

# Girls face 'sexting' threat from peers

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A report commissioned by the NSPCC, conducted in collaboration with King's College London, reveals the level that 'sexting' has reached among teenagers, with schoolgirls facing increasing pressure to provide sexually explicit pictures of themselves, a threat that appears to come from friends and peers rather than strangers.

Professor Rosalind Gill, from the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King's, collaborated on the qualitative study based on a focus group and in-depth interviews with 35 [young people](#). The findings reveal that while youths are increasingly savvy at protecting themselves from so called 'stranger danger', they are facing a new problem of 'peer to peer' approaches, with boys constantly demanding sexual images.

While some [girls](#) are developing sophisticated techniques to deal with this pressure, others are left struggling to cope and with feelings of

uncertainty in what to do.

Professor Gill said: ‘We were deeply upset by the levels of sexual abuse, physical harassment and even violence some of the girls experienced on a regular basis.

‘Apart from the immediate acute distress this kind of behaviour can cause we also have to consider the affect it might have in later life. The girls are in an environment dominated by sexual double standards with little opportunity to explore their own sexual desires and this could have serious implications for their self-esteem as young women.’

Professor Gill collaborated on the research with the Institute of Education and the London School of Economics. They sought the views of 13-15-year-olds at two London schools. Previous research has shown that more than a third of under-18s have received an offensive or distressing sexual image by text or e-mail.

Jon Brown, Head of the Sexual Abuse Programme at the NSPCC, said: ‘What’s most striking about this research is that many young people seem to accept all this as just part of life. But it can be another layer of sexual abuse and, although most children will not be aware, it is illegal.

‘Girls should never be forced to carry out sex acts and boys must understand it’s not acceptable to put them under such duress that they have little choice but to agree. It’s very concerning that whilst young people seem to have a solid grasp of ‘stranger danger’ they are often struggling to cope with problems from their own peer group.

Professor Gill says that we need to re-evaluate where the threat comes from: ‘Our research marks a shift in studies of young people and the internet. Up until now, e-safety campaigns have focussed on preparing young people to face dangers posed by strangers online. Our report

suggest that the focus needs to shift to include the much more complicated issue of peer-to-peer communication, and the difficulties and isolation young people experience in negotiating this.’

The report cautions against a censorious or blaming approach and urges greater openness among parents, teachers and other adults in discussing sexual matters including sexual bullying and cyber bullying.

The study reveals girls can be pestered relentlessly until they finally agree to perform sexual acts which can be recorded on mobile phones. These can then be broadcast to groups of young people leaving the devastated victim to face ridicule and abuse. Researchers found there were ‘significant numbers’ of such files in circulation with one boy alone claiming to have 30.

In some cases the girls even write a name in black marker pen on a part of their body to show it’s the ‘property’ of a certain boy.

Researchers found the young victims are often left to suffer alone in a culture of silence for fear of being labelled ‘snitches’ or ‘snakes’ if they tell anyone. But despite the constant barrage of messages from boys asking for ‘beats’ – intercourse - or ‘heads’ - oral sex - the teenagers say they cannot live without their mobile phones, using them from the moment they wake until they go to sleep.

Lead researcher Jessica Ringrose from the Institute of Education, said: ‘Girls are being pressured by text and on Blackberry messenger to send ‘special photos’ and perform sexual services for boys from an early age. In some cases they are as young as 11. Even while we were interviewing them they were being bombarded with these messages.

‘Some of them found ingenious ways to fend off the demands but still the pressures are immense and the younger girls in particular wanted

help.

‘Although this is happening through new mobile-internet technologies, teens still face the same old situation that boys who have sex are seen as ‘players’ and earn the respect of their peers, while girls who do the same are labelled ‘skets’ or ‘sluts’.

‘Some of the boys have a disturbing approach to this. They have been encouraged by a wider culture to see girls’ bodies as property which they can own. But even if boys don’t have this view it’s difficult for them to directly challenge this for fear of being called ‘gay.’

‘At its worst sexting can be an extreme form of cyber-bullying which has to be tackled.’

The report, ‘A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and [Sexting](#)’, was launched at a House of Commons event chaired by MP Claire Perry.

**More information:** ‘A Qualitative Study of Children and Young People,’ Jessica Ringrose, et al. [www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resour...-report\\_wdf89269.pdf](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/resour...-report_wdf89269.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

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