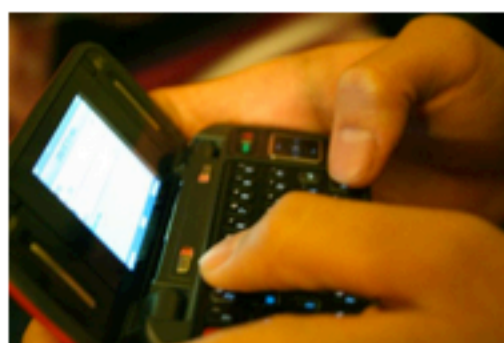


Teens & Sexting: An Interview with Psychologist Dr. Stephanie Mihalas



Jaleh, Yahoo! Contributor Network
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The prevalence of teens and sexting is on the rise. What is sexting you ask? According to Wikipedia, "Sexting is the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photographs, primarily between mobile phones." For many parents and communities sexting among teens has become an issue. To help understand some causes of teen sexting, consequences of teen sexting and what a teen can do if someone initiates sexting, I have interviewed psychologist Dr. Stephanie Mihalas.

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

"I completed my advanced training at the Kennedy Krieger Institute at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. I am currently an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University and is the founder of The Center for Well-Being: Psychological Services for Children, Youth, and Families in Los Angeles, CA. I treat a wide variety of children and adolescents ranging as young as 2 through the later adolescent years. I present at national and state conferences and I am published in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters. I also frequently engage in print and radio media ventures."

What are some causes of teen sexting?

"Some of the reasons that teens engage in sexting initially may include flirtation with his/her significant other or as a means of being "cute." Importantly, "sexting" is not limited to the female gender as the media often portrays. Males frequently send pictures of their genitalia or pictures of themselves engaging in sexual acts. After the first picture or two are sent, sexting then often times becomes an issue of power or bullying; such that the person on the receiving end wants to see more pictures. The person who takes the pictures may have had enough; however, becomes concerned that the other partner may not "love them anymore" or that they may "break up" with them if they do not continue. Herein, lays the vicious cycle of sexting; whereby one partner is actually uncomfortable and becomes a victim. Yet, all too frequently, the victim becomes punished either when a break-up occurs and pictures of him/her are distributed around the school. Or at a legal level is punished with long-term repercussions that are discussed below based on federal and state guidelines."

What are some consequences of sexting?

"Unfortunately, state and federal laws regarding child pornography have not caught up with the prevalence of teenage sexting and the rationale behind it! The reality is, that one in five texts sent by teens is a "sext" and the majority of people sexting are not intended to engage in child pornography. However, currently, if the authorities catch the message or a parent decides to prosecute, teens will end up in court and be labeled a "sex offender" for life. The second major ramification is that the more juveniles persecuted under "sexual offense" are added to the registry of sex offenders an "overload" to the registry database occurs which makes it more difficult for authorities to track the real sex offenders in each state. Other consequences to the individual that may have sent the "sext" include isolation, depression, anxiety, decline in grades, and even suicide. The embarrassment of having your picture sent around school as an attack or retaliation has deleterious consequences on psychological functioning and social-emotional well-being."

What can a teen do if someone initiates sexting?

"The first thing a teen can do is step back and think, "Okay, what are the pros and cons here if I decide to engage back in this behavior?" Make a list. First, think honestly about what the short and long-term benefits for you are and then, second, consider what could be the short and long-term consequences for you. By writing down your thoughts on paper and actually seeing what could happen, the reality of "sexting" actually sinks in. At first, to many teens, "sexting" does not seem like a big deal because the adolescent brain is not fully formed to engage in in-depth problem-solving. However, if they are guided through this process and know what to do before hand (e.g., have the skill in their back pocket), then they are more likely to pull it out at times they need it! The second thing a teen can do is talk to another teen that has experienced "sexting" and subsequently has not had good outcomes. By doing this the teen can provide support as to not engage in the act; whereas, talking to an adult may not always be comfortable to the teen and the advice sometimes is not heard as well as it is from a peer. Another great website that gives sound advice such as teen-like "come-backs" and excellent support is "thatsnotcool.com.""

What advice would you like to leave for a teen that is considering sexting?

"Think about your sense of self and who you are. Is your body your core sense of self and what represents you the most? Is your body what you most value? Is the relationship that you are engaging in based on bullying, love or friendship? When you engage in "sexting" do you feel better or worse about yourself and why? I think asking yourself these questions as a teen will open up a number of issues for you and then you can make better decisions overall about the relationship or friendship that you are in and why you are engaging or considering "sexting." Think about who will ultimately end up seeing the pictures, as for the most part, during your teenage years, your circles of [relationships](#) are constantly changing and fluctuating. Ask yourself if you would feel confident having other people viewing the pictures. If your answer is "no," don't "sext." You will save yourself a lot of heartache and emotional distress. Instead, you will own your honor and gain self-worth."

Thank you Dr. Stephanie for doing the interview on teens and sexting. For more information on Dr. Stephanie or her work you can check out her website on www.askdrstephanie.com.

Resources: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexting>

Recommended Readings:

- [Teen Dating Tips](#)
- [How to Avoid Teen Rape](#)
- [Teens & Peer Pressure: How Parents Can Help](#)

Published by [Jaleh](#)
JALEH holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a Masters of Science in Marriage and Family Counseling. She is the book author of *Making Marriage a Success* and *Life's Little How to Book* which can be... [View profile](#)



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