NCTSN

The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network

Staying Safe While Staying Connected
Tips for Caregivers

Text, tweet, facebook, IM, email, blog, snapchat, instagram, post . . .
between cell phones and computers youth can stay in touch with anyone, anytime, anywhere. But staying connected has its risks. Posting or sending sexual photos, images, messages, or videos—"sexting"—can lead to trouble that can last for years after the message or image is sent or posted.

Why Sexting Isn't Smart

The Internet is FOREVER.
Messages and posts are things youth can never take back. Many Internet sites keep records of everything posted, and may share that information with other people including the police and potential employers. And there is nothing youth can do to control copies that may have been downloaded or forwarded by other parties.

People forward things.
Nearly half of all teens who receive "sexts" forward them on to someone else, and 15% of teens say that they have had private chats made public. Many times messages and images are forwarded after a relationship ends as a means of "revenge porn." Messages or pictures intended for just one person could end up anywhere and be seen by anyone.

People can get hurt.
Sexting can ruin people's lives. When sexual messages or pictures reach other people—including family members, schoolmates, coworkers, or potential bosses—they can lead to broken friendships, getting kicked out of school, not getting hired for a job, losing a scholarship, or worse.

It's illegal.

All across the country, states are passing laws against posting or sending messages meant to hurt, insult, or spread nasty rumors about another person—including sexts. And posting or sending sexual pictures of anyone under the age of 17, even the youth's own pictures, may be considered child pornography in the eyes of the law. In Pennsylvania and Florida, for example, teens who "sexted" naked pictures of each other have been arrested for child pornography a felony. Even if a sext did not start with the youth, there may be legal consequences for forwarding someone else's sexts.

Tips for Keeping Youth Safe

Educate yourself. Any child can become the victim of an online predator. Become familiar with social networking sites and any apps that youth are using to communicate. You can ask them to explain or demonstrate.

Teach youth to protect their identity. Teach youth to choose their screen names carefully and not use one that can easily identify them. Their passwords are the only thing standing between youth and a lot of potential trouble. Teach youth to keep their passwords and identifying information private. This includes their name, address, phone number, school grade, family member information, etc. Predators can use this information to locate and groom a victim. If your child has a key to your house you would be concerned about whom they might share that access with and where they might leave it or keep it safe. Passwords are like keys to your information.

Strengthen privacy setting. Make sure that privacy settings on all social networking sites are set high and that they remain unchanged after updates.

Discuss the dangers of "checking-in." Some apps allow users to share their current location sites which tell predators exactly where to find them. Disable geotagging on mobile devices so that youth's locations are not disclosed.

Talk regularly. Conversations about cyber and personal safety have to take place more than once. As children age, peer and social activities—as well as social media technology and platforms—evolve, and the conversations about being safe need to also evolve to stay current to youth's needs. If caregivers are not monitoring activities or having conversations about safety as often as they change the batteries in their smoke detectors, they are probably not happening often enough.

Monitor youth's activity on computers and all mobile devices. Become familiar with parental monitoring options and monitor desktops, laptops, tablets, cell phones, and video game consoles that have online connectivity. A caregiver has a responsibility to protect youth. You are not spying.

Be supportive. If you know or suspect that a youth is being cyberbullied as a result of sexting, get the facts and contact law enforcement and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline at http://www.missingkids.com/cybertipline. Teach youth about the consequences for those that cyberbully.

Talk about sexting. Many youth are engaging in sexting. Sending or receiving explicit images of minors is considered child pornography and can result in legal consequences for both the youth and caregiver.

Don't forget about young children. Ninety-one percent of children play video games, and gaming among young children has increased the most. Many video game consoles now come equipped with the capability for children to chat with other players. Warn children that the other player may not actually be a child, but rather a predator posing as a child. Remind them not to share any personal information.

Communicate. Maintain open and respectful communication with youth and set and enforce rules regarding online safety. Assure youth that they can come to you for help.

References

The Alicia Project
http://www.aliciaproject.org/internet-safety-tips.html.
http://www.cnet.com/news/91-percent-of-kids-are-gamers-research-says/

For More Information

American Academy of Pediatrics
https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/news-features-and-safety-tips/pages/Talking-to-Kids-and-Teens-About-Social-Media-and-Sexting.aspx

Kids Health
http://kidshealth.org/parent/firstaid_safe/home/2011_sexting.html

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children NetSmartz Workshop
http://www.netsmartz.org/Sexting

Connect Safely
http://www.connectsafely.org/tips-for-dealing-with-teen-sexting/

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