

Teach digital citizenship, responsible use to prevent sexting

Sending nude images to others via text messages is increasingly common among youths, research shows, and it can get students in loads of trouble. They could go to jail in many states, and might even have to carry the label of sex offender going forward.

Key points

- Sexting is increasingly common among American youths.
- Consequences can be severe, including criminal prosecution.
- Provide students a basic understanding of how to relate to each other in cyberspace. ■

When it comes to disciplinary responses to “sexting,” a school referral, suspension, or expulsion might be the least of a student’s worries. Still, districts should educate students on the dangers and be prepared to respond proportionately to the conduct violation.

Diana Graber, co-founder of *CyberWise.org*, a provider of educational tools and other resources for addressing digital media issues among youths, said, “Today, kids are creating a permanent reputation with their digital footprint. These things may never go away. It can stop them from getting jobs or scholarships. They just aren’t aware of the far-reaching consequences of it.”

Graber developed CyberCivics, a three-year curriculum, about six years ago in response to a private conflict among her daughter’s classmates that spilled out into a public forum via social media. The curriculum addresses the broad universe of digital citizenship, and sexting is a core focus area since the consequences are so severe.

“The legal implications [of sexting] are most concerning. Most child pornography laws were written up prior to the onset of sexting, and what could be considered normal adolescent behavior is being caught up in these laws that call for harsh criminal punishments, depending on the state,” she said.

Graber’s program gets progressively more sophisticated, just as the target students do.

In sixth grade, the program covers the basics of digital citizenship, including online reputation and digital footprint, cyberbullying, online identity and privacy, and appropriate communication strategies. Classes emphasize peer-to-peer learning activities that call on critical thinking, ethical discussion, and decision-making.

In seventh grade, the program focuses on information literacy. The purpose of these lessons is to help students learn how to effectively find information on the Web, as well as how to determine the validity and appropriateness of that information. The curriculum

drills deeper into topics such as online privacy, safety, and security; copyright, fair use, and public domain; and plagiarism.

In eighth grade, the program explores media literacy or the use of critical thinking skills to evaluate media messages. Topics include digital doctoring of photos, advertising messages, urban legends and online rumors, gender representations, and evaluating one’s personal “media diet.”

Examples and case studies address sexting — most prominently as it relates to online reputation; the legal consequences of sending, receiving, and possessing nude images of minors; and how online activities interplay with real-life safety and security, said Graber.

Training results

Administrators at Journey School, a public charter school in Aliso Viejo, Calif., helped develop and pilot CyberCivics and have seen positive results from the program. “We haven’t had a single sexting or cyberbullying incident since the program has been fully implemented,” said Shaheer Faltas, the school’s executive director.

According to Faltas, Journey School recognized the need for a proactive strategy to address inappropriate uses of digital media and technology after the “digital drama” mentioned above. While the incident didn’t directly involve sexting, it shone a light on a gap in the school’s policies and curriculum.

“We realized that we had not equipped our students with a basic understanding of how to relate to each other in cyberspace,” he said.

In addition to participating in the program, which takes one hour a week, the students and their parents must sign agreements relating to responsible media usage. The parents receive training on responsible use and coaching on ways to monitor their children’s online activities, said Faltas.

If a digital media situation arises, it is handled similarly to how a real-world offense of a similar magnitude would be, Faltas said. “First, we vet the facts. We see what has occurred, what harm was done, by whom and to whom, and we look at what the intentions were,” he said.

The potential disciplinary repercussions at Journey School range from mild to severe, just as a physical conflict or in-person bullying incident would be handled, he said.

While the “digital” component does complicate things, that shouldn’t lead to a knee-jerk response and overreaction, Faltas said. “The key is not to press the panic button,” he said, “but to respond proportionately.”

For more information, contact Faltas at administration@journeyschool.net, or visit www.cyberwise.org. ■