

Schools crack down on teen 'sexting'

September 1 2009, By Megan Goodson

At 19, Melanie Young knows firsthand about the devastating consequences of sexting.

Too bad she didn't learn her lesson sooner.

"I thought it was fun and just a way of flirting," the McKinney, Texas, resident said of sending a nude photo of herself to a male friend when she was 16. "I sent it to someone that I thought I could trust."

Turns out she couldn't. The person she sent the picture to promptly forwarded it to others. She was stunned when she went to school soon after and a classmate showed her the embarrassing photo on his cellphone. Other students saw it, too.

One in every five teenagers say they have electronically sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude images of themselves, according to a 2008 survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

And while some youths may see "sexting" -- sending sexually suggestive or indecent text messages or pictures -- as harmless fun, some folks are beginning to take steps to stop them.

BANS INSTITUTED

In July, the Houston Independent School District became one of the first large urban districts in the nation to officially ban sexting.

"We haven't had much of a problem with sexting in our district," said Norm Uhl, Houston ISD media relations manager. "But it has been in the news so much and happened in surrounding areas that we wanted a policy on the books just in case it happens here."

The Mesquite, Texas school district also added a section in its Student Code of Conduct this summer: "Sending, sharing, viewing or possessing pictures, text messages, e-mails or other material of a sexual nature in electronic or any other form on a cellphone or other electronic device is prohibited."

"We haven't seen a huge rash of sexting," said Ian Halperin, Mesquite schools public information director. "But we know it is out there. This is just one more tool we can use to prevent it."

"We hope it works as a deterrent," added Halperin. "Most students know that (sexting) is wrong, but now they know they will get in trouble if they are caught."

Some other school districts haven't gone as far as Houston and Mesquite in banning sexting outright. Many of them use current student code prohibitions against improper text messaging or standards that outlaw the use of cellphones at all during the school day.

In Dallas, for example, the Student Code of Conduct prohibits the use of any electronic device and

"possessing/distributing/exhibiting/transmitting obscene materials."

Although there is no specific ban on sexting, "We feel that our Student Code of Conduct already addresses these kinds of situations," said Jon Dahlander, Dallas schools spokesman.

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DOING MORE

But Uhl said he believes that a cellphone ban alone will not solve the sexting problem.

"Things that happen off campus involve our students," said Uhl. "They have to come to school and deal with each other. That is why we want this policy in place at school."

Young agrees with Uhl.

Sexting "is happening more often now," she said. "If it is cutting into learning, then, yeah, there should be a ban."

Melody Brooke, a Dallas family therapist, said she believes it's better for schools to intervene and punish the students than for the students to face criminal charges, as has happened in other states.

"Kids don't think that this is a crime that could affect the rest of their life, and it shouldn't affect the rest of their life," she said. "It is a lapse in judgment; it happens to kids."

"The most important thing is to educate girls that their value is not in their bodies and boys to know their boundaries," she said, adding that parents should be heavily involved, too, and "act less like a cop and more like an educator."

Young, who called her sexting experience "humiliating," had a final warning for any students tempted to send out inappropriate pictures of themselves.

"It won't end up how you expect it to," she said. "Everyone has a big mouth and no one can keep a secret. It's high [school](#)."

BY THE NUMBERS

48: Percentage of teens who say they have received sexually suggestive texts, e-mails or instant messages

40: Percentage of teenage boys who say they've sent such messages

37: Percentage of teenage girls who say they've sent such messages

22: Percentage of teenage girls who say they have sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves

18: Percentage of teenage boys who say they have sent or posted such pictures or videos of themselves

11: Percentage of young teen girls (between 13 and 16) who have sent or posted such pictures or videos of themselves

SOURCES: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and [Unplanned Pregnancy](#); CosmoGirl.com

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