

Nationwide study on teen 'sexting' has good news, bad news

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Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D., co-author, a professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

The good news is that adolescent "sexting" is not at epidemic levels as

reported in some media headlines. The bad news is that it also has not decreased despite preventive efforts by educators and others. Most commonly, the term sexting has been used to describe incidents where teenagers take nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves and exchange that content via text or private social media messages. While intended to be shared with trusted romantic partners, these images also can find their way into the hands of others.

While national studies have contributed to the understanding of [sexting](#) behavior among minors, the prevalence estimates are dated (prior to January 2011), and therefore, little is known about its frequency and scope on a national level in recent years.

A new study by researchers at Florida Atlantic University and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire is providing a much-needed update to what is currently known about the nature and extent of sexting among youth today.

The study, published in the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, examined prevalence rates for sending and receiving sexually explicit images or video among a nationally-[representative sample](#) of 5,593 American middle and [high school students](#) (ages 12 to 17). Researchers focused only on explicit images and videos (as some previous studies have conflated the picture by also including explicit texts) in order to isolate those experiences that have the greatest potential for problematic outcomes.

Results show that across all sociodemographic variables explored, the vast majority of students were not participating in sexting. Approximately 14 percent of middle and high school students had received a sexually explicit image from a boyfriend or girlfriend, while 13.6 percent said they received such an image from someone who was not a current romantic partner. About 11 percent of students reported

sending a sext to a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Interestingly, most of the students who were asked by a current boyfriend or girlfriend to send a sext complied (63.9 percent). Among those students who were asked to send a sext by someone who was not a current romantic partner, only 43 percent complied.

Males were significantly more likely to have sent and received a sext from a current romantic partner. However, males and females were equally likely to receive them from someone who was not a current boyfriend or girlfriend. Female students were more likely to have been asked to send a sext by someone who was not a current romantic partner (14.3 percent), but only 34.1 percent complied.

Among the different racial groups examined, no statistically significant differences emerged with regard to sexting participation. As expected, older youth were more likely to both send and receive sexts. Students who identified as non-heterosexual were significantly more likely to be involved in sexting in all its forms.

With regard to frequency, about one-third of the students who sent or received explicit messages did so only once. Most commonly, students engaged in these behaviors "a few times." Fewer than 2 percent of all students said they had sent a sext "many times," while 2.6 percent said they had received sexts "many times."

Overall, about 4 percent of students said they shared an explicit image sent to them with another person without their permission, and the about same number believed an image of them was shared with others without permission. This, of course, can lead to instances of "sextortion," which the authors also have studied. Males were more likely to have shared an image and were more likely to believe an image they sent had been shared with others without permission. Non-heterosexual students were

approximately twice as likely to have shared an image with others and to believe their image had been shared with others without permission. It also appears that 15-year-olds were the most likely to have shared a sext and to believe a sext of them was shared without permission.

"Findings from our study provide a very important message for youth who may believe media headlines that suggest sexting is more widespread than it actually is," said Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D., a professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice within FAU's College for Design and Social Inquiry and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center, who co-authored the study with Justin Patchin, Ph.D., a professor of [criminal justice](#) at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center. "Showing adolescents [clear evidence](#) that a relatively small proportion of teens engage in sexting could actually result in decreased overall participation since it underscores that it is not as normal, commonplace, or widespread as they might believe."

More information: Justin W. Patchin et al. The Nature and Extent of Sexting Among a National Sample of Middle and High School Students in the U.S., *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s10508-019-1449-y](#)

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