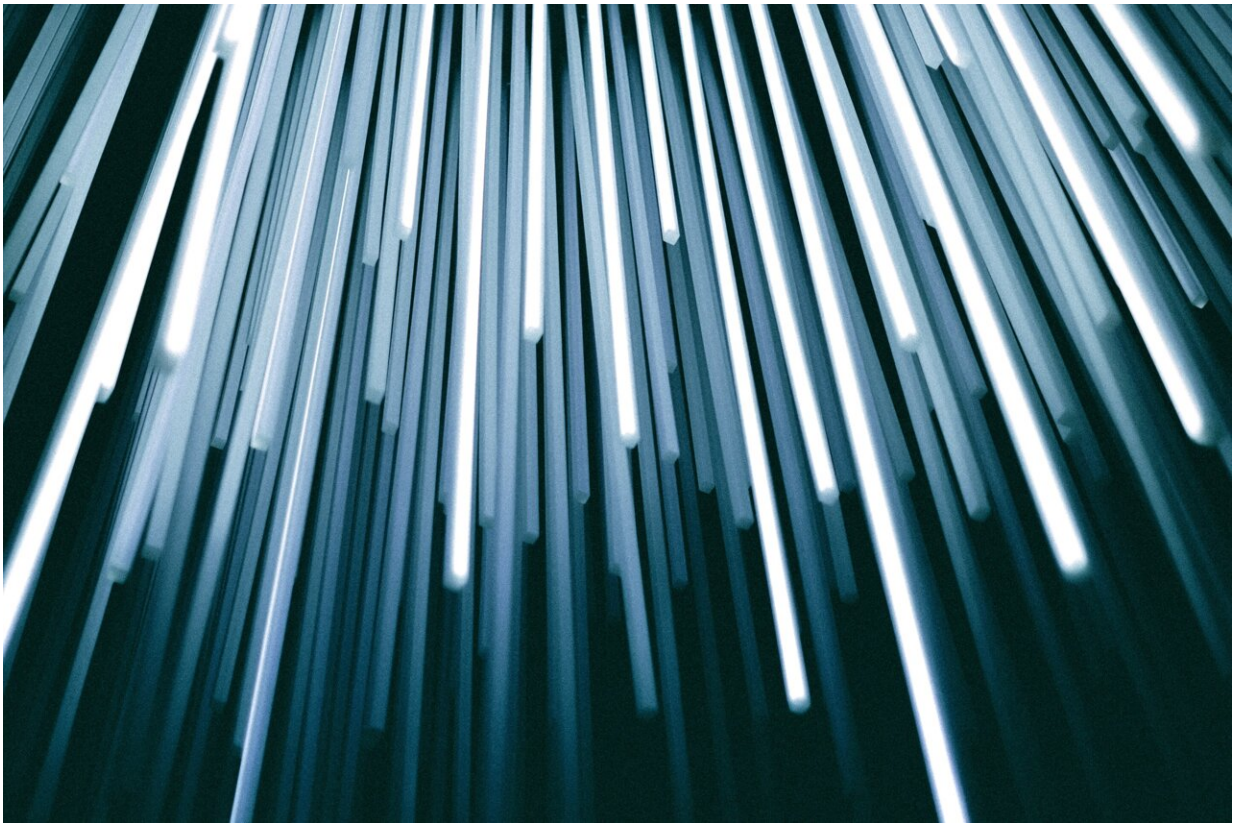


Teenage sexting linked to increased sexual behaviour, drug use and poor mental health

June 18 2019, by Camille Mori, Jeff Temple And Sheri Madigan



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

You glance at your teen's smartphone and see a text message light up the screen. Was that a sext you just saw? Questions flood your mind. Is this what kids are doing nowadays? Does this mean my child is having sex

too?

Sexting —the exchange of sexual messages, photographs or videos via technological devices —is a relatively common occurrence among adolescents, [with one in four youth receiving sexts, and one in seven sending them](#).

Some researchers have found links between [sexting](#) and factors such as [sexual activity](#), [substance use](#) (for example use of drugs and alcohol) and [emotional health](#). Others have found no evidence of these associations.

In our [research published today in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics*](#), we sought to resolve this uncertainty. Drawing from the results of 23 studies published between 2012 and 2018, with 41,723 youth aged 12 to 17 years, we conducted a series of meta-analyses to examine the link between sexting and [sexual activity](#), multiple sexual partners, contraception use, delinquent behaviour, internalizing problems (for example anxiety and depression), alcohol use, drug use and smoking.

Sex, alcohol and mental health

Our findings reveal that youth who are sexting are four times more likely to be having sex. They are also five times more likely to have had multiple [sexual partners](#) and half as likely to use contraception.

When looking at the links between sexting, [delinquent behaviour](#) and [substance use](#), we found that youth who sexted were two and a half times more likely to have engaged in delinquent behaviours such as stealing and property damage.

Furthermore, they were almost four times more likely to have drunk alcohol, and were approximately three times more likely to have used drugs such as marijuana, and smoked cigarettes.

Given the [rise of mental health problems](#) over the past decade, and claims that [digital technology is resulting in deteriorating mental health among young people](#), our team also examined the association between sexting and poor mental [health](#). We found that youth who sexted were approximately twice as likely to have experienced symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Sexting context matters

The results of this study may prove alarming to some; however, certain considerations are crucially important to make before condemning sexting as a dangerous or "risky" behaviour among youth.

First, the findings are correlations. While sexting is linked to sexual behaviour and mental health factors, correlational studies do not provide evidence to suggest that sexting is in any way the cause of risky behaviour or poor [mental health](#).

Second, the risks linked to sexting may vary based on the situation in which sexting is done. Context matters. For example, surveys done with undergraduate students reveal that sexting that occurs within the context of a committed relationship has [more positive and fewer negative outcomes](#) than sexting that occurs in casual relationships.

Sexting can also [enhance the emotional and sexual quality of a relationship](#) between partners.

The younger, the riskier

As adolescents age, [romantic and sexual exploration become an increasingly normative and healthy part of development](#). So we examined whether our findings varied depending on the age of

participants. We found that links between sexting and many risk behaviours were stronger among younger compared to older adolescents.

These results are in line with research showing that [sexual activity is more strongly linked to risk behaviours among younger youth](#).

In terms of gender, we found that, in general, results did not differ based on whether the sexting youth was female or male. This finding is consistent with our previous research, which indicate [no gender differences](#) in the prevalence of different forms of sexting.

Educating teens is key to safety

Sexting, like other aspects of adolescent and teen development, is not free from risks. But, [just like teen sex](#), teen [sexting is common](#). Yet sex often remains an unbroached topic between parents and their children.

In fact, [a study that assessed mothers' intentions to talk to their children about sexual health](#) found that 71 percent of mothers had not talked to their adolescents about sex, and that 49 percent had no intention of doing so.

So how do we go about helping youth be safe, both online and offline?

The absence of sex education within the home necessitates [comprehensive sexual education curricula in schools](#). This includes teaching adolescents about sexting.

Rather than condemning the act of sexting among youth, a more proactive approach could focus on talking openly with [youth](#) about sex, and educating [young people](#) on how to be responsible digital citizens by emphasizing ethical, respectful and safe online interactions.

If a parent or teen is concerned about videos and images being distributed without their consent, or if they are being coerced into sexting or sextortion, they should report their concerns immediately to their local police. In Canada, they can also consult needhelpnow.ca and send a report to Cybertip.ca. In the United States, they can consult Stopbullying.org.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Teenage sexting linked to increased sexual behaviour, drug use and poor mental health (2019, June 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-06-teenage-sexting-linked-sexual-behaviour.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.