

Why sexting must be on the curriculum

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

Sex education remains a fiercely debated topic, both in the media and among politicians.

A recent controversial segment on [Fox News' *The Ingraham Angle*](#) discussed whether schools should teach students about "sexting" (sharing sexually explicit images or videos through electronic means). In Canada's largest province, the leader of Ontario's Progressive Conservative party

recently vowed to [repeal the sex-education curriculum](#) if elected premier in next month's election.

We cannot politicize the reality of sexual behaviours in [youth](#). The reality is that [almost half of youth in the United States have sex prior to leaving high school](#).

Teen sexting is also common. A study of more than 110,000 teens suggests that [one in every seven are sending sexts](#), and one in four are receiving sexts. This number is on the rise. For example, the average rate of teens sending sexts went from five per cent in 2009 to 20 per cent in 2014 —[a fourfold increase](#).

And, even more alarmingly, the prevalence of non-consensual sexting is 12 per cent. This means that at least one in eight teens are having a sexually explicit image of themselves forwarded, without consent. In many countries, this represents a [criminal offence](#).

Many parents are concerned about digital safety but [only 40 per cent are talking regularly to their children about what is appropriate content to view and share online](#). That leaves six out of every 10 youth potentially vulnerable to victimization. And this is why we need to talk about it in schools.

The central benefit of educating about digital health, safety and security in schools is that it provides teens with a "two-gated" approach. If conversations about digital health and safety are not happening at the first gate, in the youth's home, then youth can receive this information at the second gate, at [school](#).

The two-gated approach guarantees that 10 out of 10 youth will receive the information they need to avoid digital dilemmas and risks.

Talking about consensual sex

While the digital age has introduced many benefits, one of its perils is the risk of teens being bullied or harassed through electronic mediums, a phenomenon known as [cyberbullying](#).

Cyberbullying is a [real challenge for today's teens that often results in psychological consequences varying from stress to suicidal ideation](#).

The [suicide of Canadian teenager Amanda Todd](#) is one example. At the age of 13, Amanda Todd was convinced to expose herself to a man she had met online, who took a picture of her and proceeded to blackmail her with the image. A sexually explicit photo of her was posted and widely circulated online. In a video posted to YouTube prior to her death, Amanda attributed her anxiety and depression to her online victimization and humiliation.

While rare, these cases highlight the need to discuss digital health and safety with youth. This topic is all the more pressing considering the near universal access that [children](#) and teens have to smartphones, computers and the internet.

Throughout the world, [a concept known as digital citizenship](#) has been introduced into many school curricula. This concept refers to the practice of being safe, legal and ethical in one's online behaviours.

Educating youth to be good digital citizens and to understand cyberbullying and digital dilemmas involves talking about consensual and non-consensual sex and sexting.

A proactive approach

Of course, we can't put all the responsibility on schools and educators. Discussions about digital safety and health should be happening at home as well.

Parents should talk to their children early and often about this topic, as well as about sex, sexuality, peer pressure and healthy relationships.

The digital world is changing rapidly, and so too is teenage development, so parents need to revise and revisit these discussions as often as possible.

But, as mentioned, only 40 per cent of parents are actually having these conversations on a regular basis.

Clearly, we need to do a better job of disseminating the many existing resources that encourage and provide parents with tips on talking with their children about online safety and citizenship. Perhaps this could be a priority of [Melania Trump's new #BeBest campaign.](#)

But a benefit of receiving information from multiple sources, including school, is that it provides more information and more opportunities for discussion.

Some children may find that they are more comfortable talking about digital health and safety in a group context, such as in school.

The key is to talk about digital safety early. Children and youth can then be equipped with solutions on how to deal with unwanted situations when they arise.

It's a proactive approach rather than a reactive one. And it can safeguard our children.

If trusted adults include both parents and educators, it means our youth have more opportunities to get the help they need to rectify, remedy or make a supportive plan for dealing with a challenging situation.

Call it digital health

The decision to keep or discard a sex-education curriculum should not be debated. We are beyond that.

Instead, our focus should be on our children's best interests. And how we as parents and educators can create the best circumstances for our youth to thrive.

As they develop, sexuality will continue to be a pressing topic on the minds of teens. Despite many of our best efforts or wishes, it's not something that we can program out of them. Nor can we create a school curriculum that excludes sexuality from their collective thinking.

In fact, as research has shown the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only education programs on rates of both [teenage pregnancy](#) and [sexually transmitted infections](#), there has been a push towards more comprehensive sex education. With the growing role of technology in the most intimate aspects of our lives, it is negligent not to effectively prepare our kids for this reality.

Our argument is that educating kids about sexuality mediated through the internet is essential to keeping them safe.

Sexual education in school is a logical and effective way to encourage these discussions. Call it by a different name—digital health or digital citizenship—but it should be included, as the potential risks are too great to ignore.

Let's not let the political narrative blur the lines of who and what we are most concerned about—the safety and well-being of our children and adolescents.

If educators are interested in resources for discussing digital citizenship, Common Sense Media has a [digital citizenship program for K-12](#). Parents can also consult [Digital Citizenship: Guide for Parents](#) for further information.

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