

Sexting: what it is and how you can help keep your child safe

Note: this factsheet deals with sexting between children. If an adult is involved – for example, sending sexual images to a child and/or grooming them to send intimate photos – refer this to the police immediately.

What is sexting?

Sexting is where people share nude or semi-nude images or videos of themselves online with another person (sometimes called sending 'nudes' or 'dick pics'). Images/videos might be shared willingly, or the person sharing them might feel pressured to do it. Sexting usually takes place over messaging apps like Snapchat, Instagram and WhatsApp, or over live video calls or streams.

All sexting between children is illegal because it involves creating an indecent image of a person under the age of 18 which, even if they take it themselves, is against the law. This doesn't mean the police will always be involved, or that your child is likely to be arrested for it, but it's important for you and your child to understand the legal position.

Note: when someone sends a photo or video of genitals without consent, to cause alarm, distress or humiliation or for the sender's own sexual pleasure, it's called 'cyber-flashing'. This is a separate issue to sexting. Cyber-flashing is a criminal offence – it should be referred to the police.

Why should I be concerned?

Creating and sharing intimate photos or videos can reflect natural curiosity about sex and children's exploration of relationships, and it won't always have negative consequences. Every situation is different, and it will depend on the children involved and the context. However, young people might see sexting as only harmless fun, without considering the risks. These include:

- **Once an image is sent, your child loses control over it** – the image could be shared with others without their knowledge or permission. It might get shown to other people at school, or posted online
 - **It can increase the risk of harm** – engaging in sexting may cause or increase the likelihood of harm. This can include sextortion (a type of blackmail where children are threatened, to make them share further intimate images)
 - **It can normalise unhealthy behaviours** – often, children need education and support on identifying healthy and unhealthy behaviours within relationships, and understanding consent and how to give it. Engaging in sexting may reflect a lack of awareness of these issues
 - **It can be difficult to say 'no' and seek help** – young people might struggle to challenge or refuse a request for sexual images, especially from someone they like or want approval from. They might avoid asking for help due to embarrassment or fear
 - **It may indicate wider issues** – sexting may be part of a wider pattern of risky or harmful sexual behaviour
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What can we do at home?

We talk about the risks of image sharing in school, but this is always more effective if conversations happen at home too.

- **Start the conversation early** – as soon as your child has their own device where they can message other people online, you should make them aware of what is appropriate to share, the risks of sending images, and how to recognise if someone is pressuring them to send photos
 - **Take an interest in your child's online life** – have positive conversations about what they're doing online regularly. This allows you to understand their activities, build trust, offer advice, and help them if a problem emerges
 - **Discuss consent and healthy relationships** – explain that it is not ok for someone to make them feel uncomfortable, to pressure them into doing things that they don't want to do, or to show them things that they're unhappy about. Discuss how they could respond if someone they like asks for an intimate photo, and let them know that they can speak to you if it happens
 - **Remind them of the possible consequences** – ask your child to think before they send a picture of themselves of the risks and how they would feel if it got shared with other people or posted online. Even if they trust the person now, relationships can change
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What if I become aware of an incident?

- **Be non-judgmental** – if your child discloses that they have sent or received a sexual image, stay calm and try to explore the facts sensitively – for example, ask what has happened, who is involved and what was said, rather than why they have done it
- **Don't view, copy, share or save an image yourself** – this is illegal
- **Tell the school** – if you suspect or become aware of any sexting incident involving your child that you have concerns about, let us know and we will make sure your child is supported
- **Make your child aware of steps they can take** – if an image of them has been shared online, help your child to report it on the individual site to get it removed. You can also use Childline's '[Report Remove](https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/)' tool to report images (<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/report-remove/>)
- **Encourage your child to get support** – if they are feeling anxious or upset about something, let them know they can speak to you and they can also access further support, such as through a Childline counsellor at www.childline.org.uk or on 0800 1111
- **Contact the police if you believe your child is at risk** – if you think your child or another child has been harmed, or that there is a risk of harm, contact the police so they can investigate and provide support

Sources

This factsheet was produced by [The Key Safeguarding](https://thekeysupport.com/safeguarding): thekeysupport.com/safeguarding

- [Keeping children safe in education](#), GOV.UK – Department for Education
- [Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people](#), GOV.UK – UK Council for Internet Safety
- [Learn about sexting](#) and [Protect children from sexting](#), Internet Matters
- [Shifting the dial: methods to prevent 'self-generated' child sexual abuse among 11-13-year-olds](#), Internet Matters
- [What parents need to know about sexual image-sharing among kids](#), Internet Matters