

# How to have the sexting talk with your kid

BY MARNIE GOLDENBERG

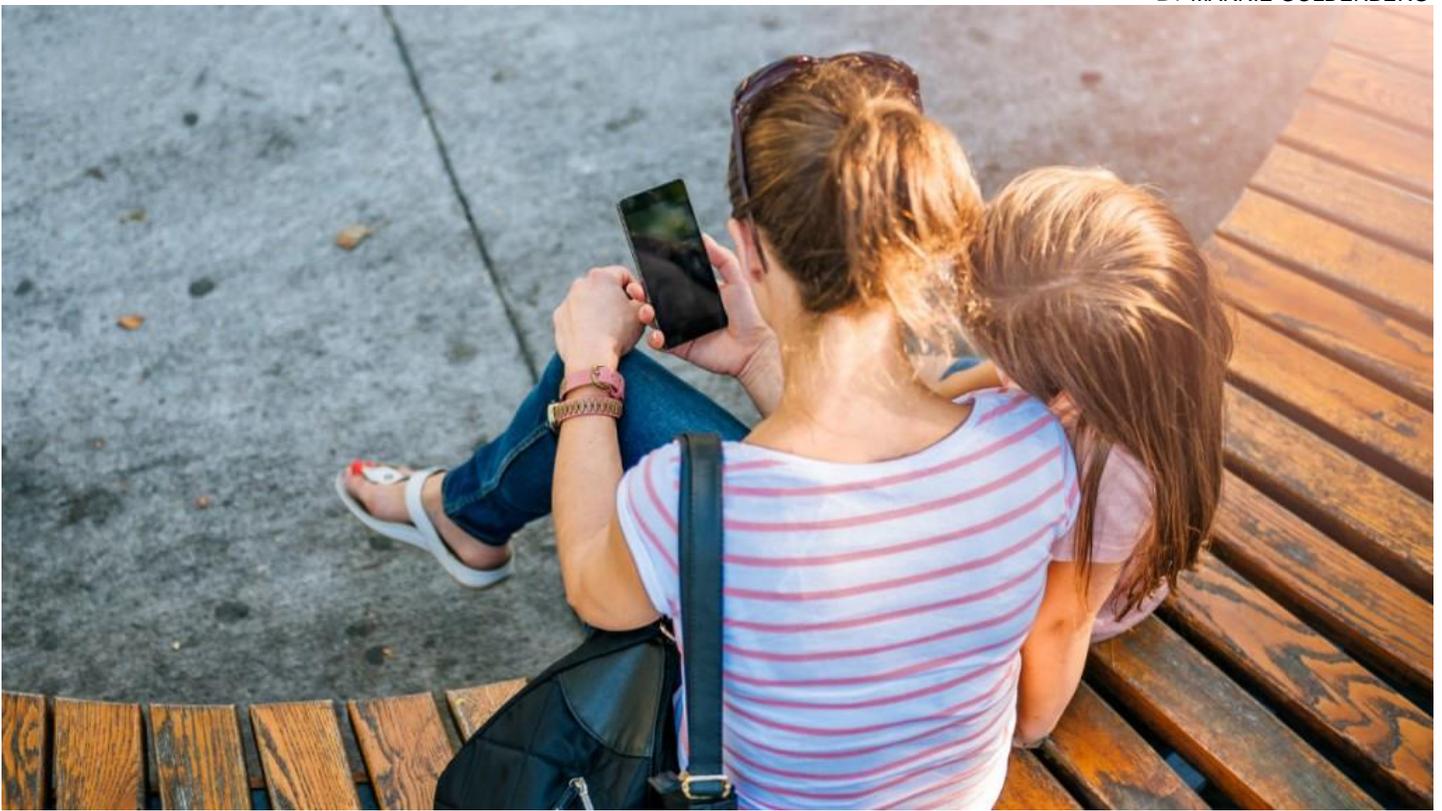


PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Sexting is one of those things you want to get ahead of before your kid starts doing it. Need some solid conversation starters? We've got you covered.

## Marine:

When I was 13, I talked on the phone *a lot*. There were long, breathless chats with my besties and awkward, **hormone-fueled chats with boys**. I'd have to dial the wall-mounted rotary phone in my kitchen, then have a polite conversation with my friend's mom or dad before the phone was passed to my pal so we could chat about school, the weekend and friend drama.

Most of today's teens are chatting about the same things with the same people, but their conversations aren't confined to the kitchen, and they don't actually have to talk. By grade 7, more than half of students **have their own device**, which they use for emoji-filled texting. During adolescence, they experience a lot of social and sexual development, and sometimes text messages cross over into sexting. Sexting is sending, receiving or forwarding sexually explicit messages or images; it can be flirtatious and welcome—and in that context, it can be a healthy thing to do. Using thumbs to type out a sexy phrase can be a form of safe sex—no one will become pregnant or contract an STI.

But this era of selfies, Snapchat and Insta stories has stretched **our concept of privacy**. For tweens and teens, digital exposure is almost a part of their DNA. While adolescents often have a different (and more laissez-faire) perspective on privacy, what they do care about is their peers. And the pressure they can feel from friends is real. Digital communication can make that pressure intense, given its immediacy and 24/7 access. While, ideally, sexting is consensual, mutual and pleasurable for everyone involved, when some teens engage in it, they may be feeling some pressure.

Some parents believe that their child would never engage in sexting, or they have forbidden it. Regardless, it's crucial to consider our kids' position on sexting *and* have conversations about it with them. Here's how to lay the groundwork.

### **Don't have one conversation—have many**

Sometimes **it's tough to string together the words** or broach the subject. Here are some conversation starters:

1. Think about sexting as a sex act—always **make sure you have enthusiastic consent** from your partner before you send sexual content or create or share any sexual images. Don't pressure anyone and be responsible when you know someone is trying to please you.
2. To be sure sexting is respectful and consensual, communicate about it beforehand. If broaching the subject feels uncomfortable or wrong, maybe sexting isn't right either.
3. If you're both interested in sexualized content, instead of sending sexy images, you could offer a description of your body since a sexy note is a great way to express yourself. This may feel equally exciting and less risky.
4. If you decide to send a sexy selfie, choose images without your face and consider angles or views that don't include obvious markers (birthmarks, for instance). Or go for sexy without nudity. After all, people can be very sexy without taking off their clothes

## 1. Try not to imply that their sexuality scares you

Your child's budding sexuality is healthy and **they will benefit from understanding what is unfolding**. Try to identify your concerns—social and peer pressure, lack of privacy, lack of consent—and communicate in ways that help build their confidence to explore the (increasingly digital) world when it comes to their emerging sexuality.

## 2. Discuss what happens to images after

Remind your kid that, once an image is in the world, you can't take it back. People can take screen grabs, hide images behind firewalls and hold onto them well beyond any intended period. Even if your child feels comfortable sending a sexy image to a serious partner, it's possible that the image could eventually reach unintended audiences: extended family, teachers, future employers, kids they babysit, etc. And if they receive an image, they should consider it a gift—one that is only for their eyes and is time limited. That means they can enjoy it but then must delete it. They can't store it, let others look at it on their device or forward it.

## 3. Don't believe the hype

There's so much panic around sexting but the reality is, few young people do it. In research by the McCreary Centre Society on British Columbia youth, nine percent of grade 7 to 12 students anonymously reported engaging in sexting. You might remind your teen that it isn't common—so that they don't do it because they think everyone else is. Rather than forbid sexting, make sure your teen knows that it's fine to wait to engage in this type of sexual communication.

## 4. Focus on what healthy relationships look like

Young people report a strong interest in learning about relationships. So, if you spend lots of time talking about what a healthy relationship looks like, then they will be able to contextualize the possibility of sharing sexy images as part of a healthy relationship. Help them understand that, during adolescence, friendships and relationships can shift quickly. That means that even when they have strong feelings for another person, building trust takes time.

## 5. Model responsible use of social media

Take a look at your habits and how you share information and images online. I'm guilty of **posting photos of my kids** being cute or outrageous without their permission—I may have inadvertently reinforced the idea that their images belong in the public sphere, with or without their consent.

## 6. Talk about the law

It is debatable whether the laws related to child pornography are appropriate for dealing with 16-year-olds who share sexy images with friends—and only in very rare cases does it end up in the courts or in the news. Nevertheless, distributing sexual images of underage people is illegal and can have significant repercussions. The law may not dissuade young people from sexting, but if they have a device, they are old enough to know the potential implications of doing so.