

Teen sexting associated with delinquency, sexual behaviours and mental health issues, study finds

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In their meta-analysis, University of Calgary researchers Camille Mori, left, and Sheri Madigan analyzed 23 studies of adolescent behaviour conducted between 2012 and 2018. Credit: Riley Brandt, University of Calgary

A broad analysis of 23 studies on adolescent sexual behaviours, involving 41,723 participants, revealed that teen sexting is associated with a bevy of risk factors for youth, including multiple sexual partners, lack of contraception use, and mental health problems like anxiety, depression, delinquent behaviour and substance use.

The University of Calgary-led study, published in the medical journal *JAMA Pediatrics*, indicates the need for educational campaigns that raise awareness around issues of digital health, safety and conduct, to help youth navigate their personal, social and sexual development in a [digital world](#).

"Sexting has become the newest method of expressing sexual behaviour in teens. It is common and on the rise," says Dr. Sheri Madigan, PhD, an associate professor in the University of Calgary's Department of Psychology, and member of the Owerko Centre at the Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute at the Cumming School of Medicine, senior researcher on the study.

"Our previously published research suggests that one in four teens are receiving sexts and one in seven are sending them. We also know that the majority of youth are not talking about this at home. Forty-nine per cent of parents have no intention of talking to youth about their online or offline sexual health. So, it's really the flip of a coin as to whether youth are going to learn about safe, legal and ethical digital practices for their parents."

Call for enhanced sex education curriculum

That's why [sexting](#) needs to be incorporated into the sex education curriculum of schools, says Camille Mori, a master's student in Madigan's Determinants of Child Development Lab and lead author on the *JAMA Pediatrics* paper.

"More than anything, this study is a call for more and better education," says Mori. "We need to have those talks about consent. Not just in terms of sexual consent, but also consent around the distribution of images. What does consent mean in the digital age? What do you do when you receive sexts? And what is your responsibility when someone shows or

forwards another person's sext to you? We need to talk about the ethics and consequences surrounding this on both sides.

"There's a lot that's lacking right now in terms of sex education, especially with digital communication coming into play so heavily. We think there needs to be a revamp of the sex education curriculum."

The 23 studies analyzed for the JAMA Pediatrics paper included adolescents ranging from the ages of 12 to 17 with the studies conducted between 2012 and 2018. The meta-analysis looked at studies from around the world, with the majority of those North America based but also from such countries as Nigeria, Korea, Australia, Peru and others.

Sexting associated with range of risky behaviours

Madigan and her team found that teens who are sexting are nearly four times more likely to be having sex than those that are not, with multiple [sexual partners](#) and lack of contraception use also factoring in. Meanwhile, sexting teens are also more likely to be engaging in substance use and delinquent behaviours, such as stealing and property damage.

Madigan, who holds a Canada Research Chair in the Determinants of Child Development, stresses that the new study does not imply that sexting causes these other problematic behaviours. Rather, the problematic behaviour are linked with sexting via associations. "Right now, we can't disentangle what comes first, the sexting or the risky outcomes," Madigan says.

As for the associations found between sexting and such mental health issues as depression and anxiety, there are a number of scenarios at play, says Madigan.

"On the extreme end, some kids are finding their sexts used as a means of sextortion, where they're being told they need to send money, or, more pictures, to avoid having their naked photos posted online," says Madigan. "That can obviously be very distressing."

In other instances, teens are being peer-pressured into sexting, which can cause emotional distress. Then there are those who use sexting as a means of soliciting attention because they're feeling isolated, depressed or lacking confidence. "This is, of course, not effective for their mental health," says Madigan.

Shame and guilt can factor into the equation too, says Mori, whether teens are being coaxed into sexting or shamed for having done so. "Shame and guilt is bred into what we're taught about sex in our culture and sexting can compound these issues," Mori says. "This can impact symptoms of depression and anxiety."

Madigan says parents and educators should "move away from shaming and instead have open conversations with teens about both healthy relationships and digital citizenship, which is how to be safe, legal and ethical online."

More information: Camille Mori et al. Association of Sexting With Sexual Behaviors and Mental Health Among Adolescents, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.1658](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.1658)

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