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FINAL EDITION

Teen Sexting Exploding

EDUCATION: TEENS NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND THAT LOVE ISN'T FOREVER BUT NAKED PICTURES ARE AS THIS PHENOMENON SHOWS NO SIGN OF LETTING UP

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With police investigations launched at several high schools in recent months, London-area school boards are grappling with a vexing problem -- how to curb the proliferation of sexually explicit texts and photos sent between teens.

Sexting has been making headlines across the U.S., where several teenagers face child pornography charges for distributing or possessing sexual pictures of minors.

Reports of one suicide have been linked to the distribution of a compromising photograph originally sent by a teen to her boyfriend.

Now, educators and police warn the dangerous trend is exploding in the London area.

"It's a hot topic in schools right now," said Const. Carl Noel, one of five school resource officers working in 20 city high schools.

"Not one of us had an incident last year, and this year (since September) we've dealt with about 10 incidents."

No teens have been charged, Noel said.

OPP officers working in county schools have been investigating the same types of cases "on a very regular basis," said Perth OPP Const. Kees Wijnands.

"It's becoming common with students. We're seeing this in the schools and we get parents contacting us. Students don't realize once something goes out there (on the Internet), it's out there. It's tragic, some of the stuff we are seeing.

"I go into the schools and teachers say, 'Please warn these kids -- give them the whole criminal aspect of it, the safety aspect.' "

Police get involved in sexting cases because of the potential for serious criminal charges. What teenagers often don't realize, or don't think about when sending sexually explicit photographs to a peer or boyfriend or girlfriend, is that if they're under the age of 18, those photographs are considered child pornography, Noel said.

"If you are underage and send your boyfriend a picture of you that shows some nudity, by definition you've created (child pornography), and you've distributed it -- and now he has it, so he's in possession of it.

"So that's three offences, right there," he said.

And if the statistics are right, untold numbers of teens are guilty of those three offences.

A recent study of U.S. teens found 20% had sent naked photographs of themselves online, and 39% had sent sexually explicit messages.

"It's so easy now. It takes three seconds to take a photo and send it to somebody," said Katie Cole, who teaches English and media studies at Medway high school. "It's really simple and the technology is there.

"I've had girls come to me, talking personally about it, saying they've sent a picture and now other people have it in their possession."

"If you are giving your kid any kind of smartphone, know they are not phones, they are minicomputers," Cole said.

And the comfort with which students reveal minute details of their lives is translating to the comfort of sending private and explicit messages to loved ones, said University of Western Ontario psychologist Peter Jaffe.

"Kids take pictures with cell-phones all the time, but what they're not aware of is how easily they can lose control of the information," he said.

"When you're 15 or 16 you think you'll be in love with someone forever."

Noel said two cases he investigated recently involved girls sending photographs to boyfriends who then sent them on.

"The high school boyfriend-girlfriend relationship doesn't last forever and then there can be jealousy or whatever."

As police deal with the individual cases, area school boards are wrestling with how to educate students on safe use of technology, which is moving faster than many of the teachers can keep up with.

"That is part of the key," said Barb Sonier, superintendent with the Thames Valley District school board. "We have to educate our educators."

Vice-principals from the Thames Valley and London District Catholic school boards met with London police this month to learn more about how to educate students on sexting issues.

The Catholic board sent a letter to schools this year, outlining police concerns about sexting on the rise, superintendent John Mombourquette said.

"One of the things we urged in the letter is for parents to have the conversation with their sons and daughters about technology, " he said.

"Kids are pretty naive about this stuff and a lot believe it's kind of like magic and it goes away.

"We are trying to actively converse with students to say this can be dangerous stuff."

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WHAT LONDON STUDENTS SAY

We asked several London students what they thought about sexting, how the trend is playing out in their world, and where they would draw the line when it comes to explicit text messages. Here's what they had to say:

YOU MIGHT THINK YOU ARE MADLY IN LOVE WITH SOMEBODY, BUT IT COULD TOTALLY BLOW UP. IT TAKES TWO SECONDS TO SEND SOMETHING, BUT YOU COULD END UP WITH A REPUTATION THAT YOU NEVER WANTED AND THAT IS NOT WHO YOU ARE AT ALL.

Nicole Ward, 16

IT'S NOT A PROBLEM DEPENDING (ON) WHO YOU ARE SENDING THE TEXT TO. IF YOU TRUST WHO YOU ARE TALKING TO, IT'S OK TO SEND THOSE KIND OF MESSAGES -- BUT NOT PICTURES. DEFINITELY NOT.

Cassie Durocher, 15

I'D SAY NAKED PICTURES ARE BAD . . . A LOT OF PEOPLE GET THEM AND SEND THEM TO OTHER PEOPLE . . . MY FRIEND HAD ONE, AND I WAS LIKE, 'DUDE, DON'T DO IT. NO. 1, IT'S STUPID. NO. 2, YOU CAN GO TO JAIL. AND NO. 3, IT'S STUPID.'

Darrian Dodge, 16

IT'S GROSS AND PERVERTED AND STUPID IN GENERAL. IF YOU WANT TO SAY SOMETHING LIKE THAT, SAY IT TO THEIR FACE.

Micah Van Deel Piepers, 15

I THINK IT'S DISGUSTING. IF YOU ARE GOING TO DO SOMETHING, DO IT IN PERSON. I'D BE AFRAID OF PICTURES LEAKING OUT, BECAUSE I GUESS IT'S CAUSING PROBLEMS IN SOME SCHOOLS WHERE A PERSON WHO RECEIVES THE STUFF SENDS IT OUT.

Justine Morwood, 16

IF PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY IN A RELATIONSHIP, IT'S NOT TOO BAD.

Nick Buchanan, 15

(A FRIEND'S) MOM SMASHED HIS CELL . . . BECAUSE SHE FOUND SOME MESSAGES ON IT. IT'S GROSS AND IT COULD BE USED FOR BLACKMAIL.

Alanna Tangjerd, 14