



QUICK FACTS FOR PARENTS

Learning about **Online Safety, Including Risks of Sexting**

Sexting: Sending or receiving sexually suggestive or explicit text, picture, or video messages through electronic devices.



Today's children and youth are more connected than ever. Many use a wide variety of apps and technologies to share pictures and information. They are gaming, "chatting," using cell phones and smartphones, texting and using social media to stay connected with their peers and with current trends. Our digital and interconnected world has endless positive possibilities. At the same time, students at all grade levels need to be aware of potential online risks.

The health and physical education curriculum helps children and youth develop skills for online safety by learning about things such as:

- Safe and respectful use of technology
- Social, emotional and legal implications of online behaviours such as sexting
- Potential risks of sexting on relationships and future employment.

SEXTING AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH

A small minority of elementary-aged students in Canada report having sent a sext to someone. As students get older, they are more likely to sext (*Young Canadian in a Wired World: Phase III study*). Students may sext to show their interest in and/or attract romantic or sexual partners. Many students are unaware of the potential effects and consequences of sexting.

RISKS OF SEXTING

Online, people can easily hide who they are, their age, sex and intentions. Peers, romantic partners or even strangers can pressure or coerce a young person to participate in sexting. Once a person sends a sext, they lose control of it. It is nearly impossible to have it pulled back. Anyone who forwards sexts containing images of a minor may face not only social and emotional consequences, but also legal ones.

WHAT DO STUDENTS LEARN AT SCHOOL ABOUT ONLINE SAFETY AND THE RISKS OF SEXTING?

Learning about their own physical and emotional safety and the safety of others is a fundamental part of what students are learning in health and physical education. Students learn to recognize, assess and manage potentially dangerous situations. As students are learning skills for healthy relationships – understanding themselves, learning to communicate and work with others – they are developing skills they can apply in both face-to-face and online situations.

About 11 per cent of grade 10 students with cellphones and 14 per cent of grade 11 students with cell phones say they have sent a sext.

(Young Canadian in a Wired World: Phase III study. The Trends and Recommendations, 2015)

A digital image can stay online forever, available for anyone in the world to look at, print or forward to other people.

Learning about using technology responsibly and safely is part of students' learning in all subjects and courses.

Blocking Internet content is typically ineffective for older children and youth. Instead, focus on helping your children to develop skills for thinking critically about what they see online.

What do younger students learn?

Students in primary grades (Grades 1, 2 and 3) learn initial online researching skills, guidelines, precautions and strategies for safe Internet use. They learn how to get help for themselves or others, if harassment or abuse happens either face-to-face or online.

Teachers lay the groundwork for respectful online activities as students are learning and practising skills for respectful in-person interactions.

Students learn about:

- The difference between real and fictional violence (in the media, or with online games)
- Respectful communications with other students in the gym, the classroom and in the schoolyard
- When they need to ask for help, and when they can try to solve a problem on their own.

What do older students learn?

Students in Grade 4 and up learn more about using technology to support learning, collaboration and improved communication, and learn about the dangers of online bullying. Grade 4, 5 and 6 students learn about the risks of posting or sharing sexual images or information.

In Grade 7 and above, students learn more specifically about the risks of “sexting” and protecting their privacy online. They continue to learn about avoiding causing harm to themselves or others.

Students learn about:

- The benefits and risks of using technology
- Using online games and apps to practise solving problems and responding to issues that may arise online
- The possible legal, social and emotional implications of sexting.

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT STAYING SAFE ONLINE

The Internet can be a positive tool for children and youth. They can find information, talk with friends, collaborate with others and get support from peers.

Parents and schools can work together to keep kids safe online. Consider these ideas:

- Reinforce that only they can control their own image and reputation with safe online habits and social media. Help them to use privacy settings and think critically about what they do online.
- Encourage respect for others’ privacy and level of comfort.
- Discuss empowerment and respect for self and others rather than using scare tactics.
- Encourage your children to ask questions about anything they have seen online that has made them feel uncomfortable.
- Talk with your children about:
 - How media and Internet messages influence gender stereotypes and body image
 - Confidentiality, privacy, respect, and the potential effects of making on-the-spot decisions
 - The do’s and don’ts of sharing their own and other people’s personal information
 - The potential inaccuracy of information they read, watch or receive online.

MORE INFORMATION

- » Cyber Safety www.getcybersafe.gc.ca
- » Canadian Paediatric Society www.cps.ca/documents/position/sexting
- » Sexting: Considerations for Canadian Youth www.sexualityandu.ca/uploads/files/CTRsextingEnglishApril2011.pdf

MediaSmart – Internet Safety Tips by Age:

- » Ages 2–4 www.mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/internet-safety-tips-age-2-4
- » Ages 5–7 www.mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/internet-safety-tips-age-5-7
- » Ages 8–10 www.mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/internet-safety-tips-age-8-10
- » Ages 11–13 www.mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/internet-safety-tips-age-11-13
- » Ages 14–17 www.mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/internet-safety-tips-age-14-17