

# Teenage sexting: We're letting young people down by not talking about it

December 12 2018, by Elizabeth Agnew

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Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Sexting among young people has become a hotly debated topic over the past few years. Over the same period, our understanding of [sexting](#) has evolved. What was originally understood as sending naked or semi-naked

images has now expanded to also include videos and text messages of a sexual nature.

Statistics are extremely varied but generally indicate that sexting is pretty widespread among young people. Reports estimate that between [15% and 40%](#) of them participate in this sexual behaviour.

While the prevalence of sexting among young people seems to be growing, very little progress has been made on implementing efficient and effective ways to monitor it outside the legal system. In fact, [much research](#) to date only focuses on the [legal ramifications](#) that could befall a [young person](#) who sexts.

This is important, of course, but more comprehensive [education](#) programmes which address and challenge some of the more nuanced aspects of sexting are needed, including issues of consent and coercion. Schools need strong guidelines which consider the practicalities and complexities of sexting among young people. Current education programmes fail young people and deny them the opportunity to make informed choices.

## **Sex education**

This is because education programmes often focus on the biological and physical aspects of sex and sexuality and fail to explore social aspects. The narrow curriculum reinforces gender stereotypes that influence young people's perceptions of sex, sexuality and consent (a factor which is now [central to sexting cases](#)). [Lucy Emmerson](#), the director of the Sex Education Forum, a charity campaigning for quality relationships and [sex education](#) in England, notes that what is "most lacking" within the secondary curriculum is "a positive view of human sexuality".



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Education needs to be modernised, acknowledging the different contexts and changing social attitudes among young people. The persistent and prevailing misguided fear that children can learn [too much too soon](#) must be challenged – something that is particularly relevant when it comes to speaking about sexting in schools.

Some progress has been made. The UK government, for example, introduced a mandatory [health education](#) programme within the English school curriculum. Guidance on relationships education in [primary schools](#) has been reformed and updated as has relationship and sex education in secondary schools. This new curriculum will be compulsory from [September 2020](#).

The new guidance suggests pupils will learn about safe online

relationships. This is important when we consider the cultural shift in how young people not only communicate but also participate in [harmful behaviours](#). This includes, for example, online bullying and [peer-on-peer grooming](#). While [sexting](#) has been noted as an issue of concern, it's not clear how much information children will receive. For example, issues of consent and peer pressure must be discussed within the context of sexting between young people, and this should be explicit within the guidance.

## Let's talk about sexting

[Reports](#) have found that young people start sexting at younger ages than they used to. Therefore, children need to be able to identify potentially harmful sexual behaviours, including sexting, from a young age.

These conversations can be had with sensitivity and the content can be tailored to accommodate specific age ranges (see for example the NSPCC's [Talk Pants](#) campaign for young children). The importance of informing children and young people about sexting behaviours has also been noted in [America](#) and [Australia](#).

Consent is also a key issue. Children need to know about the varying age limits attached to different sexual activities. For example, in the UK, the age of sexual consent is 16, whereas the age you can legally send a naked image is 18. These age limits are central to sexting and can cause great uncertainty and confusion among young people. How can I, at 16 years, legally have sex with my partner, but I cannot legally take a naked picture of myself? Although [it's unlikely](#) that a young person would receive a conviction for taking such a picture without evidence of, for example, coercion, the potential to receive a criminal record still exists.

Also, reports suggest that a significant proportion of sexting among young people happens within relationships or as a [flirting tool](#). Greater



dialogue and education regarding what consent means and what it looks like within young relationships is needed. Providing clarity on such issues will therefore help differentiate between ["explorative" and "exploitative"](#) sexting behaviours between young people. This distinction is crucial.

Sexting among young people is complex: there are a wide range of social and legal issues connected to sexting. Its prevalence among young people has contributed to blurred boundaries regarding consent, coercion and "healthy" sexual behaviour. But criminalising young people is not the answer. Nor is the implementation of narrow and limited education programmes which will only reinforce and heighten myths and stereotypes around sexual behaviours.

Young people need to be educated on and engage with a wide range of issues relating to sex and sexuality and how to safely navigate the internet and form healthy relationships both on and offline. This includes talking about issues such as sexting with young people from a young age.

While education cannot solve all concerns raised, it will greatly assist in helping [young people](#) receive clarity regarding [sexting](#) and the key concepts it involves, including that of consent.

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