

Study: More education needed on impact of sexting

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Nearly 40 percent of young people across a sample of just over 6,000 participants spanning 11 countries have engaged in sexting, according to new research out of Sapienza University of Rome and the University of

Huddersfield.

Sexting is the sharing of sexual content, such as message, images or videos, via [digital technology](#) and while the study states that [sexting](#) can be seen as an evolving way for people to explore sexuality, its negative aspects require greater understanding.

The subject was in the news recently when sexually explicit messages and photos sent by Australian cricketer Tim Paine to a work colleague led to him resigning the captaincy of his country's Test team.

But the study's authors say that parents have an important role and that rather than trying to prevent their [children](#) from sexting, they should try to have open discussions about it and its possible consequences.

"Our findings from a sample of 6,093 suggest the importance of [prevention programs](#) that should be implemented in secondary and high schools," says Dr. Mara Morelli from the Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology and Health Studies at Sapienza University. "These programs should help adolescents to understand that they cannot control what happens with images they share with others, even if they think they can. Prevention programs should improve digital literacy both of adolescents and adults.

Recognizing the risks

"Parents should understand that they have to use a balance between support and monitoring with their children. Preventing children from using the smartphone or other devices does not really protect them from engaging in risky online behavior. Young people have to be educated on the use of social networks, to recognize risks and consequences of their actions, and to take other people's perspectives into account to be more aware of what other people think and feel in reactions to what they do."

Some motivations for sexting are harmless, such as flirting or seeking praise to confirm what is known as 'body adequacy.' But a third reason, sharing content without consent with the intention to harm or cause distress, is highly prevalent and was a motivation for the research.

'A new way of expressing sexuality'

"Sexting is becoming 'normal," but [young people](#) are maybe not aware that it is a risky behavior," Dr. Morelli continues. "It is a new expression of sexuality and the construction of identity, but there is also a more negative aspect of sexting behaviors that happens when young people use sexting with harmful intentions towards someone else or in exchange for some kind of benefit, such as money.

"This kind of sexting is usually related to other aggressive and violent behaviors, such as bullying, cyberbullying, and dating violence. Young people sometimes share sexts for emotion regulation to compensate for negative emotions they are feeling, or when they are under influence of substances or chatting with strangers they have met online."

The study was conducted across 11 countries, including key contributions from academics at the University of Huddersfield. This relationship was established through Dr. John Synnott and Professor Maria Ioannou, who visited Rome to discuss collaboration between the two institutions. Both groups are now expanding on this collaboration and developing new research projects. One such project lead by Dr. Calli Tzani focuses on dating violence related to online dating platforms. Dr. Tzani has recently published an article about 'sextortion' on The Conversation.

On the importance of collaboration Dr. Synnott said, "Working with our colleagues in Sapienza has been a real success, the importance of cross-cultural collaboration aids not just the science but the quality of the

work.

Discussion not prevention is the way forward

The results of the report point to a need for parents to consider discussing the issues around sexting with their children, rather than a more natural reaction of shock and trying to stop their children's activities.

"One of our studies shows how a high level of parent-child communication in general, not specifically on sexting, is an important protective factor for adolescents' sexting behaviors," Dr. Morelli adds. "Adolescents who talk with their parents about their thoughts and emotions are more able to understand and express their emotions.

"They are also more able to develop more adaptive problem solving and coping skills that lead them to be more capable of understanding and recognizing the consequences of their actions, and being then less impulsive. Unfortunately, parents usually think that talking about sexting with their children may lead them to be more involved in sexting.

"Not talking about sexuality and sexting makes parents think they are protecting their children, but the opposite is true. By talking with their children, they have the opportunity to discuss the positive and negative aspects of sexting, making their children more aware of their behaviors and emotions."

More information: Mara Morelli et al, The Relationship between Dark Triad Personality Traits and Sexting Behaviors among Adolescents and Young Adults across 11 Countries, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18052526](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052526)

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