting, but local research [shows](#) that young people are predominantly sexting within the contexts of an intimate relationship. Today's research found that 12% of participants

had forwarded sexts without consent, however [the majority of the time](#) sexting is a consensual activity.

Teachers should also be aware that in digital spaces, young women aged 18–19 years old are more likely to encounter degrading comments about their gender, sexual harassment and unwanted sexual requests, according to a recent [Australian survey](#).

## **We don't have the full picture**

There are [methodological challenges](#) in researching something that adults call sexting, but that young people might not recognise as such. There are also challenges in gaining a decent sample of young people.

Online samples could over-report the incidence of sexting because young people who aren't sexting also aren't likely to participate in online surveys about sexting.

Meanwhile, samples using telephone recruitment are likely to under-report because young people are less likely to participate, or to talk honestly, about sexting while their parent or guardian is in the vicinity. In Australia, the permission of a parent or guardian is mandatory in research with young people under sixteen years of age.

## **Teens taking sex ed into their own hands**

Since schools and parents can be poor at sexuality education, young people may indeed be in the best position to educate themselves and one another about sexuality – including sexting.

In the age of #metoo we increasingly see young people taking education about sexuality and sexual harassment into their own hands. Young

women are responding to online sexual harassment in ways that poke fun at their harassers, but these tactics are not without consequences.

For example, Anna Gensler is an illustrator who [posted satirical illustrations on Instagram](#) calling out [sexual harassment](#) she encountered online. As a consequence, she became the target of a stalker.

## More and better dialogue

In Australia and the UK, researchers [have urged](#) the need for more public conversations about social media as spaces of courtship and sexual exchange for youth beyond boundaries of the schoolyard.

With my colleague Louisa Allen, I [have argued](#) that sexuality education needs to focus much more helping young people to imagine and participate in conversations and related to sexuality, both within and outside the school context. It seems that the authors of the [review](#) published today concur with us on this point.

We should be encouraging young people to think about the etiquette of sexting and why [young women often experience more harm](#) as a result of it.

The answer is not to tell young people that they should not sext, but rather to engage them in thinking, with each other, about [sexting](#) as part of the broader negotiation of intimate relationships.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Bringing pleasure into the discussion about sexting among teens (2018, February 27)  
retrieved 27 April 2024 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-02-pleasure-discussion-sexting-teens.html>

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