

With more and more teens sending text messages, cases of digital abuse are on the rise



# Katy Teens and Sexting

## How to Protect Your Katy Teen from Sending Regrettable Text Messages

Written by Kelly Isenberger

**E**veryone makes mistakes, especially teenagers. However, there are some mistakes that parents want their children to avoid. We talk to our kids about the dangers of tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and sex. More recently, parents have had to talk to their children about the dangers of the Internet and chat rooms. Now, there is a new threat parents need to know about - teen sexting. Teen sexting is when a teen sends nude photos, semi-nude photos, or any sexually explicit material via text message on their cell phone. Even though this may seem like a private matter, many teens have discovered the humiliating result of it quickly getting out of control.

### A Common Trend

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy recently conducted a study of about 1,200 participants on the topic of sexting. The organization found that 20% of teens, ages 13 to 19, had sent nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves via a cell phone text message. Another study by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported the same facts, finding that one in five teens have engaged in sexting.

Even though parents may get huge cell phone bills, many may not be aware their teen is texting or know what they're sending to friends. Sexting is common, and Katy parents need to know what their kids are sending out to their friends.

### Take Care with What You Share

A typical sexting scenario occurs when teens send pictures of themselves nude to their significant others. In many cases, they break up and the picture gets sent on to other people. In no time, the picture can be sent around the whole school. Jeff Lee, an investigator for Harris County's High Tech Crime Unit, investigates

cases of teen sexting and Internet crimes. He explains, "Teens take these pictures without mind to the future consequences. They don't understand that once it is sent, you lose control of the image."

He describes another instance of nude photos getting into the wrong hands. "We've had a case where a young girl had a friend over," he recounts. "As she was taking a shower, the other girl thought it would be funny to take a picture of her with her cell phone camera. As she is walking home, the girl drops the phone and loses it. Someone else picks it up and sends out the photos." Taking pictures of anyone nude is an invasion of privacy, and children need to be taught that you cannot always control what happens to a digital photo.

Lee points out, "The closest thing to an instant picture used to be a Polaroid, which meant there was only one copy. Now with a digital image, saved copies are limitless." He adds, "The problem is that the pace of technology has outpaced a juvenile's ability to stop and think." The problem can get out of control quickly, to the embarrassment and humiliation of a child or adolescent.

### A Web of Consequences

Teens need to understand that being in possession of or sending nude photos of a juvenile can have severe consequences. There have been cases where teens have been charged with possession of child pornography or distributing child pornography. This is the most severe penalty, and police officials are working toward changing existing laws to stiffen the consequence without having to charge teens with child pornography.

Lee explains, "We are working on a law that would give an immediate consequence, such as a fine, that would make a teen



About 20% of teens say they have sent provocative text messages



Sexting can lead to both school and legal consequences

stop and think through what they are doing.” In most cases, if the school discovers a student has participated in sexting, they will call the proper law enforcement officials. Most teens do not realize the severity of their actions. Besides legal consequences, many teens may find themselves ostracized at school and can be teased and bullied by their peers.

### **Talk to Your Teen About Texting**

There are several things a parent can do to protect their teen from making the mistake of sexting. “Don’t buy your kids fancy Blackberries and iPhones,” Lee advises. Remember that the main purpose for a teen to have a cell phone is so they can call in case of an emergency or so the parent can call them. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children advises parents to buy phones for their teens that have parental controls. Parents should also select cell phones for kids and teens that do not allow text messaging or Internet access and that do not have a built-in camera.

It’s important to talk to your children and teens about the dangers of giving out personal information, photos, or cell phone numbers. Visit the website [netsmartz.org](http://netsmartz.org) with your child and talk about these issues. Lee and the Harris County High Tech Crimes Unit also give safety presentations. Ask your school, church, or organization to invite them to come and talk to your teen.

In this day of texting, social networking, and blogging, kids need to be mindful of what they are posting and sending. It is easy for kids to fall prey to predators, bullies, or even their own peers. One day they may be trusted friends with someone, and then the next day they may not be. The information and pictures that are put out there cannot be retrieved. Teach your teen to think before they post or send, and be aware of what they are texting. KM

*KELLY ISENBERGER is a Katy resident and mom of two girls. They are not teenagers yet, and so far she texts way more than they do.*

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## Shocking Sexting STATS

In 2009, the Associated Press and MTV partnered to survey 1,247 teens and adults between the ages of 14 to 24 on the topic of sexting.

**45%** of sexually active youth report being involved in sexting.

**51%** have thought about how things they share could hurt them.

**50%** surveyed have experienced "digital abuse from the mild to the extreme."

**30%** have been involved in some type of nude photo-sharing.

**28%** have thought about how sexting could get them in trouble at school.

**25%** have thought about how what they post could get them in trouble with the police.

**10%** have sent provocative photos.

**76%** say digital abuse is a serious problem for people their age.



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Teens should be careful of what they share electronically

## SEXTING:

The act of sending sexually explicit messages or photos electronically, primarily between cell phones.

-wikipedia



Parental involvement is one of the best ways to prevent problems



Cell phones with cameras make it easier for teens to send pictures via text message



Parents should be savvy and vigilant in checking teen's phone usage