

Youth sexting: Fundamental shift in education approach needed to change culture

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Research published in the *International Journal on Bullying Prevention* finds sex and relationship education around youth sexting needs updating.

Rather than focusing purely on risk avoidance and abstinence, the research by Dr. Emily Setty at the University of Surrey suggests sex and

relationships [education](#) (SRE) should extend to raise awareness amongst young people of their responsibility to their peers as bystanders and how they might unwittingly promote harmful [sexting](#) practices.

Dr. Setty argues that SRE should pay attention to the broader youth cultural context surrounding sexting. She acknowledges that in their attitudes towards peers involved with sexting, young people form judgments based on age-old gender stereotypes and assumptions.

The research found that views based on these assumptions facilitate and reinforce harmful practices. The attribution of "lad points" to young men who share sexted pictures encourages unauthorized distribution of images, while [young women](#) who share images with partners who then betray their trust are shamed as "sluts." However, sexist assumptions that are taken for granted can mean young men are denied support when they themselves are negatively impacted by sexting.

Current SRE around sexting encourages young people to abstain from producing and sharing personal sexual images because of the risks involved. Dr. Setty's research recommends supplementing this with an approach in which sexting education could become a platform for critical learning about relationships, sex, rights, responsibilities, ethics and justice. It suggests young people could be asked what they think about sexual and bodily expression in a broad sense, then guided to explore how risk and harm emerge from a culture of stereotypes and inequalities.

Dr. Setty said: "A different approach to teaching and a particular focus on bystander intervention could help reduce the bullying associated with youth sexting. Better sex and relationships education could contribute to it becoming socially unacceptable to impinge on peers' rights—not just their rights to privacy but also to self-expression and safety. A 'thou shalt not sext' approach in isolation lets the pervading culture amongst young

people off the hook. Arresting and reversing the damage done to young people through sexting requires education that sets out to change the culture, not just wish the problem away."

Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Surrey, Dr. Setty conducted interviews with 41 young people aged 14 to 18 to explore the social meanings and cultural norms that shape harmful sexting practices, including breaches of privacy and consent, victim blaming and bullying within [young people](#)'s peer contexts.

More information: Emily Setty. A Rights-Based Approach to Youth Sexting: Challenging Risk, Shame, and the Denial of Rights to Bodily and Sexual Expression Within Youth Digital Sexual Culture, *International Journal of Bullying Prevention* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s42380-019-00050-6](#)

Provided by University of Surrey

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