Adolescent Sexting

by

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Abstract

Adolescent sexting is a contemporary issue at the intersection of adolescent development, mental health, and digital behaviour, presenting unique challenges for parents, educators, and therapists. This capstone paper reviews existing literature to provide a comprehensive overview of adolescent sexting, with a focus on prevalence, demographic influences, and its implications on mental health. By examining factors such as gender dynamics, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, this review highlights the critical need for inclusive, tailored interventions that address the unique experiences of adolescents. This paper also explores the legal implications of adolescent sexting, noting that it is illegal for minors under 18 to share sexual content in Canada, even if consensual. As a result, parents face the dual challenge of addressing legal concerns while offering emotional support and guidance to their adolescents. Through a critical synthesis of research, this capstone identifies gaps in the literature and presents practical solutions for therapists and educators. Specifically, narrative therapy and psychoeducation are suggested as effective tools for helping adolescents process their experiences with sexting. Moreover, educators are encouraged to adopt comprehensive sex education programs that integrate discussions on consent, healthy relationships, and digital citizenship. The findings of this literature review are critical for designing a workshop for parents aimed at supporting adolescents in the digital age. By promoting open communication and understanding the complex dynamics at play, this paper provides actionable strategies for parents, educators, and therapists in navigating the challenges posed by adolescent sexting.

Keywords: sexting, adolescent, parent-teen communication

Dedication

Thank you, Ben, our boys, and Amanda. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine. This capstone was born from my experience as a parent—a role that is by far the hardest and most rewarding of my life. In writing this, I aimed to support other parents like me, navigating the complexities of raising children in a rapidly evolving, technologically advanced world.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Statement of the Problem 2

Purpose of the Capstone 5

Research Question 5

Significance of the Study 6

Theoretical Orientation 7

Positionality Statement 8

Definition of Terms 9

Chapter Summary 11

Chapter Two: Literature Review 14

Prevalence 15

Mental Health 22

Theoretical Considerations 31

Synthesis 34

Conclusion 38

Chapter Three: Summary, Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions 40

Implications 40

Application 44

Limitations to the Capstone 66

Conclusion 67

References 69

Appendix A 80

Chapter One: Introduction

Technology has increasingly impacted adolescent relationships in the 21st century (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). With text messaging surpassing phone calls, 87% of adolescents who own a cell phone rely on this form of communication (Ceci, 2022). Research suggests texting negatively impacts teens intellectually, emotionally and physically (Skascs, S. N, 2013). However, newer studies are showing how texting helps facilitate interpersonal skills (Hunter et al., 2021). Sexting is a type of online communication between adolescents that has received much attention in the media over the past 15 years.

When 13-year-old Hope Witsell sent a topless photo of herself to a boy, she could not have known that this message would be spread around her middle school and eventually published in the NBC News (Choney, 2009). In 2009, this was the second case of bullying due to sexting, leading to a nationwide panic that sexting-related suicides were as common as cyberbullying-related suicides (Philip, 2021). Challenging biases and assumptions about adolescent sexting behaviours by reviewing current research can provide a clearer understanding of how sexting impacts adolescents' interpersonal development and what parents can do to help support their children.

This capstone paper focuses on the prevalence of sexting to increase awareness of who is sending and receiving sexually explicit text messages. The following analyzes how age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status impact adolescent sexting behaviour. In an attempt to explore discrepancies and common themes in the research, the second chapter will provide an accurate understanding of the amount of adolescent sexting occurring and how sexting impacts adolescents' interpersonal development. Chapter 2 will also look at theoretical underpinnings of adolescent sexting and uncover themes found in the research to help inform my work as a future

therapist working with adolescents as well as how to support parents. In chapter 3, this capstone can help parents promote healthy relationships for their adolescents. While sexting does carry risks, it's essential to recognize that when practiced responsibly and consensually, it can offer adolescents valuable opportunities to develop communication skills, deepen emotional intimacy and establish the foundation for positive and healthy relationships. Educating adolescents about the responsible use of sexting is critical to unlocking these potential benefits while minimizing the associated risks (Ahern, 2013).

Statement of the Problem

Mental Health

Adolescent sexting is a contemporary concern that presents numerous challenges and complexities in the field of adolescent development and mental health. One primary issue is the significant lack of comprehensive literature that thoroughly addresses the multifaceted nature of sexting among adolescents. Current research often falls short in exploring the theoretical underpinnings, such as how attachment styles may influence the psychological impact of sexting. There is also a notable gap in understanding the gender-specific effects of sexting, particularly how societal gender stereotypes exacerbate the experiences and consequences for both males and females.

Prevalence

Technology is changing how adolescents develop romantic relationships in the 21st century. As of 2022, it was reported that 87 percent of teenagers aged between 12 and 17 years in Canada used a mobile device such as a smartphone (Ceci, 2022). This technology enables adolescents to connect and develop social connections very differently than previous generations. It allows modern youth to engage in sexual activity more frequently and more instantaneously

than past generations (Ahern & Mechling, 2013). They can engage in riskier sexual activity like accessing sexually explicit content, sending sexts through various communication channels, and online dating without the same consequences as offline behaviour (Fleschler et al., 2013). This generational shift leads to a disconnect between adolescents and their parents because parents cannot draw upon past experiences to support their adolescents (Fleschler et al., 2013).

There are many discrepancies in the research on how often teens are sexting. This capstone paper will find themes in the research to provide clarity for parents, educators and therapists on how often teens are sexting. For example, Hunter et al., (2021) found that sexting among teenagers in Canada has been rising in recent years. Some stats reveal that one in three young people in Canada has received or sent a sext message at least once. These may be overestimated as the results were anonymously self-reported. According to a systematic review and meta-analysis, 14.8% of youth had sent a sext, 27.4% had received a sext, 12.0% had forwarded a sext without consent, and 8.4% had a sext forwarded to them without consent. These rates increased with age and over time (Strassberg et al., 2012).

Gender Differences

Research highlights significant gender differences in sexting behaviours, which therapists must consider when treating a client who is struggling to maintain a healthy relationship with sexting. Studies by Strassberg et al. (2013) and Mitchell (2012) suggest that males are more likely to send sexual pictures, while females report receiving sexts more frequently, as found by Lippman & Campbell (2014). These differences are often rooted in societal norms where males might be socially rewarded for engaging in sexual experiences, whereas females might face negative labelling for similar behaviours (Strassberg et al., 2013).

These gender norms impact how adolescents experience and respond to sexting. For males, sexting might be seen as a way to assert masculinity or gain social status. It might involve navigating social pressures and the potential for reputational damage for females (Gil-Llario et al., 2020). Therapists must be aware of these dynamics to address the unique challenges faced by each gender. This understanding can guide the development of gender-sensitive interventions that address the underlying societal pressures contributing to sexting behaviours (Gil-Llario et al., 2020).

Treatment Issues

Additionally, the existing literature does not sufficiently address practical approaches for helping adolescents process and cope with the negative impacts of sexting. The potential benefits of narrative therapy and post-modernist perspectives in reauthoring adolescents' experiences are underexplored. This gap in practical guidance extends to parents as well, who often lack the resources and knowledge to effectively support their teens through these challenges. Thus, there is a pressing need for research that not only delves into the theoretical frameworks but also provides actionable strategies for both adolescents and their caregivers to navigate the complexities of sexting in a digital age.

Legal Implications

Adolescent sexting is further complicated for parents as such activities are considered unlawful if the adolescents involved are under the age of 18. The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada has created a fact sheet for young teens about the privacy risks of sexting (Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, 2023). Parents face the challenge of balancing discipline with emotional support. They must address the illegal nature of certain sexting activities while maintaining open communication and guiding their adolescents.

The Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act (Bill C-13) changed the way sharing sexual images and video without consent is prosecuted under the Criminal Code of Canada. It's illegal to send sexual photos/videos of anyone who is or appears to be under 18 (OPCC, 2023) - and this includes taking and sending sexual photos/videos of oneself if you're under 18. Sexting between consenting adults over 18 is legal so long as no intimate images are shared without the permission of those depicted in the picture or video.

Limited Parental Support

Sexting is a way that adolescents can explore relationships and their sexuality, and a common conception amongst parents is that it can lead to negative consequences in their interpersonal development. Challenging biases and assumptions about adolescent sexting behaviours by reviewing current research can provide a clearer understanding of how sexting impacts adolescents' interpersonal development and what parents can do to help support their children.

Purpose of the Capstone

The purpose of this capstone is to evaluate how sexting influences the complex dynamics of adolescents' romantic relationships, and what strategies can parents employ to guide their children toward healthy sexting practices? This capstone will uncover the impact of sexting on adolescents' development by exploring the blurred lines between technology, intimacy, and human connection. It will also investigate how parents can help support their children.

Research Question

The research questions this paper will address are, can sexting have positive impacts on adolescent relationship development? What are the negative impacts of sexting on adolescent

relationship development? How can parents help their adolescents' overcome consequences of sexting?

Significance of the Study

Understanding the prevalence and impacts of sexting behaviours on adolescents' intrapersonal development provides accurate insights into their socialization. Including questions on an adolescent's sexting behaviour during the assessment phase of a client/therapist relationship can help guide the therapeutic process and uncover a therapist's biases. Dispelling bias is an essential step in developing a trusting rapport with a client; gaining a client's trust is imperative to the success of a therapeutic experience.

Adolescents' use of smartphones and digital media is now a defining aspect of their daily lives. Studies from 2023 show that teens spend an average of more than 8 hours a day on digital entertainment, which includes social media, texting, and other online activities. This screen time has been steadily rising, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a significant jump in media use among teens (Laborde, 2024) Research highlights that around 90% of adolescents in the U.S. aged 13 to 17 own or have access to a smartphone, and social media platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram dominate their digital consumption. Adolescents often use these platforms to connect socially and build relationships, making them central to their daily routines (Laborde, 2024).

While this access can foster communication, excessive screen time can also contribute to issues such as sleep disruption, anxiety, and depression if not monitored. However, many teens believe social media helps them stay connected and provides emotional support (Laborde, 2024). This context frames the broader use of digital communication methods like texting (and even sexting) as part of their developmental milestones, though it's essential to guide adolescents

toward critical thinking and setting healthy boundaries in their online interactions (Laborde, 2024).

Parents, educators, adolescents and counsellors would benefit from staying informed about how sexting impacts adolescents' interpersonal skills and romantic relationships. This research can provide parents with a better understanding of the impacts of sexting and how to support their children effectively. Educators can use this research to develop lessons and policies to educate students. The findings can help adolescents understand the potential consequences of sexting and encourage safe sexual communication behaviours. This research can inform therapists and counsellors in their practice, helping them provide more effective support to adolescents and families dealing with issues related to sexting.

This capstone paper is crucial for parents who struggle to communicate with their teens about cellphones and sexting because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the issue from a research-based perspective. Such a paper can offer insights into the psychological, social, and technological factors influencing sexting behaviours among adolescents. It can also highlight effective strategies and approaches for initiating open and constructive conversations with teens about the risks and consequences associated with sexting. By equipping parents with evidence-based knowledge and practical tools, the paper helps bridge the communication gap, enabling parents to engage more confidently and effectively in discussions that are critical for their children’s safety and well-being in the digital age.

Theoretical Orientation

This capstone paper will explore adolescent sexting through various theoretical perspectives, including postmodern, narrative, social construction, and feminist lenses, as well as attachment theory. A postmodern approach, such as narrative therapy, help individuals’ re-author

their personal stories, recognizing multiple perspectives and the influence of societal contexts on their experiences and identities. This orientation values the subjective experiences and diverse voices of individuals, promoting a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of human behaviour and relationships (Bonilla et al., 2021). A feminist orientation will help examine how gender impacts attachment differences, the developmental aspects over a lifetime, and the meanings adolescents attach to this form of communication (Golemeeva, 2020). Finally, by understanding an adolescent's attachment style, therapists can better comprehend their motivations and behaviors related to sexting.

Positionality Statement

As a mother, an educator of adolescents and as a future therapist adolescent sexting is an important topic for me. I am concerned for the well-being on my own children, while they are only 6 and 9 years of age, after teaching middle schoolers for the past 20 years I have a clear understanding of where they are heading and I have witnessed the negative impacts of social media over the past 10 years. Sexting has become increasingly common among adolescents (Foody et al., 2023). As a middle school teacher and future therapist, understanding the impacts of sexting on adolescents' development of romantic relationships will help me understand how to guide the adolescents I teach in developing healthy interpersonal skills. It is also important for me to educate adolescents on the potential risks of emotional victimization and dating relationship violence that sexting may promote.

Sexting may reinforce sexual double standards, sexual violence, slut-shaming and rape culture (Golemeeva, 2020). For example, girls are often judged more harshly than boys for engaging in comparable sexual behaviour (Hunter et al., 2021). Understanding these dynamics

will help me recognize issues that may arise in my classroom or as a future Registered Clinical Counsellor (RCC) so I can address these issues in a sensitive and informed manner.

Parents play a crucial role in adolescent behaviours and attitudes; however, they may lack the knowledge and skills to help their children navigate sexting. As a Registered Clinical Counsellor (RCC), I hope to educate parents about the implications of sexting and provide them with strategies to address the problem effectively. Sex education is pivotal in addressing the challenges posed by sexting (Strassberg et al., 2012). By equipping adolescents and their parents with knowledge on topics like consent, sexual coercion, online safety and sexual exploitation (Campbell & Park, 2013), I can prepare them to navigate sexting. It's important to acknowledge that sexting may be a reality for teens, and with the proper guidance, adolescents can use this form of communication safely and consensually, mitigating potential negative impacts on their social development.

Definition of Terms

Adolescents

Adolescents are young individuals in the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. This stage typically begins around puberty and continues into the late teenage years. Adolescents are characterized by physical and emotional changes as they mature into adults. This period is often associated with developing self-identity, increased independence and exploring new experiences and responsibilities. Adolescents are typically between 10-19 years, although the specified age range may vary depending on cultural and developmental factors (Foody et al., 2023).

Gender Minority

A person with a gender identity that differs from that commonly associated with their sex assigned at birth (Suen et al., 2020)

LGBTQ2S+

An acronym that collectively refers to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, sometimes stated as LBGT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) or historically GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender). The addition of the Q for queer is a more recently preferred version of the acronym as cultural opinions of the term queer focus increasingly on its positive, reclaimed definition. The Q can also stand for questions, referring to those who are still exploring their own sexuality and/or gender. The "+" represents those who are part of the community but for whom LGBTQ does not accurately capture or reflect their identity**.** **(**Lee et al., 2020)

Parent-Teen Communication

The exchange of information, thoughts, and feelings between parents and their teenage children. It encompasses both verbal and non-verbal interactions about a variety of topics, including everyday matters, emotional concerns, decision-making, and sensitive issues like relationships, sexuality, and substance use (Smetana, 2017)

Romantic Relationship

Romantic Relationships are when two people form an intimate connection based on attachment, interdependence and a sense of their needs being met. This relationship involves long-term or casual dating, sexual contact, intimacy, or any other conduct typically associated with a romantic or sexual relationship (Fleschler et al., 2013).

Sexting

Sending, receiving and forwarding sexually explicit messages, images or videos, often through digital devices like smartphones or computers. These messages can involve nude or sexually suggestive content and are typically sent between people who are romantically involved or interested in one another. It's important to note that sexting can have legal and social consequences, especially when involving minors and should be done with consent and consideration of potential risks (Foody et al., 2023).

Sexting Demographics

Refers to the study and analysis of the patterns, characteristics, and trends of individuals who engage in sending or receiving sexually explicit messages, images, or videos via digital platforms (text, social media, etc.). This includes identifying the age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural backgrounds of those involved in sexting, as well as the contexts (e.g., romantic relationships, peer pressure) in which sexting occurs (Gassó et al.,2019)

Sexual Development

Refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological changes that occur in individuals as they grow and mature in their sexual identity and reproductive capacity. It involves a series of stages, typically beginning in childhood and continuing through adolescence and into adulthood (Santrock, 2018)

Chapter Summary

The introduction to the capstone paper on adolescent sexting highlights the profound influence technology has had on the way adolescents interact and form relationships. As text messaging becomes the dominant form of communication among teens, the practice of sexting—sending sexually explicit messages or images—has emerged as a significant and controversial issue. The introduction frames sexting within a broader context of digital communication's

effects on youth, pointing out both potential risks and benefits. It underscores the urgent need to understand sexting's prevalence and impact on adolescent development, considering variables like age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This paper aims to challenge existing biases, provide clarity on the complexities of sexting behaviors, and offer strategies for parents, educators, and therapists to support adolescents in navigating these digital interactions responsibly.

Chapter two will delve deeper into the theoretical frameworks underpinning the themes found in research on adolescent sexting. The chapter will explore how attachment theory relates to the impact of sexting on adolescents, examining how different attachment styles affect their experiences and outcomes. Additionally, a feminist perspective will be considered to understand how gender stereotypes shape the effects of sexting on both males and females. The chapter will also highlight the benefits of a post-modernist perspective and the application of narrative therapy, demonstrating how these approaches can help adolescents reauthor their experiences and mitigate the negative impacts of sexting.

In Chapter two of this capstone paper, the lack of literature on sexting addiction will be explored. Today’s digital world offers new ways for adolescents to stay connected and develop relationships. Sexting, the act of sending sexual images and texts, has raised significant concern (Morelli et al., 2016). Although sexting addiction is not recognized by the DSM-5 as a substance use disorder, adolescents who engage in sexting are at risk of experiencing social problems, diminished school performance, and a lower quality of life, akin to the effects of an addiction. Behaviors with such negative consequences meet the criteria for substance use disorders (American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2022). Some psychologists propose that sexting addiction is similar to sex addiction, which the DSM-5 categorizes as a behavioral addiction

(American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2022). Even without physical intercourse, adolescents are driven to sext by the endorphin rush it provides (Morelli et al., 2016).

Chapter three will provide a comprehensive summary of the research findings on adolescent sexting and its effects on adolescents' intrapersonal skills and social-emotional development. The chapter will also serve as a practical guide for parents, offering recommendations on supporting their sexting teens. This section aims to educate parents about the realities of adolescent sexting, enabling them to make informed decisions on how best to support their children.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Sexting, involving the exchange of sexually explicit content through digital platforms, is a complex issue in adolescent development and digital behaviour research (Baumgartner et al., 2015). Age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status significantly impact how sexting impacts adolescents (Bianchi et al., 2021). Many themes were discovered through reviewing the research. For example, older adolescents generally engage in sexting more than younger ones, influenced by cognitive and emotional development, as well as legal considerations (Froyland et al., 2021). Gender differences show mixed results, with some studies indicating males receive more sexts and others reporting higher rates for females (Burén & Lunde, 2018). Ethnicity and socioeconomic status also affect sexting prevalence. Still, findings are inconsistent, with some research suggesting higher rates among ethnic minorities or lower-income adolescents, while other studies find no significant differences (Molla-Esparza et al., 2021).

Understanding the nuances associated with adolescent sexting is crucial for developing practical advice for parents, educators and therapists aiming to support adolescents with their sexting practices. This chapter highlights the need for inclusive approaches that address the diverse experiences of adolescents, considering factors such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. This review will examine the existing research on adolescent sexting, focusing on its prevalence, the impact of demographic factors, and the implications for mental health. By synthesizing these findings, this review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge on adolescent sexting and identify areas for further research and intervention.

Prevalence

The total number of adolescents who participate in sexting behaviours is unclear and varies between studies. Many factors affect the prevalence of sexting, including the social system in which the adolescent belongs, as well as their age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Fleschler-Pesking et al., 2013). After reading several studies with varying sample sizes, the average prevalence rate among adolescents is approximately 20% for sending photos or video sext messages (Campbell & Park, 2014; Fleschler-Pesking et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2012). When looking exclusively at receiving sext messages, the percentage increases to 31.5% in a sample of 1034 adolescent 10th graders from diverse cultural backgrounds (Fleschler-Pesking et al., 2013). The number of adolescents who receive only photos is between 15 and 41% (Campbell & Park, 2014; Fleschler-Pesking et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2012). Campbell and Park (2014) discovered through telephone surveys of 552 adolescents aged 12-17 that the prevalence of receiving sexts was 15%. In comparison, Fleschler-Pesking et al. (2013) reported that 30% of adolescents received sexual images. Finally, Strassberg et al. (2013) found that 41% of 606 American high schoolers had received a sext. Notably, there is a 26% discrepancy between these studies.

The prevalence of redistributing messages with sexual images to unintended recipients also varies between studies. Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2013) surveyed 1034 Black and Hispanic adolescents and discovered that 9% of adolescents said they redistributed sexual photos or videos. Strassburg et al., (2013) surveyed 606 high school students who completed a questionnaire and found that 25% of students who received a photo sext had forwarded the image to another person. Overall, the studies reviewed had very different results concerning the prevalence; however, in general, less than half of adolescents are sexting.

Madigan et al., (2018) synthesized data from 39 studies involving over 110,000 participants. This meta-analysis reported that 14.8% of adolescents had sent sexts, while 27.4% had received them. The study showed a clear link between age and sexting behavior, with older teens more likely to engage in sexting. The analysis also noted that 12% of adolescents had forwarded sexts without consent, emphasizing the normalization of sexting as smartphones became more widely used. Similarly, Gámez-Guadix et al. (2018) revealed that over 25% of Spanish adolescents engaged in sexting, with behavior increasing with age. This longitudinal study highlighted that sexting was linked to peer influence and romantic involvement. Moreover, adolescents who sexted were more likely to engage in other risky online behaviors like cyberbullying, pointing to a broader pattern of risk-taking in online spaces.

Across these studies, the prevalence of sexting among adolescents generally hovers between 15-41% for receiving sexts and 12-25% for forwarding them without consent. However, the large discrepancies between studies suggest that many factors—including age, ethnicity, social system, and methodology—affect sexting rates. The increase in smartphone use is a key driver in this behavior, and as Howarth found, smartphone ownership increased by 73.88% between 2016 and 2021. Since the most recent study cited is from 2020, it is clear that cell phone usage is continuously evolving, and additional research is necessary to understand how adolescent sexting is affected by this increase. Newer studies are needed to reflect the current state of digital behavior in adolescents and guide more effective intervention strategies.

Age

The data presented by various studies show that age impacts sexting behaviours among adolescents. As adolescents increase in age, so does the prevalence of sexting (Klettke et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014; Robertson, 2022). Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) discovered after

surveying adolescents from seven public high schools in the United States that sexting among 16–17-year-olds was 61.5%. This same study found that 20% of 15-year-olds reported sending a sext.

The increase in sending and receiving sexts as adolescents age may be because the risk associated with sexting decreases as one ages. In Canada, under section 163.1 (1) of the *Criminal Code,* child pornography is defined as "any picture or video of a youth under 18 years old who is naked or semi-naked or engaging in a sex act" (Robertson, 2022, p. 44). A young person under 18 who takes sexually explicit material of themselves and sends it to anyone, minor or adult, could be charged and, therefore, may deter younger adolescents from sexting (Robertson, 2022).

Gender

There is less clarity regarding gender differences in the sexting behaviours of adolescents. Some studies revealed significant differences in the sexting behaviours of males vs females, while other studies describe no difference. Strassberg et al. (2013) found that males are more likely to receive sexual pictures than females. Mitchell (2012) conducted a telephone survey of 1560 youth and found that females report receiving sexts more than males.

Another gender difference was the perceptions of girls' and boys' sexting behaviours (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). Societal norms for males and females are different. For example, males were socially rewarded for participating in sexual experiences, whereas girls were viewed more negatively for engaging in sexual behaviours. Lippman and Campbell (2014) gathered data through focus groups of 51 adolescents. Their research found that girls may be labelled a “slut” if they send a sext after being asked to do so and a “prude” if they do not send a sext when asked (Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

These findings may have important insights for education programs. Programs designed to educate and support adolescents' use of technology within relationships should consider gender and gender identity (Kim et al., 2019). Lippman and Campbell (2014) established that the knowledge of the "dangers and risks" associated with participating in sexting did not prevent risky sexting behaviours. A more influential topic of focus when educating youth about sexting could be "consent within a sexual ethics framework" (Lippman & Campbell, 2014, p. 45). An inclusive educational program for adolescents of all gender identities that focuses on consent and the "production and possession of illegal child pornography" could be beneficial for today's youth (Mitchell, 2012, p. 20).

LGBTQIA2S+

While the prevalence between heterosexual males and females proved inconclusive, there are expected results associated with gender-minority adolescents and sexting behaviours. Kim et al. (2019) conducted a 12-month survey gathering the prevalence of sending and receiving sexts. After surveying 2576 adolescents, the results showed that adolescents who identified as members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community were 3 to 4 times more likely to send or receive sexts than youth who had not disclosed these identities (Kim et al., 2019).

Marginalized adolescents, including those identifying as LGBTQIA2S+, may be more likely to engage in sexting for various socio-cultural reasons. One key factor is that these groups often face heightened isolation, stigma, and identity struggles (Mustanski et al., 2014). As a result, they may seek validation or connection in online spaces, sometimes leading to risky behaviors like sexting (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Additionally, sexting may serve as a form of sexual exploration, especially in environments where marginalized youth face barriers to healthy expression of their identities (Ringrose et al., 2013).

Intersectionality and the layers and systemic oppression of those with a marginalized identity address don't stand in a vacuum, research shows that LGBTQIA2S+ youth may engage in more risk-taking behaviors as a coping mechanism in response to societal rejection, discrimination, and lack of support. According to Bradford et al. (2014), minority stress due to societal and institutional discrimination contributes to mental health issues and risky sexual behaviour, which can manifest through sexting.

Another researched theory as to why members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community may be more likely to sext is due to peer pressure. Ringrose et al. (2013) noted that marginalized youth may feel pressured to engage in sexting to fit in or affirm their desirability. This may be particularly true for LGBTQIA2S+ youth, who might feel excluded from traditional dating scenes and turn to sexting as a way to connect with others.

Finally, sexting and communicating online is seen as a safer way to explore sexual interactions. Marginalized individuals may use online platforms as it offers a less judgmental space to explore their sexual identity. According to McInroy and Craig (2015), LGBTQIA2S+ youth frequently turn to online interactions to find communities that accept them, and sexting can emerge as part of these explorations.

Ethnicity

Similar to gender, the results of how ethnicity impacts sexting behaviour is also inconsistent. Some research supports that sending sexts happens more frequently among visible minority groups, whereas other studies found that ethnicity does not impact sexting behaviours (Campbell & Park, 2014; Fleschler-Peskin et al., 2013). For example, Campbell and Park (2014) discovered that African American adolescents sent sexts more than White and Hispanic adolescents. This study found that White adolescents received sexts less often than adolescents

of other ethnicities. White adolescents were also less likely to send a sext than African American adolescents (Campbell & Park, 2014).

African American teens are more likely to sext than white teens in the U.S. due to several factors, including greater access to smartphones and differing socioeconomic conditions. Research indicates that 95% of Black teens have access to a smartphone, compared to 89% of white teens (James & Harville, 2017). Smartphones are the primary device for many lower-income adolescents, especially those who may lack access to other digital tools like tablets or computers, which could otherwise be used for educational or professional purposes. For African American teens, this increased reliance on smartphones can contribute to a higher prevalence of digital communication through social media, messaging apps, and, by extension, sexting (Campbell & Park, 2014). Without other devices to support digital activities that are not for socializing, such as completing schoolwork or job applications, the phone often becomes central to social and romantic interactions (James & Harville, 2017).

In contrast to these findings, Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2013) reported that the percentage of adolescents sending sexual images and videos was similar across all ethnicities. Strassberg et al. (2012) studied White private high school students, and Campbell and Park (2014) studied a more ethnically diverse population. Both studies found that ethnic minorities are 20% more likely to send or receive a sext in comparison to adolescents who are an ethnic majority.

In a more recent study, Wood et al. (2015) compared the prevalence of sending sexts across five European countries and found that sending sexts is connected to adolescents' cultural values. For example, the study found that 38% of adolescents who reside in England and 30% of Norwegian adolescents send sexual images (Wood et al., 2015). Alternatively, only 10% of adolescents in Cyprus participate in sexting behaviours. The cultural values contributing to

Cyprus' low rates of sexting may be the "importance of protecting one's reputation in small communities" (Wood et al., 2015, p. 15).

Socioeconomic Status

Most studies reviewed did not include socioeconomic status, but those that did had conflicting findings. A common theme amongst the findings is that adolescents of higher socioeconomic status sexted less (Kim et al., 2019; Van Ouytsel, 2014). The discrepancy lies in a study conducted by Campbell and Park (2014), who found that adolescents' socioeconomic status had no impact.

After surveying 2537 Ontario adolescents, Kim et al. (2019) discovered that adolescents from lower-income families sent and received fewer sexts. 91.4% of lower-income participants claimed they did not send sexts, and 71.3% responded that they did not receive sexts. This study provided important preliminary information regarding sexting; however, the results from this survey are limited as it only considered sexual pictures and not sexually explicit texts. Some researchers indirectly found a similar result of how an adolescent's socioeconomic status impacts how often they sext. Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) outlined that sexting behaviour is a form of "deviant risk-taking behaviour" (p. 23). Sexting, when defined as a risk-taking behaviour, increased among adolescents who lived in a lower economic status and could be considered a coping mechanism for financial stress (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014).

Finally, another study revealed that an adolescent's family's "access to financial, educational, social and health resources" did not affect their prevalence of sexting behaviour (Campbell & Park, 2014, p. 54). A national survey of teens in the United States hypothesized that adolescents with higher incomes and easier access to technological devices such as mobile

phones sexted a similar amount to those with less access to mobile phones (Campbell & Park, 2014).

Hunter et al. (2021) concluded that while one's economic status does not impact the prevalence of adolescent sexting behaviour, the most significant effect was romantic pressures. After gathering data from 3322 students, aged 11 to 15, through a survey, it was concluded that societal factors like socioeconomic status had little impact on how often teens sext. Overall, an adolescent's socioeconomic status has little effect on sexting behaviours, and therefore, intervention efforts should be offered to adolescents from the lowest to the highest socioeconomic status.

Understanding the prevalence of sexting behaviours in adolescents provides critical insights into their socialization. Including questions on an adolescent's sexting behaviour during the assessment phase of a client/therapist relationship can help guide the therapeutic process and uncover a therapist's biases. Dispelling bias is essential in developing a trusting rapport with a client; gaining a client's trust is imperative to the success of a therapeutic experience.

Mental Health

Adolescent sexting, involving the exchange of sexually explicit content through digital means, has significant and complex implications for mental health. This literature review examines studies that employed online surveys, meta-analyses, and longitudinal methods to explore the psychological outcomes of sexting. The context—whether consensual, coerced, or peer-pressured—plays a crucial role in determining these outcomes, alongside factors such as pre-existing mental health conditions and the roles of sender and receiver.

A study by Howard et al. (2023) found that consensual sexting in romantic relationships generally does not harm adolescents' mental health, suggesting it can be a part of normal sexual

development. This contrasts with Froyland et al. (2021) and Madigan et al. (2018), who emphasize the negative impacts of coerced or non-consensual sexting. These latter studies indicate that such experiences often lead to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, mainly when comorbid conditions exist. Gámez-Guadix and Mateos-Pérez (2019) further elaborate on the adverse effects, highlighting how pressured sexting correlates with low self-esteem and social anxiety. This finding aligns with the emphasis on context by Howard et al. (2023), who note that the psychological impact varies significantly depending on whether the sexting is voluntary or involuntary.

The reviewed studies collectively highlight the complex relationship between adolescent sexting and mental health. They suggest that while consensual sexting may not be harmful, coerced or pressured sexting can lead to significant psychological distress, especially in the presence of pre-existing mental health issues. This underscores the need for comprehensive mental health assessments and targeted interventions to address the diverse experiences of adolescents engaged in sexting.

Gender Differences

Adolescent sexting, a significant concern in modern society, has distinct social and psychological consequences that vary by gender. Studies have consistently highlighted a pervasive gender double standard in the perception of sexting behaviours. For instance, Lippman and Campbell (2014) and Dully et al. (2023) underscore how societal norms reward males for sexual experiences while harshly judging females. Girls who engage in sexting may be labeled as "sluts" if they comply with requests for sexts or "prudes" if they refuse, illustrating a double standard that valorizes male sexual conquests while policing female sexuality. These labels can

deeply affect the emotional and psychological well-being of adolescent girls, leading to anxiety, shame, and guilt.

Bianchi et al. (2021) examined how family dynamics influence sexting behaviours among female adolescents. Their study found that risky sexting behaviours, such as sharing explicit content with multiple recipients, were less common in families with healthy communication. However, experimental sexting, typically within consensual relationships, was more common among older adolescents and those from families with flexible dynamics. This aligns with Gasso et al. (2020), who also noted the severe social repercussions for girls when sexts are shared without consent, such as slut-shaming and social ostracism. These consequences highlight the differential impact of sexting based on gender, with girls facing more severe social and psychological repercussions due to societal double standards.

Gasso et al. (2020) provided a broader perspective, examining the mental health and social consequences of sexting across a diverse group of adolescents. The study found that both male and female adolescents experienced negative social consequences, but these were more pronounced for girls. Girls often face significant social stigma and victimization, leading to psychological issues such as depression and low self-esteem. In contrast, boys generally face fewer social repercussions and usually view sexting as a normative, peer-encouraged behaviour. However, this normalization can lead to problematic attitudes toward consent and privacy, potentially fostering a culture that trivializes these critical issues.

The literature also indicates that gender-minority adolescents, including those identifying as LGBTQIA2S+, exhibit distinct patterns of sexting behaviours compared to their heterosexual peers. Kim et al. (2019) revealed that LGBTQIA2S+ youth were 3 to 4 times more likely to engage in sexting, potentially due to exploring identity, seeking validation, or lacking supportive

environments for safe sexual expression. Van Ouytsel et al. (2020) found that gender-minority adolescents often face more significant pressure to engage in sexting, originating from peers and strangers. This pressure, combined with societal stigma and lack of support, makes these adolescents particularly vulnerable.

The mental health implications of sexting vary significantly between genders. For females, the negative social stigma attached to sexting can lead to mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Girls may also suffer from victimization, such as slut-shaming or cyberbullying, exacerbating these issues. Males, although experiencing less direct stigma, can still face psychological consequences if their sexts are shared without consent, leading to feelings of betrayal, embarrassment, and loss of personal boundaries. Additionally, the emotional impact of sexting depends on the context, with consensual sexting in trusting relationships having different implications than coerced or manipulative sexting.

These studies collectively suggest that adolescent sexting has complex and gendered social and psychological impacts. The consistent finding across this literature is the heightened negative consequences for girls, driven by societal double standards and stigmatization of female sexuality. This underscores the need for supportive interventions that address these gendered disparities and promote healthy, consensual digital behaviours among adolescents.

Developmental Differences

The mental health implications of adolescent sexting are complex and significantly influenced by developmental stages and milestones. This literature review compares and contrasts vital studies examining how different stages of adolescent development affect the psychological outcomes of engaging in sexting. By highlighting common themes and

differences, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how developmental factors shape the mental health impacts of sexting behaviours.

According to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, the formal operational stage begins around age 12 and extends into adulthood (Piaget, 1954). This stage is marked by the development of abstract thinking and hypothetical reasoning, allowing adolescents to think beyond concrete events and consider possibilities, risks, and consequences of their actions (Piaget, 1954). These cognitive abilities are crucial for risk assessment and decision-making, particularly in the context of social and sexual behaviors like sexting.

In the formal operational stage, adolescents develop the ability to think abstractly, allowing them to grasp complex concepts like privacy, reputation, and consent, which are essential for understanding the long-term risks of sexting. They engage in hypothetical-deductive reasoning, weighing potential outcomes and consequences, such as the emotional or social fallout from sharing explicit content. Adolescents also begin to plan for the future, anticipating how their digital behaviors may affect relationships or career prospects. Lastly, they become more adept at perspective-taking, fostering empathy and ensuring that their sexting behaviors remain consensual and respectful (Piaget, 1954).

Trub and Starks (2017) emphasize that emotional regulation and cognitive development are key protective factors for adolescents navigating the digital aspects of their romantic and sexual lives, such as sexting. Securely attached adolescents are better able to make informed decisions, set boundaries, and handle potential emotional consequences in a healthy manner. Adolescents with secure attachments and cognitive maturity, aligned with Piaget's formal operational stage, are less likely to experience negative emotional outcomes from sexting because they can regulate their emotions effectively and assess risks more thoughtfully.

Similarly, Dodaj et al., (2020) conducted a prospective study on high school adolescents. They found that as adolescents mature, their cognitive and emotional development influences their ability to understand and manage the consequences of sexting. This study underscores that increased maturity can either mitigate or exacerbate the psychological distress associated with sexting, depending on an individual's readiness to handle complex social interactions. The researchers noted that more mature adolescents could better cope with these situations, while less mature adolescents often struggle.

In contrast, Frankel et al. (2018) specifically examined the influence of age and psychosocial maturity on the mental health outcomes of sexting. Their findings revealed that younger adolescents, who typically lack fully developed critical thinking and emotional regulation skills, are more prone to anxiety and depression following sexting experiences. This vulnerability is linked to their limited ability to set boundaries and understand the potential consequences of their actions. Conversely, older adolescents, with more developed coping mechanisms and a better grasp of digital boundaries, showed greater resilience against these adverse outcomes.

Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez (2019) explored the reciprocal relationships between sexting and mental health across different developmental stages. Their longitudinal study highlighted that early engagement in sexting is associated with a higher risk of anxiety and depression, particularly among adolescents who have not yet developed strong self-esteem and identity. This study adds a dynamic perspective, illustrating how the timing of sexting behaviours within an adolescent's developmental trajectory can significantly influence mental health outcomes.

A common theme across these studies is the critical role of developmental stages in determining the mental health impacts of sexting. All three studies agree that younger adolescents are generally more vulnerable to adverse outcomes due to their ongoing cognitive and emotional development. This is a period where critical thinking, emotional regulation, and identity formation are still in progress, making them more susceptible to the adverse effects of sexting.

On the other hand, while older adolescents might have more resilience, the studies by Frankel et al. and Gámez-Guadix & Mateos-Pérez highlight that they are not entirely immune to the risks. Older adolescents may still face significant mental health challenges, especially if they engage in sexting early or without adequate emotional support. The timing of these behaviours, along with individual differences in maturity and psychosocial development, plays a crucial role in the severity of the mental health impact. The reviewed studies collectively emphasize the importance of considering developmental differences when assessing the mental health implications of adolescent sexting. Younger adolescents, due to their developmental immaturity, are at greater risk for adverse outcomes such as anxiety and depression. However, older adolescents, while generally more resilient, are still at risk, especially if they engage in sexting prematurely.

Attachment

While often perceived as a form of modern courtship, sexting can have significant implications for adolescents' mental health. Understanding the role of attachment styles in these behaviours is critical, as attachment theory provides a framework for understanding how early emotional bonds influence later relational behaviours and emotional regulation. This literature review examines how attachment styles impact adolescents who engage in sexting, focusing on

three critical studies: Drouin and Landgraff (2012), Keizer et al. (2019), and Trub and Starks (2017). By comparing and contrasting these studies, this review identifies common themes and highlights the complex interplay between attachment styles and mental health outcomes in the context of adolescent sexting.

Drouin and Landgraff (2012) explored the prevalence of texting and sexting in young adult romantic relationships and examined the relationship between these behaviours and attachment styles. Their findings indicate that securely attached individuals were more likely to engage in text messaging. At the same time, those with insecure attachments, particularly those with high attachment avoidance, were more likely to engage in sexting, including sending explicit texts and pictures. Anxious attachment was explicitly linked to sending sex texts. Additionally, the study found that gender moderated these behaviours, with avoidant men more likely than avoidant women to send sexual content. This suggests that insecure attachments may lead to sexting as a means of seeking validation or excitement due to a lack of secure emotional bonds.

Keizer et al. (2019) examined the associations between attachment styles and adolescent mental health outcomes. They found that insecure attachment to the mother was often linked to higher levels of depression and anxiety. In contrast, insecure attachment to the father was associated with increased risk-taking behaviours, including sexting. This study highlights the distinct roles that maternal and paternal attachments play in shaping adolescents' emotional and behavioural responses. Adolescents with insecure maternal attachments are more prone to internalizing problems such as depression and anxiety. In contrast, those with insecure paternal attachments are more likely to engage in externalizing behaviours, including risky sexting.

Trub and Starks (2017) investigated the relationship between insecure attachment styles, emotional regulation, sexting behaviours, and condomless sex among women in romantic relationships. Their findings indicated that women with high attachment anxiety were more likely to engage in sexting and unprotected sex. The study emphasized the mediating role of emotional regulation, suggesting that difficulties in regulating emotions led to higher engagement in risky behaviours. This implies that insecure attachment styles not only influence the likelihood of sexting but also impact how adolescents manage the emotional consequences of these behaviours.

The studies reviewed collectively underscore the significant influence of attachment styles on adolescents' sexting behaviours and their subsequent mental health outcomes. A recurring theme is that insecure attachment, whether anxious or avoidant, is associated with a higher propensity for sexting and related risky behaviours. Conversely, secure attachment appears to act as a protective factor, promoting healthier communication practices and reducing the likelihood of sexting.

Another commonality is the role of emotional regulation. Both Drouin and Landgraff (2012) and Trub and Starks (2017) highlight how individuals with insecure attachments struggle with emotional regulation, leading to increased engagement in sexting as a coping mechanism. Keizer et al. (2019) further differentiate the impacts based on the specific attachment figure—mother versus father—indicating that the nature of the attachment relationship can differentially influence internalizing versus externalizing behaviours.

The reviewed studies illustrate that attachment styles significantly impact how sexting affects adolescents' mental health. Insecure attachments, marked by anxiety or avoidance, predispose adolescents to engage in sexting and experience adverse mental health outcomes,

such as depression, anxiety, and risky behaviours. These findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions that address attachment-related issues and promote secure attachment styles to mitigate the adverse effects of sexting on adolescents' mental health. Understanding how attachment influences these behaviours can help mental health professionals and educators develop more effective strategies to support adolescents in navigating their digital relationships and emotional well-being.

Theoretical Considerations

Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy, as Michael White theorized, emphasizes the importance of re-authoring personal narratives to help individuals understand behaviours like sexting as separate from their identity (Slivinske & Slivinske, 2014). This approach promotes strengths and resilience by externalizing problems, reducing shame, and empowering adolescents to see sexting as a behaviour rather than an inherent flaw (Slivinske & Slivinske, 2014). The studies reviewed suggest common themes that align with the goals of narrative therapy, such as reducing stigma, creating supportive communities, and promoting healthier self-narratives. While empirical evidence is limited, these studies support narrative therapy's potential to help adolescents cope with the negative mental health implications of sexting.

Hartikainen et al. (2022) focus on adolescents seeking peer advice and emotional support online to cope with sexting. The findings align with narrative therapy's emphasis on externalizing problems and creating supportive communities but do not directly evaluate the therapy's effectiveness. Bragard and Fisher (2022) suggest narrative therapy may help adolescents externalize their sexting behaviours and reduce shame. However, the study does not provide empirical evidence on its effectiveness. Dully et al. (2023) and Doyle et al. (2021)

indicate that narrative therapy can positively reframe traumatic experiences. These systematic reviews highlight narrative therapy's role in addressing trauma and promoting healthier self-narratives among adolescents. It emphasizes the therapy's potential to reframe experiences positively, supporting its effectiveness in dealing with sexting issues. Doyle et al. (2021) review psychological outcomes related to sexting and suggest that narrative therapy could help reframe negative experiences, improving mental health outcomes. However, like Bragard and Fisher, this study lacks direct empirical evidence.

All studies highlight the potential of narrative therapy in reframing experiences and providing emotional support. They suggest that narrative therapy could be effective due to its focus on externalizing problems and reducing stigma. The studies by Dully et al. and Doyle et al. provide theoretical recommendations for using narrative therapy but need more direct empirical evidence. In contrast, Hartikainen et al. and Bragard and Fisher provide more contextual insights into adolescents' needs and motivations, indirectly supporting narrative therapy’s utility.

Additionally, as Slivinske & Slivinske (2014) argue, narrative therapy fosters a collaborative therapeutic relationship among the therapist, parents, and adolescents, enhancing a sense of agency in addressing complex issues like sexting. By acknowledging broader societal influences, this approach can help families navigate the pressures that impact adolescent behaviour, such as peer dynamics and social media.

Overall, while more research is needed to confirm its effectiveness, the theoretical principles and the alignment of narrative therapy's goals with the needs of adolescents struggling with sexting suggest it could be a valuable therapeutic modality.

Psychoeducation

Whether using a narrative or attachment-based approach to supporting adolescents and parents with sexting, as a therapist psychoeducation is going to be an important part of the work done with families. Educating adolescents and parents about digital behaviour is key to addressing issues related to sexting. A 2023 study by Livingstone et al. advocates for teaching positive digital citizenship through enhanced media literacy. In this context, adolescents can be encouraged to critically assess the consequences of sharing explicit content online, while parents can learn to guide their children in developing responsible digital habits. The focus on collaborative digital literacy between parents and teens promotes shared understanding of the digital world and the risks involved, such as privacy violations and non-consensual sharing of sexts.

Beyond educating parents and teens about the digital behaviour, teaching communication skills to both parents and teens would also be beneficial. Parental Mediation Theory has evolved in recent years, emphasizing the importance of active mediation (Dulkadir Yaman et al., 2022) rather than restrictive or punitive measures when managing adolescents' cell phone use. Recent studies encourage parents to act as digital role models by engaging in open conversations about privacy, consent, and safe online behavior**,** rather than simply restricting screen time or access to devices. This approach helps adolescents feel supported rather than controlled, which research shows can lead to healthier and more informed decision-making when it comes to sexting.

Collaborative Problem-Solving Model

Another communication tool to draw upon for therapist could be drawing upon Collaborative Problem-solving Model (CPS). Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS) continues to be a valuable approach for addressing parent-adolescent conflict around sexting and cell phone use. Recent adaptations of this model (Lenhart, 2022) show its efficacy in helping families

navigate difficult conversations without increasing resistance or conflict. Therapists using CPS focus on joint goal setting where both the adolescent and the parent work together to set digital boundaries, promoting mutual respect. This method fosters a sense of partnership and trust, allowing for more productive discussions about online behavior and personal boundaries.

Synthesis

Prevalence

The results presented by studies on the sexting behaviour of adolescents showed conflicting evidence on how gender and ethnicity impact adolescent sexting behaviour, while the studies that analyzed how adolescents' socioeconomic status and age impact the prevalence of sexting were similar. Whether the findings were conflicting or similar, they all showed how often adolescents send sexts. Overall, the studies reviewed showed surprising results and challenged many biases associated with adolescent sexting.

Gender and ethnicity's impact on the prevalence of sexting is still unclear. Strassberg et al. (2013) found that males received more sexts than females, whereas Mitchell (2012) found that females received more sexts than males. While the results are inconsistent, a common explanation for how gender impacts sexting behaviour is the influence of societal norms (Strassberg et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2012).

Similar to gender, studies that identified the impact of an adolescent's ethnicity on sexting behaviours found inconsistent results. Campbell and Park (2014) discovered that the prevalence of sexing increased with ethnic minorities and decreased with those who belonged to an ethnic majority. Alternatively, Fleschler-Peskin et al. (2013) found no difference in ethnicity and sexting, and Wood et al. (2015) found that the smaller communities sent fewer sexts.

Differences in findings could be because this is a relatively new area of research, and there are many variations in how the data is collected. However, most studies utilized an online survey. This could compromise the results as only those with access to the internet and a computer could complete the study (Howard, 2019). They also may not be accessible to individuals in remote areas; there is a high chance of survey fraud. Most importantly, it is difficult to interpret the "sentiments behind the answers (Howard, 2019).

The studies that collected data on adolescent's socioeconomic status and age about their sexting behaviours found similar results. Klettke et al. (2014) and Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) discovered that adolescents 16 and older were likelier to send and receive sexts. Interestingly, this may be related to the legal ramifications for adolescents under the age of 18 sending sexts, as well as the increase in sexual behaviours as adolescents age (Robertson, 2022).

Mental Health

Adolescent sexting, involving the sharing of sexually explicit content via digital means, presents complex and far-reaching implications for mental health. Studies using online surveys, meta-analyses, and longitudinal research have explored the nuanced psychological effects of sexting, influenced significantly by context—whether the sexting is consensual or non-consensual—and pre-existing mental health conditions of the individuals involved.

For example, Howard et al. (2023) found that consensual sexting within romantic relationships often does not negatively impact adolescents' mental health, suggesting that it can be part of normative sexual development during adolescence. However, this finding contrasts with research by Froyland et al. (2021) and Madigan et al. (2018)**,** which highlights the adverse effects of coerced or non-consensual sexting. Adolescents exposed to non-consensual sexting often experience mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and substance abuse,

especially when other pre-existing psychological conditions are present. Additionally, Gámez-Guadix and Mateos-Pérez (2019) emphasize the correlation between pressured sexting and low self-esteem, along with increased social anxiety.

Understanding adolescents' sexting behaviors through the lens of attachment theory has been well-established as a useful framework. Insecure attachment styles, whether anxious or avoidant, are linked to higher rates of risky behaviors, including sexting. Adolescents with insecure attachments often use sexting to seek validation or excitement, especially in the absence of secure emotional bonds (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Keizer et al., 2019). Parents and therapists can work on fostering secure attachment bonds through healthy communication and emotional support. This can decrease adolescents' likelihood of engaging in sexting and improve their emotional regulation. Secure attachments, on the other hand, act as protective factors, leading to healthier digital interactions. Therapeutic interventions that focus on addressing attachment-related issues, helping adolescents build healthier relationships, and improving emotional regulation can significantly reduce sexting behaviours.

Collectively, these studies underscore the central role of context in determining the mental health outcomes of sexting. While consensual sexting may not be inherently harmful, coerced or pressured sexting can lead to significant psychological distress, particularly in adolescents with prior mental health vulnerabilities. These findings suggest the need for comprehensive mental health assessments and interventions tailored to the varied experiences of adolescents engaged in sexting.

Theoretical Considerations

Narrative therapy offers a way to reframe sexting as a behavior rather than a defining characteristic of the adolescent's identity. By externalizing the problem, therapists can help

adolescents understand that sexting is not an inherent flaw but rather a challenge they can overcome. This process reduces shame and stigma, key emotional hurdles in dealing with the consequences of sexting (Slivinske & Slivinske, 2014).

Recent literature highlights the potential of narrative therapy in re-authoring adolescents' experiences, helping them gain agency over their behaviors, and supporting them in rebuilding self-esteem (Bragard & Fisher, 2022; Doyle et al., 2021). Although direct empirical evidence on its effectiveness in sexting-related cases is limited, narrative therapy's principles align with the psychological needs of adolescents struggling with sexting.

Psychoeducation is an essential element when addressing sexting with adolescents and their parents. Teaching both parties about digital behavior, media literacy, and the potential consequences of sexting helps create a shared understanding and promotes healthier digital habits. Research suggests that fostering open dialogue rather than punitive restrictions is more effective in guiding adolescents through these challenges (Livingstone et al., 2021).

Parents can be encouraged to act as digital role models, engaging in ongoing conversations about online privacy, consent, and safe digital communication. Collaborative digital literacy education enables both parents and teens to discuss sexting risks and boundaries in a mutually respectful way, reducing the chances of harmful behaviors emerging (Livingstone & Byrne, 2021).

For families struggling with communication issues surrounding sexting or cell phone use, the Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS) approach offers a useful framework. CPS emphasizes joint goal-setting between parents and adolescents, creating a sense of partnership rather than conflict. This method encourages open dialogue about digital boundaries and personal responsibility, which is crucial when addressing sensitive topics like sexting (Walker, 2022). By

working together to set realistic digital boundaries, parents and adolescents can avoid escalating tensions, build trust, and improve communication patterns. CPS fosters a supportive environment where adolescents feel understood rather than controlled, allowing for more meaningful conversations about their online behavior and reducing the likelihood of risky activities like sexting.

Combining these approaches of Attachment Theory, Narrative Therapy, Psychoeducation, and CPS provides a holistic framework for therapists and parents to help adolescents navigate the digital landscape (Walker, 2022). By fostering secure emotional attachments, reframing negative experiences, promoting media literacy, and improving communication, these strategies can mitigate the negative impacts of sexting and strengthen parent-adolescent relationships.

Conclusion

The findings from this literature review offer critical insights for designing educational programs and therapeutic interventions aimed at addressing adolescent sexting. Educators should develop programs that integrate gender considerations and focus on consent within a sexual ethics framework rather than solely highlighting the dangers of sexting, which has proven insufficient in preventing risky behaviours. An inclusive approach addressing consent and the legal implications of sexting can better support adolescents across all gender identities. For therapists, including questions about sexting behaviours during the assessment phase can uncover biases and help build a trusting therapeutic relationship, which is essential for effective intervention.

The reviewed studies underscore the complex interplay between adolescent sexting and mental health. While consensual sexting might not necessarily be harmful, coerced or pressured

sexting can lead to significant psychological distress, especially for those with pre-existing mental health issues. This highlights the need for comprehensive mental health assessments and targeted interventions to address the diverse experiences of adolescents involved in sexting. Older adolescents, although generally more resilient, still face risks, mainly if they engage in sexting without adequate emotional support. Developmental differences play a crucial role in the severity of mental health impacts, with younger adolescents being more vulnerable to negative outcomes like anxiety and depression.

Moreover, the review emphasizes the role of attachment styles in influencing how sexting affects mental health. Insecure attachments, characterized by anxiety or avoidance, are linked to increased engagement in sexting and adverse mental health outcomes. Targeted interventions that address attachment-related issues and promote secure attachment styles are essential for mitigating the adverse effects of sexting. While further research is needed, the alignment of narrative therapy's goals with the needs of adolescents struggling with sexting suggests it could be a valuable therapeutic approach. Overall, these insights can guide parents, educators, and therapists in supporting adolescents as they navigate the complexities of sexting and its impact on their well-being.

Chapter Three: Summary, Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

The findings from the capstone on adolescent sexting offer crucial insights into how educators and therapists can better support teens in navigating the complexities of sexting. The literature highlights the importance of integrating gender considerations and a sexual ethics framework, focusing on consent rather than merely emphasizing the risks, which has proven insufficient in preventing risky behaviors. Addressing legal implications alongside consent in educational programs can better serve adolescents across all gender identities. For therapists, assessing sexting behaviours during therapy can help uncover biases and establish a trusting relationship, essential for effective intervention. Additionally, the studies reveal the mental health risks, especially in cases of coerced sexting, where adolescents with insecure attachment styles or pre-existing mental health issues are more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and other negative outcomes. Targeted interventions, such as those based on attachment theory and narrative therapy, could be key in mitigating the adverse effects of sexting, supporting teens' emotional well-being.

Implications

Implications for Therapists

The implications for therapists in supporting adolescents struggling with sexting are multifaceted and require addressing both psychological and educational aspects. First, understanding the role of attachment styles is crucial, as adolescents with insecure attachments (anxious or avoidant) are more prone to engage in sexting and experience adverse mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, or risky behaviours (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). In this context, attachment-based interventions, focusing on improving emotional regulation, can help reduce negative sexting behaviours linked to insecure attachment (Keizer et al., 2019).

Therapists should also consider narrative therapy as an effective modality. This approach helps adolescents separate sexting from their identity by externalizing the problem and reducing associated shame. By reframing experiences and encouraging healthier self-narratives, narrative therapy can foster resilience and support adolescents in managing the emotional consequences of sexting (Bonilla et al., 2021).

Incorporating psychoeducation is another critical aspect of therapy, particularly when educating both adolescents and their parents about responsible digital behaviours. This includes teaching digital literacy and promoting positive digital citizenship, where adolescents are encouraged to critically assess the consequences of sharing explicit content online. Additionally, parents can be guided to serve as digital role models, engaging in open conversations about privacy, consent, and safe online behavior, rather than taking a punitive approach (Bonilla et al., 2021).

Lastly, therapists may draw on Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS) models to mediate parent-adolescent conflicts around digital device use, fostering joint goal-setting to establish healthy digital boundaries and promote mutual respect. This method helps build trust and partnership within families, facilitating productive discussions about sexting and other online behaviours (Walker, 2022).

Implication for Educators

The implications for schools regarding how to educate adolescents about sexting are significant and call for a thoughtful, comprehensive approach that integrates modern understandings of sex education, gender dynamics, and digital literacy. Given the complex and evolving landscape of relationships, consent, and technology, schools must prioritize a range of strategies. First, schools need to move beyond outdated models of abstinence-only education and

ensure that their curricula include discussions of consent, healthy relationships, and the risks and consequences of sexting (Paterson, 2018). The National Education Association (NEA) and sex education experts like Leslie Kantor advocate for comprehensive sex education that not only covers traditional topics like birth control and sexual health but also addresses contemporary issues like digital behavior and consent. This is especially crucial given that many provincial programs do not adequately cover these areas, leaving students without the necessary tools to navigate complex digital and sexual landscapes (Paterson, 2018).

Addressing consent and sexting directly in education is crucial. With the rise of movements like #MeToo, which have highlighted issues of sexual harassment and assault, it is essential for schools to actively educate students on consent, boundaries, and the responsible use of technology. This includes explicit instruction on the risks of sexting, privacy violations, and the emotional and legal consequences that can result from sharing intimate images or messages. Health educator Christopher Pepper underscores the importance of addressing these topics sensitively and thoroughly in health education classes to ensure students are informed and empowered to make responsible decisions (Paterson, 2018).

Schools should also tailor their curricula to meet the developmental needs of students at different ages. Programs like those in San Francisco begin addressing issues like puberty and boundaries in elementary school, gradually progressing to more complex discussions about sexting, relationships, and sexual health in middle and high school (Paterson, 2018). This age-appropriate approach helps students better understand these complex topics over time, ensuring that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills as they grow.

Involving parents and the broader community is another critical component of effective sexting education. Michelle Rawcliffe, a long-time sex educator, emphasizes the importance of

parental engagement in these conversations. Schools should act as a resource not only for students but also for families, fostering open, supportive dialogues about sexting and digital behavior at home (Paterson, 2018). This collaborative approach reinforces the messages delivered in the classroom and helps create a consistent framework for addressing these issues both in school and in the family setting.

Additionally, schools must ensure that educators are well-trained to deliver sensitive and comprehensive sex education, including discussions about sexting. Jessica Sales highlights the barriers to implementing equitable, evidence-based sex education, but overcoming these challenges requires ensuring that teachers are prepared to handle these conversations effectively and without judgment (Paterson, 2018). Adequate training equips educators to create a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable engaging in discussions about sexting and other sensitive topics.

Finally, schools should create safe spaces where students can seek advice and information about sexting and related issues. Programs like the wellness centers established in San Francisco schools offer confidential support, helping students navigate the emotional and social pressures associated with sexting (Paterson, 2018). These centers provide students with the resources and guidance they need to make informed, responsible decisions about their digital behavior.

Implications for Parents

This capstone paper on adolescent sexting highlights critical implications for parents, particularly in understanding the prevalence and risks associated with this behavior. Contrary to common beliefs, sexting among teens is less widespread than many might assume, and the primary concern arises when it occurs without consent, especially if the individuals involved are

over 18, which could lead to legal repercussions particularly if nude images are shared (Molla-Esparza et al., 2021). Parents must be aware of warning signs, such as symptoms of depression or anxiety, that may indicate a need for professional help (Lieberman et al., 2013). It's essential for parents to know where to find resources and support while fostering open communication with their teens. Shaming adolescents for mistakes in this realm can be detrimental; instead, parents should reinforce the lessons taught in schools about digital citizenship, online safety, and the enduring impact of sharing content online. (Hagan, 2017). By approaching the subject with empathy and understanding, parents can help their teens navigate these complex issues more effectively.

Application

A presentation in a community-based setting will help guide parents and their adolescents in making informed decisions about sexting. Significant changes are needed in the mental health field to better inform parents struggling to support their adolescents with sexting, especially those who have adolescents with mental health disorders. I have created a three-hour interactive training intended for parents that provides opportunities for self-reflection, psychoeducation, and tools and resources around sexting. An outline of the presentation is provided below, and the slides can be found in their entirety in Appendix A.

Slide 1: Why this topic matters

Sexting has become increasingly prevalent among teens, especially as their use of smartphones and social media has grown. Over 90% of U.S. adolescents aged 13 to 17 own or have access to smartphones, and platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram dominate their daily digital consumption (AAP, 2014). On average, teens spend more than eight hours each day

on digital activities, which has contributed to a rise in behaviors like sexting (NSPCC, 2024). This increased screen time highlights the need for guidance in managing their online interactions.

Parental involvement plays a crucial role in guiding teens toward safe digital behaviour. By setting clear boundaries and staying informed about the risks associated with online communication, parents can help their children navigate the challenges of social media and texting (AAP, 2014). Open discussions about the potential dangers of sexting, such as emotional and legal consequences, are essential for ensuring that teens make responsible choices. Research suggests that when parents maintain open communication with their teens, it fosters a sense of trust and encourages safer behavior in the digital realm (Smetana, 2017).

Encouraging ongoing conversations about sexting is one of the most effective ways for parents to prevent risky behaviours. By discussing the consequences openly and honestly, parents can help teens understand the emotional, social, and legal risks involved (AAP, 2014). Building a trusting relationship creates a supportive environment where teens feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics, which ultimately helps them make informed decisions. A study completed by Smetana showed that adolescents benefit from clear and consistent guidance as they navigate the complexities of online interactions, highlighting the importance of parental engagement in promoting responsible digital behaviour (Smetana, 2017).

Slide 2: What is Sexting?

Adolescent sexting refers to the sending, receiving, or forwarding of sexually explicit messages, images, or videos, often using digital devices like smartphones, tablets, or computers. This type of content can include nude or partially nude photos, sexually suggestive images, or explicit texts. It’s common for these exchanges to happen between teens who are romantically

involved or have an interest in one another, as they may see it as part of their relationship or a way to express affection (Foody et al., 2023).

Slide 3: The Numbers Speak

Scary headlines may lead you to believe this is a common practice among teens with extreme consequences. Although the actual numbers vary, many researchers agree that most teens are not sexting, and those who are usually aren't subjected to harsh penalties (Madigan & Reich, 2020). However, there are still risks to consider for teens who sext. This presentation will help you talk about sexting with your teen so you're both prepared if it ever becomes an issue. Approximately 15-25% of teens have sent or received sexting messages (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). According to a 2020 study conducted by Golemeeve in Britain, around 27% of teens have received a sext, and 15% have sent one. Sexting is more common as teens age, with a notable rise in high school years (Golemeeva, 2020).

Slide 4: Understanding the Motivation

Teens may engage in sexting for a variety of reasons, and it's often more complex than it seems. For some, sexting might start off as a joke or a way to get attention from their peers. Peer pressure plays a significant role as well, especially in today's digital age, where teens feel the need to fit in or go along with what their friends are doing (Joseph, 2022). Others may view it as a way to flirt or express romantic interest, believing it's part of what's expected in relationships at their age (Santrock, 2018).

Sexting can also be tied to the normal process of teenage sexual development. During adolescence, teens are often exploring their identities, including their sexual selves, and sexting may feel like a low-risk way of experimenting with intimacy (Froyland et al. 2021; Madigan et al., 2018). They might see it as a way to bond or grow closer with a romantic or sexual partner.

In some cases, it might even be about wanting to seem “cool” or mature in the eyes of others, believing that this behaviour will make them more popular or desirable. Additionally, some teens engage in sexting simply because they think it’s fun or adventurous. For them, it might not feel like a serious decision, but rather another way to explore new experiences (Froyland et al. 2021; Madigan et al., 2018).

Slide 5: Emotional & Mental Health Consequences

Sexting behaviours, particularly when non-consensual or coerced, are linked to mental health issues like depression and anxiety in teens (Gasso et al., 2019). As adolescents grow older, the relationship between sexting and mental health becomes more pronounced, especially with "aggravated sexting" (coerced or pressured sexting). However, consensual or "experimental" sexting between older teens without pressure tends to show fewer negative emotional effects (Gasso et al., 2019).

The emotional consequences of sexting may be influenced by factors such as coercion, victimization, and age. Teens who feel pressured into sexting or who experience sharing of their content without consent are at higher risk for mental health challenges. This suggests that sexting can be both a predictor and a consequence of mental health issues (Gasso et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of paying close attention to both sexting behaviours and any signs of emotional distress in teens, as they may indicate underlying issues.

Slide 6: Understanding the Law

In some cases, teens who engage in sexting could potentially face legal consequences, but there are exceptions. Under Canadian law, sexting involving minors can sometimes be considered illegal, especially when it involves explicit images or videos of anyone under 18 (CLT, 2024). In the worst-case scenario, teens can be charged with possession or distribution of

child pornography, which is defined as any sexual images or content of minors (Bill C-13, 2013). However, this doesn't mean all sexting is illegal for teens.

There is a legal concept known as the "private use exception," which provides some protection for minors aged 12 to 17 who share explicit images of themselves, as long as certain conditions are met (CLT, 2024). This exception allows teens to produce, keep, and share these images if they are consensual, depict lawful sexual activity, and are shared only between the individuals involved without distribution to others. Both parties must consent to the exchange, and the content must remain private (CLT, 2024).

It's also important to note that consent for sexual activity in Canada has specific age-related guidelines. For example:

- Teens aged 12 and 13 can consent to sexual activity with a partner no more than two years older.
- Teens aged 14 and 15 can consent to sexual activity with someone up to five years older.
- Those aged 16 and 17 can consent to sexual activity with partners of any age, provided the relationship is not exploitative.

If sexting falls outside these guidelines or involves explicit content being distributed to others, it can lead to legal trouble (CLT, 2024).

Slide 7: Social Media's Role in Sexting

Social media makes it easier for teens to send and receive explicit messages or images because of certain features that seem to reduce risk. One major factor is the availability of disappearing or temporary message features, which can give teens a false sense of security. Apps like Snapchat allow users to send photos or videos that disappear after a short time, leading many teens to believe that their content is fleeting and won't be seen again (Lenhart, 2015). This can

encourage sexting because teens feel that there are no long-term consequences if the message vanishes.

However, many teens aren't fully aware of how easy it is for others to save or capture their content, even if it's meant to disappear. Screenshots or screen recordings can preserve these messages and images, allowing them to be shared or distributed long after the sender intended them to be gone. This can lead to serious emotional or social consequences, including embarrassment, bullying, or unwanted exposure (Lenhart, 2015).

Social media, with its constant interaction and instant communication, makes sexting feel casual and common for some teens, while they may not fully understand the risks. Parents should be aware of how these platforms work and talk to their teens about the permanence of what they share, no matter how temporary it seems. Understanding the reality of how social media operates can help guide better digital decision-making and safeguard teens from the potential negative consequences of sexting (Lenhart, 2022).

Slide 8: When Sexting Turns to Cyberbullying

While not all sexting leads to cyberbullying, in certain situations, it can become a serious issue. Sexting can turn into cyberbullying when explicit images or messages are shared without consent. This non-consensual sharing often results in harassment, blackmail, or bullying. When private content is distributed beyond its intended recipient, it becomes a form of cyberbullying, and the emotional impact on the victim can be severe (ASPA, 2021). Teens who experience sexting-related cyberbullying may face anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal due to the humiliation or betrayal they feel. It's important for parents to recognize that while some teens may share intimate content consensually, the risk of that content being used against them—intentionally or maliciously—exists (ASPA, 2021). Open conversations about the consequences

of non-consensual sharing and how to protect themselves online can help teens navigate these complex situations and avoid becoming victims of cyberbullying.

Slide 9: What Happens Online Stays Online

While teens may think that their private messages or photos will disappear or remain confidential, in reality, what goes online can often stay online indefinitely. Many universities, including prestigious institutions like Harvard, have rescinded admission offers based on inappropriate social media activity, even for students who had already been accepted. Colleges increasingly look for students who not only excel academically but also demonstrate strong character and judgment. Sexting content, if shared or exposed, could negatively impact how teens are perceived by admissions officers (Moody, 2019).

Even though not all universities actively monitor applicants' social media, some do, and troubling or inappropriate content may be flagged if brought to their attention by third parties. According to a survey by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, about 11% of colleges have denied admission based on social media content, and another 7% have rescinded offers for the same reason (Moody, 2019). It's crucial for teens to understand that their digital footprints, including sexting or any explicit content shared online, can follow them beyond high school and impact their future opportunities, whether it's getting into college, applying for jobs, or building a professional reputation.

Slide 10: Open, Honest Dialogue

Supporting your teens in navigating the risks of sexting requires open, honest, and non-judgmental communication. Try to start with open dialogue, It's crucial for parents to have regular conversations with their teens about sexting. Don't wait for a problem to arise. Normalize discussions around online safety, personal boundaries, and the potential consequences of sharing

intimate content. Frame the conversation as a way to equip them with the tools they need to make informed decisions, not as a lecture (Selman, 2014).

Teens are more likely to come to you with their concerns if they feel safe from criticism, so try to create a safe and non-judgmental space. Avoid language that might make them feel ashamed or embarrassed. Instead, ask open-ended questions and actively listen to their perspective. Let them know they won't get in trouble for being honest, and that your priority is their well-being.

While discussing the emotional and social risks of sexting, it's important to also cover the legal implications, such as the potential for shared images to be classified as child pornography. Help your teen understand that once content is shared, it's out of their control and could have lasting effects on their reputation, relationships, and future opportunities (Moody, 2019).

Guide your teen to set personal boundaries when interacting online. Talk about respecting their own privacy and the privacy of others. Help them feel confident in saying "no" to requests that make them uncomfortable, and discuss strategies for handling peer pressure in digital environments (Selman, 2014).

Teens take cues from their parents on how to handle sensitive subjects. Model calm, respectful discussions, and show them that it's okay to talk about challenging topics (Selman, 2014). Regular, non-judgmental conversations can prevent risky behaviors and help teens feel supported as they navigate their online lives.

Slide 11: Approaching the Topic with Your Teen

Talking to your teen about sexting can be uncomfortable, but it's an essential conversation to ensure they understand the risks of their online behavior. The first step is to choose the right moment. Timing is key—select a neutral time when both you and your teen are

relaxed and not dealing with other stressors. Avoid bringing it up during emotionally charged moments, like after a disagreement or a bad day (Brown, 2021). This will create a calm and non-confrontational environment where your teen will be more open to having an honest discussion.

It's helpful to frame the conversation as part of a broader discussion about digital responsibility. Teens live much of their lives online, so it's important they understand not only how to navigate the internet but also the potential consequences of sharing intimate content. Rather than positioning it as a lecture or reprimand, focus on empowering your teen with the tools and knowledge to make safe and informed choices about their digital behaviour (Brown, 2021).

Using real-life examples can make the conversation more relatable (Brown, 2021). You can reference a recent news story or a situation from popular culture where sexting was involved. This can serve as a natural way to bring up the topic and make it feel less awkward or forced. It also helps teens see that sexting is a real issue affecting many young people, not just something parents are concerned about.

To keep the conversation open, ask questions that invite your teen to share their thoughts and experiences. For instance, ask how they feel about sexting, whether they think it's common among their peers, or how they would respond if someone asked them to send explicit images. These open-ended questions can lead to a deeper, more meaningful dialogue and give you insight into your teen's perspective (Livingstone & Byrne, 2021).

It's crucial to stay calm and avoid judgment throughout the conversation. If your teen discloses something surprising, take a moment to process before reacting. Reacting with anger or judgment may cause your teen to shut down, so focus on being supportive and guiding them

through these complex situations. Remember, your role is to help them navigate these challenges, not to punish or shame them.

Lastly, sexting and digital behaviour aren't one-time conversations. As your teen's online habits evolve, revisit the topic periodically to check in. By keeping the lines of communication open and ongoing, you ensure that your teen feels they can come to you if they ever face uncomfortable or risky situations online. This steady support will help them feel more confident in making safer choices (Brown, 2021).

Slide 12: Establishing Ground Rules

Establishing clear ground rules for digital behaviour is essential for helping teens navigate the challenges of online interactions. Parents should take the initiative in setting expectations about what is and isn't acceptable when using technology, while encouraging responsible online behaviour. Here are a few steps to approach this effectively.

First, it's important to define specific boundaries regarding how technology is used at home. Set clear guidelines for texting, sharing images, and using social media (Brown, 2021). For instance, you can explain what types of messages are appropriate to send, who it's safe to share photos with, and what content should never be posted online. Make sure your teen understands the risks of sharing private or intimate content, even with people they trust. Emphasize that once something is shared online, it's almost impossible to completely remove it or control who sees it.

Next, discuss privacy limits and the importance of protecting personal information. Set rules about what types of details—such as their location, phone number, or address—should never be shared online. Explain that even on platforms that seem private, information can spread rapidly and be viewed by unintended audiences (Brown, 2021). Sit down with your teen to adjust

privacy settings on social media accounts, ensuring that only trusted individuals can see their posts. This helps them understand how to protect their digital presence.

A useful tool for reinforcing these expectations is creating a technology use agreement. This document should outline the rules for digital behaviour in your household, covering screen time limits, acceptable online activities, and guidelines for social media use. It's also helpful to include consequences for breaking these rules. Involve your teen in the process to encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility (Livingstone & Byrne, 2021). You can also use this opportunity to set positive goals for online behaviour, such as promoting kindness, avoiding cyberbullying, and taking breaks from technology when necessary.

Encouraging responsible online behaviour is another crucial aspect of setting ground rules. Remind your teen that using technology is a privilege that comes with responsibility. Help them understand that their actions online can have real-world consequences (Moody, 2019). Encourage them to think critically about what they post, who they interact with, and how they conduct themselves on digital platforms. Having regular discussions about these topics builds a foundation for thoughtful and respectful behavior online.

Slide 13: Help Teens Navigate Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is a significant factor in sexting, and it's important for parents to equip their teens with the tools to handle situations where they may feel pressured to share inappropriate content. Here's how you can help guide them through these challenges.

First, have a conversation about how to recognize peer pressure and the impact it can have on decision-making. Explain that it's normal to want to fit in, but no one should feel compelled to do something that makes them uncomfortable, especially when it involves sharing

intimate content (Lyness, 2022). Make sure your teen knows that it's okay to say no, and that refusing to engage in sexting is not something to be embarrassed about.

To make them feel more confident in handling these situations, try role-playing different responses they can use when faced with pressure. This can help them practice saying no in a way that feels natural and less awkward. For example, they could say, "I'm not comfortable with that," or "I don't think this is a good idea." Encourage them to find a response that feels right for them, so they feel prepared if the situation arises (Lyness, 2022).

It's also important to reinforce the idea that no one has the right to pressure them into sexting. Let your teen know that true friends and respectful relationships won't involve pressure to send explicit content. Remind them that they are always in control of their own choices, and they should never feel obligated to share personal or intimate material just to please someone else (Lyness, 2022). By teaching your teen how to recognize and resist peer pressure, you empower them to make decisions that align with their values and boundaries. This not only helps them avoid risky behavior but also boosts their confidence in standing up for themselves.

Slide 14: Teaching Teens About Consent

Talking to your teen about consent in the context of sexting is crucial for helping them understand the importance of boundaries, respect, and clear communication. Here's how you can approach this conversation effectively. Start by explaining that consent is necessary for any kind of interaction, including sexting. Teach your teen that before sharing any photos, texts, or videos, it's important to ensure that both people involved are fully on board (Patrick, 2024). Make sure they understand that just because someone consents to receive or send content once, that doesn't mean they are automatically comfortable with it in the future. Reinforce that sexting without mutual consent is a violation of trust and, in some cases, could have serious legal consequences.

Sharing explicit images without someone's permission, even if consent was given initially, is never acceptable and can have damaging effects on relationships and reputations (Patrick, 2024).

It's also essential to stress the importance of respecting other people's boundaries. A healthy relationship involves open and honest communication, and that includes talking about comfort levels before sexting. Let your teen know that having a conversation about what they and their partner are comfortable with isn't awkward—it's actually an important step in showing mutual respect. Encourage them to approach consent in a straightforward way, such as asking, "Is it okay if I send this?" or "Are you comfortable with this?" Make sure they know that if their partner seems unsure, hesitant, or uncomfortable, they don't have consent, and they should stop immediately (Bill C-13).

Help your teen understand that paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues is key. If someone says "no," doesn't respond, or gives unclear signals, that means there's no consent. They should also be aware that someone might say "yes" but still seem uncomfortable or unsure. In those situations, they should check in again, asking questions like, "Are you sure you want to continue?" or "It's okay if you're not into this—what do you want to do instead?" (Patrick, 2024). Remind your teen that everyone deserves to feel safe and respected, and pressuring someone into sexting or any other activity can harm a relationship and damage trust.

Finally, reinforce that consent is an ongoing conversation. Even if both people are initially on the same page, it's important to check in regularly to ensure that boundaries are still being respected (Bill C-13). By teaching your teen about the importance of consent, you're helping them build healthier, more respectful relationships and giving them the tools to navigate digital interactions responsibly.

Slide 15: Encouraging Self-Respect

When talking to teens about sexting, it's important for parents to encourage self-respect and help them understand that they should never feel obligated to share explicit content in order to maintain a relationship. Here's how to approach this sensitive subject.

Start by reinforcing the message that their self-worth is not tied to their physical appearance or to whether they share explicit content. Help your teen understand that a healthy relationship is based on respect, trust, and mutual understanding, not on pressure or expectations to share intimate images (Bernstein, 2013). Remind them that their value comes from who they are as a person, not from how they look or how others perceive them.

You can also talk to your teen about personal boundaries and how to assert them confidently. Explain that respecting their own boundaries—and expecting others to do the same—is a key part of self-respect. Encourage them to stand firm in their decisions about what feels right for them, even if they face pressure from others (Bernstein, 2013). Make sure they know that it's perfectly okay to say "no" if they're uncomfortable, and that no one has the right to make them feel guilty or insecure about their decision.

Building self-esteem is another crucial part of helping teens develop a strong sense of self-respect. Teach them strategies for reframing negative thoughts into more positive, helpful ones (Bernstein, 2013). For example, if your teen feels insecure about their appearance, you can help them practice focusing on the things they like about themselves and remind them that they don't need to be perfect to feel good. Encourage them to take care of themselves, both physically and emotionally, and to surround themselves with people who lift them up, rather than those who bring them down.

It's also helpful to talk to your teen about how to handle difficult emotions, like frustration or insecurity. When they face challenges—whether it's struggling with schoolwork or

feeling left out by peers—encourage them to talk back to self-defeating thoughts (Bernstein, 2013). For example, if your teen feels pressured to send explicit content and thinks, "I have to do this, or they won't like me," guide them to reframe that thought into something like, "If someone truly cares about me, they won't pressure me into doing something I'm uncomfortable with." Similarly, if they're feeling insecure and believe that sharing intimate images will improve their relationship, help them shift their focus toward valuing their self-worth and setting boundaries that prioritize their comfort and well-being (Bernstein, 2013). By helping your teen build their self-esteem and teaching them how to respect their own boundaries, you empower them to make healthier, more confident decisions about sexting and other relationships.

Slide 17: What If They've Already Sent a Sext?

If your teen has sent an inappropriate image or message they regret, it's essential to approach the situation calmly and without anger. Your support will be key to helping them navigate the potential emotional and social consequences. Here's how to help them through this difficult time.

First, focus on providing emotional support and helping your teen problem-solve, rather than punishing them. Understand that they are likely already feeling scared, embarrassed, or overwhelmed, and your calm response will make it easier for them to open up. Let them know that making a mistake doesn't define them, and your priority is to work together on addressing the situation (Thorn, 2023).

Next, have a conversation about what steps can be taken to minimize further damage. Encourage your teen to stop responding to anyone who is asking for more content or making threats, and remind them that they have the right to say no, even if they've shared something before (Thorn, 2023). If they feel uncomfortable or pressured, reinforce that the person asking is

the one in the wrong. Encourage your teen to talk to someone they trust, whether it's you, another adult, or a counselor, to get the support they need.

It's also important to discuss the practical steps they can take to protect themselves. Encourage them to report the image to the platform where it was shared, as tech companies can sometimes help remove explicit content and address the threats (Bernstein, 2013). You can work with your teen to report the situation to law enforcement, if necessary, especially if there is sextortion involved. Let your teen know that sharing explicit images of minors, even if they are the subject of the image, is illegal, but working with a trusted adult can help them decide how to proceed.

Remind your teen to save all evidence, including messages, images, or threats, rather than deleting everything out of panic. This documentation will help if they need to report the situation or if the issue escalates. Encourage them to take screenshots or save content, and reassure them that this is part of protecting themselves (Thorn, 2023). Finally, help your teen take control of their privacy by changing all of their passwords, especially if they believe someone else may have access to their accounts (Thorn, 2023). Emphasize that taking proactive steps like this is an important way to regain control of the situation.

Slide 17: Protecting Your Teen Legally

When talking to your teen about the legal consequences of sexting in British Columbia, it's important to help them understand how the law works and why it's there to protect people. Start by explaining that sharing sexual photos or videos of someone without their consent could be illegal. The law is designed to prevent the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, which can have serious consequences (Kids Help Phone, 2024). In 2001, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that young people have the right to express themselves sexually by creating and sharing

sexual images of themselves, but only under certain conditions. The images must be shared voluntarily between consenting individuals who are close in age, the content must not depict any abuse or assault, and the images must remain private. If any of these conditions are broken, legal consequences can follow (Bill C-13).

It's important for your teen to understand that sharing intimate images without consent became even more serious with the passage of the Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act (Bill C-13). This law updated the Criminal Code of Canada and gave law enforcement more authority to access online information to stop the spread of intimate images. Explain the legal terms related to sexting, such as child pornography. It's illegal to send or share sexual photos or videos of anyone who is, or appears to be, under 18. This includes images of themselves if they are under 18. Possession of these images, even if it's saved on a phone or stored in the cloud, is also illegal (Kids Help Phone, 2024). Similarly, distributing these images—whether by showing them to others, forwarding them, or posting them online—is considered a crime.

If your teen ever feels overwhelmed or unsure about their legal rights, let them know that they can talk to a lawyer. Lawyers are required to keep everything confidential, which means your teen can get legal advice without worrying that the lawyer will share their conversation with others (Kids Help Phone, 2024).

If legal action becomes necessary, remind your teen of a few key points:

- Ask for help. Speak to a lawyer to understand what's happening and what their options are.
- Take care of themselves. Dealing with legal issues can be stressful, and it's important for your teen to seek emotional support too.

- Don’t retaliate. If they’ve been wronged, encourage them not to act impulsively. Legal solutions take time, and retaliation could make the situation worse.
- Be patient. Legal processes can be slow, and it might take time for decisions to be made.
- It’s their decision. A lawyer can provide advice and guidance, but the final decisions about how to handle the situation are up to your teen (Kids Help Phone, 2024).

By talking openly about the legal consequences of sexting, you can help your teen make informed decisions and understand the potential risks involved.

Slide 18: Using Technology to Monitor and Guide

Parents can use parental control tools to help monitor their teens' digital activities, ensuring a safer online experience while guiding them through potential risks. These tools can be valuable in detecting risky behaviors, such as inappropriate content sharing or interactions with unsafe individuals, and they help promote responsible internet use.

There are several parental control apps, like Apple Screen Time, Google Family Link, and Qustodio, that allow parents to monitor texts, social media activity, and web browsing. These tools can alert parents to concerning behaviors, such as cyberbullying or sexting, without completely invading their teen's privacy. For example, Bark sends parents alerts for potentially harmful conversations, while Qustodio helps track app usage and screen time (Wirecutter, 2018). However, it's important to strike a balance between monitoring and trusting your teen’s judgment. While these tools can offer peace of mind, they should not replace open communication and trust. Encourage regular conversations with your teen about the importance of staying safe online and making smart decisions, reinforcing that the goal is to protect them, not to control every aspect of their online life (Kids Help Phone, 2024). This balance helps build

a foundation of mutual respect while ensuring your teen understands the importance of responsible digital behaviour.

Slide 19: Partnering with School on Sexting Education

Collaboration between parents and schools in teaching sex education, particularly regarding sexting and consent, is essential for supporting teens as they navigate the complexities of modern relationships. Some schools have taken the lead by implementing comprehensive sex education programs that address these sensitive topics head-on (Patterson, 2018). However, for these efforts to be fully effective, parents must also play an active role in reinforcing these lessons at home, creating a consistent and supportive environment for their children.

For example in San Francisco, the school district developed a progressive sex education curriculum that addresses issues like consent, sexting, and sexual preferences across all grade levels. Starting in elementary school, children learn about body boundaries and healthy communication. In middle school, the "Healthy Me. Healthy Us" curriculum introduces topics such as birth control, sexual harassment, and personal boundaries, setting a foundation for understanding consent (Patterson, 2018). By high school, students engage with the "Be Real. Be Ready" program, which consists of 26 lessons designed for ninth graders (Patterson, 2018). This curriculum takes a "shame-free and non-judgmental" approach, offering teens clear, developmentally appropriate information on sexual health and relationships (Patterson, 2018). One of the most notable features of this initiative is its focus on real-world issues like sexting and digital consent, teaching students the importance of respecting boundaries both online and offline.

Additionally, the success of the above programs hinge on collaboration between parents, teachers and students. These centers provide a safe space for teens to discuss their concerns, ask

questions, and receive accurate information about sexual health (Patterson, 2018). By establishing these resources, the district has created a comprehensive, inclusive environment that not only educates but empowers students to make informed choices about their sexual health and digital behavior.

The success of programs like San Francisco's hinges on active collaboration between schools and parents. When parents engage in these initiatives, attending workshops, discussing sexting, and teaching consent at home, it amplifies the impact of the education provided in schools. This united effort ensures that teens receive consistent, supportive messaging from both their educators and families, helping them navigate the challenges of adolescence with confidence and respect.

Slide 20: Why Shame Doesn't Work

Supporting teens in navigating the complexities of sexting requires a non-judgmental approach that encourages open communication rather than shaming them for their mistakes. When teens feel ashamed or judged, they are more likely to hide their digital behaviours, leading to secrecy and isolation. Instead of shaming, parents can focus on fostering an environment where their teens feel safe discussing their online experiences (Hagan, 2017). By asking questions, listening without reacting negatively, and guiding them through the potential consequences, parents can build trust and provide the tools teens need to make smarter decisions in the future.

Reinforcing the idea that mistakes are opportunities for learning is crucial. If a teen engages in risky behaviors like sexting, it's important to frame the conversation around growth, not punishment. Helping teens understand the risks of sharing explicit content online, while also emphasizing that they can move forward positively, will teach them resilience. Let them know

that everyone makes mistakes, and the goal is to learn from them and avoid repeating the behaviour (Hagan, 2017). This approach not only helps teens develop better judgment but also ensures they will turn to their parents for guidance rather than hide their struggles.

Slide 21: Parent Collaboration

When all parents or caregivers are actively involved in discussions about sexting, it provides a more balanced and comprehensive approach to sexting education. Each caregiver brings a different perspective that can complement the messages teens may hear from teachers and therapists, creating a well-rounded understanding of digital responsibility (Coleman, 2021). By working together, parents can ensure that their teens receive consistent messaging about the importance of consent, respect, and making thoughtful choices online. This collaborative effort helps teens feel supported by all parents and caregivers, strengthening their ability to make safer, more informed decisions regarding their digital behaviour.

Slide 22: Teaching Teens About Privacy and Security

Teaching teens about digital privacy is an essential step in helping them navigate the risks of sexting and protect their online safety. Parents should encourage teens to use privacy settings on all social media accounts, ensuring that their personal information is not publicly accessible. These settings allow teens to control who sees their posts, photos, and interactions, minimizing the chances of their content falling into the wrong hands (National Cybersecurity Alliance, 2023). Having conversations about why privacy matters, particularly when it comes to sensitive information or images, helps teens understand the importance of managing their digital footprint.

In addition to privacy settings, teaching teens how to create strong, unique passwords for their accounts is crucial for protecting their information. Passwords should be complex, incorporating a mix of letters, numbers, and symbols, and should be updated regularly.

Furthermore, it's essential to educate teens about the dangers of using public Wi-Fi, as unsecured networks can expose their data to hackers. Explain that connecting to public networks without precautions could lead to others accessing their private messages or content. Using a Virtual Private Network (VPN) can add a layer of security, especially when teens are on the go (National Cybersecurity Alliance, 2023). By helping teens develop good digital habits early, parents can reduce the risks associated with sexting and online privacy breaches.

Slide 23: Recognizing When to Seek Professional Help

When it comes to sexting, there are situations where the involvement of a Registered Clinical Counsellor or psychotherapist becomes necessary, especially if a teen has experienced significant emotional distress or trauma. While sexting, in some cases, may be consensual and not cause harm, coercion or pressure to engage in sexting can lead to severe psychological effects. Parents should be mindful of signs that their teen might be struggling, such as sudden withdrawal, anxiety, depression, or drastic changes in behavior. These symptoms may indicate that their teen is experiencing distress related to sexting, particularly if they feel embarrassed, ashamed, or fearful of consequences, either from their peers or adults (Lieberman et al., 2013).

At this point, seeking the help of a licensed counselor, therapist, or school psychologist is crucial. A professional can provide a safe space for the teen to process their emotions, assess whether any pre-existing mental health issues are being exacerbated by the sexting experience, and develop targeted interventions to help the teen recover. Mental health professionals can also support parents in understanding how to best guide their teen through the situation, offering strategies for rebuilding their self-esteem, confidence, and sense of security (Lieberman et al., 2013). Addressing the issue early with professional support can prevent long-term psychological

impacts and help teens navigate the complexities of their digital and emotional lives in healthier ways.

Limitations to the Capstone

The research on adolescent sexting, while informative, has notable limitations that warrant further exploration. One significant gap in the literature is the scarcity of recent sources, with most studies available dating between 2018 and 2021. Given the rapid evolution of technology, it is difficult to determine whether the data from these years accurately reflects current trends. Social media platforms, messaging apps, and even the ways adolescents use technology change almost yearly, making it challenging to keep up with the latest patterns of behavior. As a westerner crafting a resource for parents residing in British Columbia, my search focused primarily on articles from North America, where many of the studies were based. However, it would be valuable to explore how adolescent sexting is studied and perceived in different regions, particularly in more technologically advanced countries in Asia or in less developed regions where technology access is more limited.

A key intervention gap is the lack of comprehensive, qualitative research. The majority of studies I encountered relied heavily on quantitative data, often derived from online surveys. While these surveys provide useful statistical insights, they may miss the nuanced experiences and motivations behind adolescent sexting. Case studies or in-depth interviews could offer a more holistic understanding of the emotional and social factors driving these behaviors. By delving into personal stories, researchers could uncover patterns that may not emerge in broad surveys, such as how cultural, family, or peer influences shape adolescents' decisions regarding sexting.

Future research should prioritize these qualitative methods, along with expanding geographic and cultural perspectives. There is also a need for studies that are better aligned with current technological realities, as the speed of change in the digital world creates a disconnect between older data and present-day behaviors. By addressing these gaps, future studies could provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture of adolescent sexting, ultimately helping parents and educators offer more relevant guidance and interventions.

Conclusion

As a mom, educator, and future registered clinical counselor, I found the topic of adolescent sexting to be both fascinating and highly informative. This research has given me greater confidence in counseling both parents and teens on the subject, equipping me with the tools and knowledge to approach these conversations with care and clarity. The study also reinforced the timeless principles of good parenting that apply to so many challenges, including sexting. Parents need to stay informed, build trusting relationships with their children, and be aware of the legal landscape surrounding online security and sexting. It's also essential to teach kids not only about the legal consequences but about self-esteem, peer pressure, and the importance of setting clear boundaries around cell phone use. While teens may break the rules, ensuring expectations are communicated is key.

Once I began gathering well-researched, factual information, I found this topic far less overwhelming. It reminded me of the old "razor blade in the apple" scare around Halloween, where fear was magnified despite the rarity of the issue. The stories we often hear in the media about sexting focus on the extreme and tragic consequences some teens have faced. What’s not as widely discussed is how sexting, for many teens, is a way of exploring sexual relationships at a developmentally appropriate time in this technologically advanced world. In fact, many of us

parents engaged in far riskier sexual behaviours in our own adolescence compared to today's teens sending a nude picture or sharing sexual fantasies through text. Understanding this perspective helps demystify the issue and gives us a more balanced view of how to guide our children through it.

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Appendix A
Presentation Slides

Slide 1

Supporting Your Adolescent in Making Smart Decisions About Sexting

•••

A Guide for Parents

Slide 2

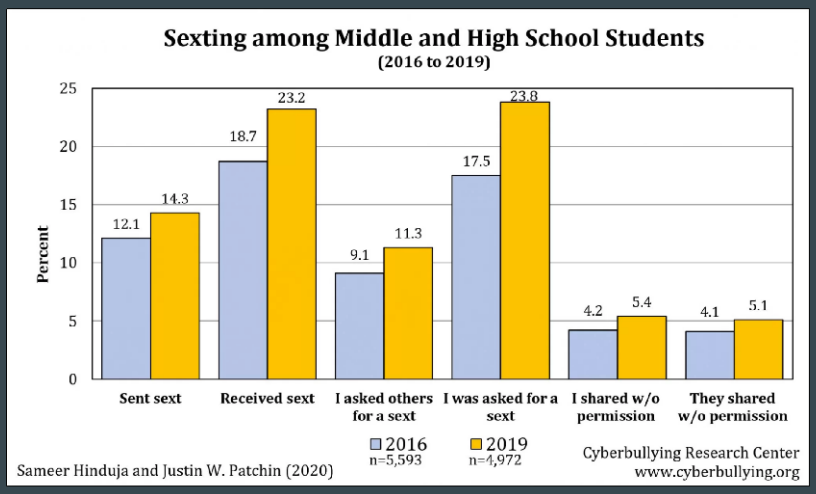
Why This Topic Matters

Slide 3

What is Sexting?

Slide 4

The Numbers Speak



Slide 5

Understanding the Motivation

Slide 6

Emotional & Mental Health Consequences

Slide 7

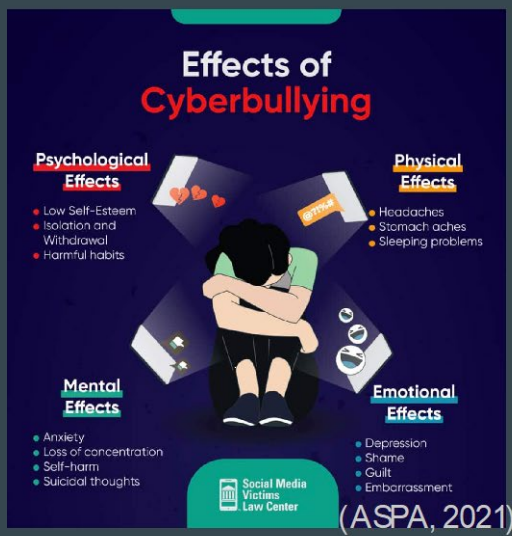
Understanding the Law

Slide 8

Social Media's Role in Sexting

Slide 9

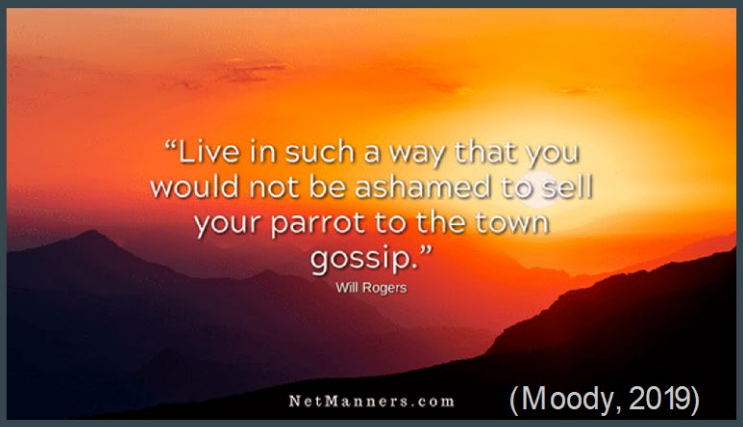
When Sexting Turns Into Cyberbullying



(ASPA, 2021)

Slide 10

What Happens Online Stays Online



(Moody, 2019)

Slide 11

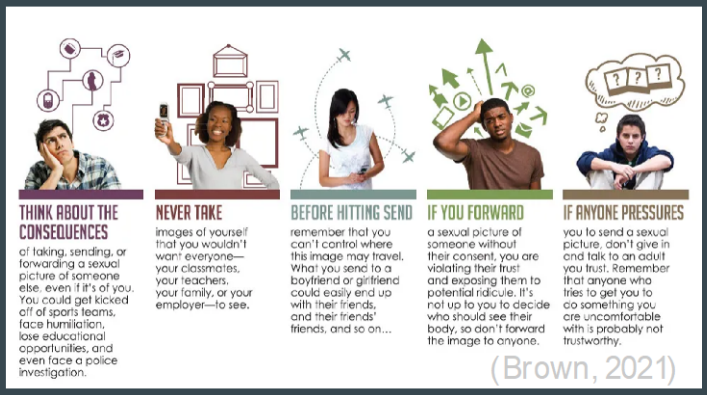
Open, Honest Dialogue

Slide 12

Approaching the Topic with Your Teen

Slide 13

Establishing Ground Rules



(Brown, 2021)

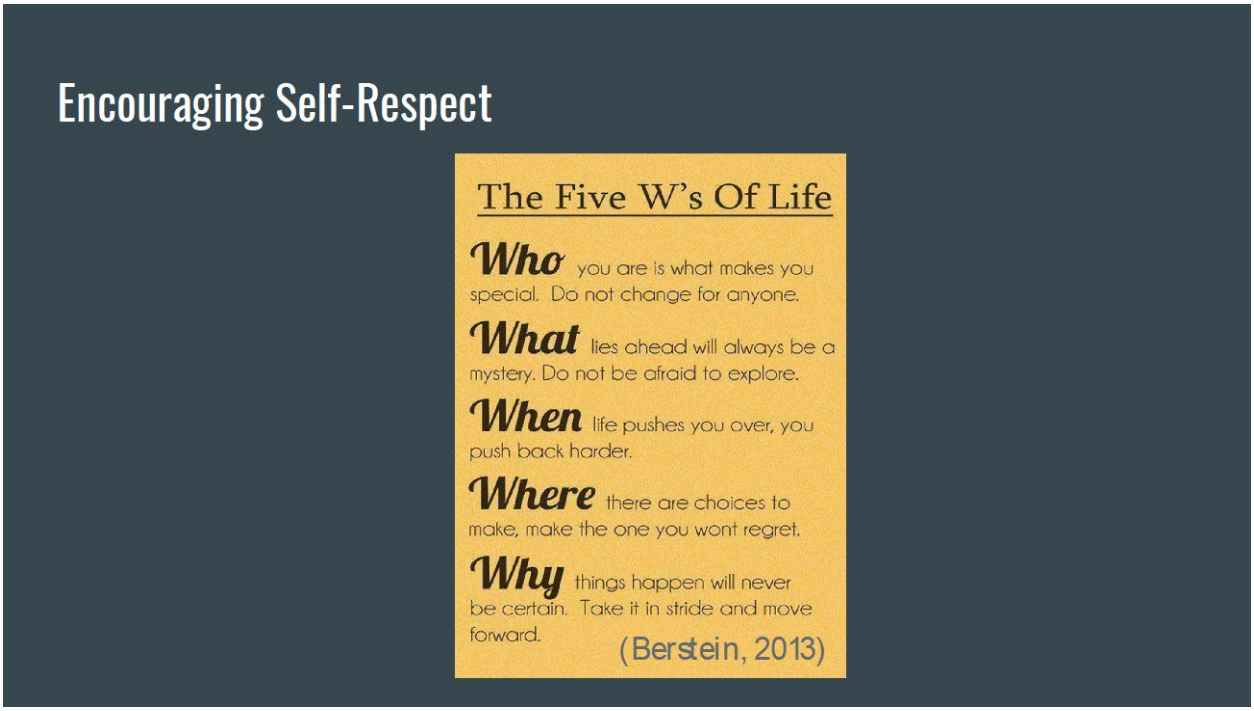
Slide 14

Help Teens Navigate Peer Pressure

(Lyness, 2022)

Slide 15

Slide 16



Slide 17

What If They've Already Sent a Sext?

Slide 18

Protecting Your Teen Legally

Slide 19

Using Technology to Monitor and Guide

Top pick	Top pick	Top pick
Apple Screen Time	**Google Family Link**	**Qustodio**
Best for iOS users	For kids on Android who are under 13	For kids on Android who are over 13

(Wirecutter, 2018)

Slide 20

Partnering with Schools on Sexting Education

(Paterson, 2018)

Slide 21

Why Shame Doesn't Work

Slide 22

Parent Collaboration

(Coleman, 2021)

Slide 23

Teaching Teens About Privacy and Security

(National Cybersecurity Alliance, 2023)

Slide 24

Recognizing When to Seek Professional Help

Signs That a Teenager Needs Therapy

Consider therapy if your child...

- has trouble connecting with peers.
- expresses a sense of hopelessness.
- lacks confidence and feels bad about themselves.
- worries excessively about the future.
- makes repeated attempts to avoid school.
- talks about self-harm or suicide.
- spend more and more time alone.
- engages in negative behavior more frequently.

(Lieberman et al., 2013)

Slide 25

Where to Find Help

#GoodDigitalParenting Video Series

Sexting 101

Kids support line 1-800-668-6868

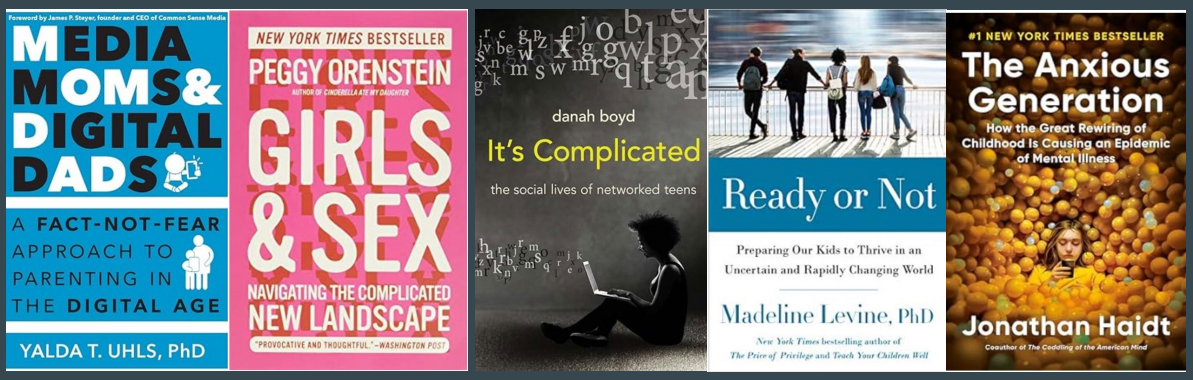
National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)

Sexting and Online Safety

Canadian centre for child protection

Slide 26

Books



Slide 27

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