

Texting, Sexting and Posting: 4 Tips to Offer Parents

Three quarters of teens maintain a profile on Facebook or a similar social networking site. The same percentage of teens also carry a personal cell phone. As a result, they are texting, posting and sharing more information than ever before.

In fact, teens send an average of 3,700 text messages per month -- that's about 120 texts per day. Even more shocking is the fact that many aren't just texting, they're also sexting. Recent surveys indicate that fully 20 percent of teens have sent or received a sexually explicit photo.

Most kids and parents may not realize it, but sexting could lead to a felony in Minnesota. That's because it's illegal to generate, possess or distribute images of children under 18. If caught, these kids could be labeled as a sex offender.

Parents aren't the only ones who are concerned about inappropriate texting, sexting and postings on Facebook. The Minnesota Department of Education says sexting and cyber-bullying are impacting the classroom.

"What's become quite apparent is that even though Facebook slams or texts are sent to kids at 2 a.m. off school grounds, that still has an impact on the learning environment on Monday morning," said Nancy Riestenberg, a school climate specialist at the Minnesota Department of Education.

She said many schools are trying to take steps to educate students and parents about the consequences of sexting and cyber-bullying both before and after these events occur.

"The schools have found that many parents and kids don't realize sexting is illegal," she said. "Many parents also don't realize they can monitor or even take away the computer or cell phone."

She offered several suggestions on what pediatricians can say to parents and children about these issues, which can be found in the sidebar to the right.

Common texting codes

LOL = Laughing Out Loud	PIR = Parents In Room
TTYL = Talk to You Later	OTB = Off to Bed
BRB = Be Right Back	^5 = High Five
OMG = Oh My Goodness	CU = See You
WTF = What The F***	GNOC = Get Naked on Camera
B2W = Back to Work	
L8R = Later	IDK = I don't know

1. Set some ground rules

Establish basic guidelines like how much time kids can spend online for homework and recreation and when they are allowed to text. Turn off cell phones during meal times. Remind kids about the possible consequences of texting or posting inappropriate photos. If they receive a sext, they should tell a parent.

2. Keep computers and cell phones out of the bedroom.

Parents should put the computer in a common, public area in the house. Cell phones should not be kept in kids' bedrooms overnight and shouldn't serve as an alarm clock. This will reduce the temptation to check or send messages late at night.

2. Let your kids know you'll be monitoring their online and cell phone activity

Parents have the right and responsibility to monitor their kid's activity, even online. They should occasionally check the Internet history on their computer, visit their child's Facebook profile and scan through text messages or cell phone records for unusual activity. They might also consider turning on certain security features and disabling the camera setting on the computer or cell phone.

4. Look for ways to increase physical activity and family time

AAP recommends no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time per day. Kids who are involved in sports and family activities -- including family meals -- will have less time to spend online and fewer opportunities to engage in inappropriate behavior.

To download parent handouts on cell phones, sexting and social networking, visit www.mnaap.org/forparents.htm