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Elizabeth Englander

Bridgewater State University, eenlander@bridgew.edu

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Low Risk Associated With Most Teenage Sexting: A Study Of 617 18-Year-Olds

Elizabeth Englander, PhD

This report describes research conducted in 2011 and 2012 on 617 subjects, 30% of whom reported sexting. The report details the frequency of sexting behaviors as well as the relationship between coerced and non-coerced sexting, sexting and gender differences, characteristics of sexters, and data on risk of discovery and social conflict following engaging in sexting. The study revealed that most risk associated with sexting is experienced by youth who are coerced into sexting; they are more impacted emotionally by the experience, and are more likely to have a prior victimization. Risk of discovery and social conflict was highest for coerced sexters but still generally low.

Along with every other area of life, sex has managed to insinuate itself into cyberspace. “Sexting,” of course, can be variably defined as “the electronic sending of pictures depicting nudity,” the sending of pictures depicting “semi-nudity,” or as “sending or posting sexually explicit pictures *or* writing.” In the current study it was defined as *sending nude pictures of yourself*.

Methodology

This was a regional study in which 617 college freshman from Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts were surveyed about their activities during all four years of high school, including online activities, social activities and relationships, and academic and psychological functioning. The survey was administered through the University Subject Pool, so subjects were familiar with its source. Subjects completed anonymous surveys for the research between October, 2011, and June, 2012. Respondents who reported that they had “sexted” were then asked a series of follow up questions, including questions about the outcome (if any) of their sexting. The study sought to find out if self-reported sexting was associated with other self-reported risk factors such as depression, anxiety, alcohol/drug use, Special Needs status in school, use of digital self-harm (or self-cyberbullying), or being a prior victim of dating or domestic violence. In addition, we asked questions such as, what were the outcomes of the sexting incident(s)? What proportion of “sexters” report that they engaged in sexting as a result of being pressured or coerced, and do the risk factors vary between these “pressured sexters” and the “non-pressured sexters”?

Frequencies of sexting behaviors.

Surveys on the frequency of sexting tend to appear, at first blush, to produce a wide variety of numbers. In this survey, 30% of subjects told us that they had sent nude pictures at some point during the four years of high school, and 45% said that they had received such pictures on their cell phones.¹ Similar numbers have been found in other surveys of college students.^{2:3:4} All those numbers are substantially higher than those found, for example, in a telephone survey of a national sample of 1,560 children and teens that asked them about sexting during the previous year.⁵ In that telephone survey, which was important as it was the first to examine a nationally representative sample, only 2.5% of subjects reported making a nude image, and only 7.1% reported receiving one.

Those numbers sound very different, but closer scrutiny reveals significant consistencies with other research. The age of the subjects studied is the primary difference between studies that found different frequencies of sexting. The Mitchell et al. survey included a wide range of ages (10-17 years old), but at the older end of the spectrum (the 16- and 17-year-olds), rates of sexting were 31% and 41%, respectively. A second 2012 study of sexting among 11-18 year olds found the same pattern; namely, that while “only” 17% of students engaged in sexting, the age breakdown revealed that 3% of 12-year-olds reported sexting, but 32% of 18-year-olds did so.⁶ These rates among older teens are similar to the rates found using convenience samples (typically also done on older teens). In short, although Mitchell et al.’s and Dake et al.’s samples *appeared* to find lower rates of sexting, they actually found comparable rates of sexting when equivalent age groups were compared.

Putting all the pieces together, it appears that older subjects are substantially more likely than younger subjects to report that they “sext,” and that rates over extended time periods (more than one year, as with the current study) may be higher as well. Although all studies were done anonymously, it’s also possible that subjects might also be more willing to be forthcoming about sexting if they are older and are asked in a written format by a familiar organization.

Thus, in spite of media reports to the contrary, the different studies in the field have not really yielded wildly different numbers. Having said that, I think that the scrutiny over the frequency of sexting reveals a possibly misplaced focus. Clearly sexting is not a universal behavior, nor is it vanishingly rare. Some youth engage in it; many do not. Perhaps a focus on the social and emotional impacts, if any, would be more productive. We should not simply assume that sexting is associated with serious difficulties, or consequences, despite media cases that document the contrary. One important finding of the current study is that a great deal of sexting does not appear to result in significant trouble for the “sexter,” although some types of sexting may be more associated with trouble.

Motivations for sexting.

Indisputably, the most important motivation for sexting revealed in this study (and others) was pressure or coercion. Girls were more likely than boys to report that they had sexted, but the gender difference was entirely due to the girls being more likely to report that they had been pressured, coerced, blackmailed, or threatened into sexting ($X^2=5.64, p<.05$) (see Figure 1). The genders didn’t differ on their rates of voluntary

sexting. A qualitative report released earlier this year also identified coercive sexting as a major area of concern.⁷ In this study, subjects were asked to rate how upsetting sending a nude picture had been for them. Among those who had sexted voluntarily, 79% selected the “least upset” rating (a 1 or 2 out of 10). However, only 17% of those who had been pressured to sext selected that rating. Taken together, this data suggests that sexting tends to be negatively impactful when it is coerced; that coercion may be twice as common among girls as it is among boys; and that for girls, about half of all sexting may be coercive, similar to rates we found in 2011.⁸

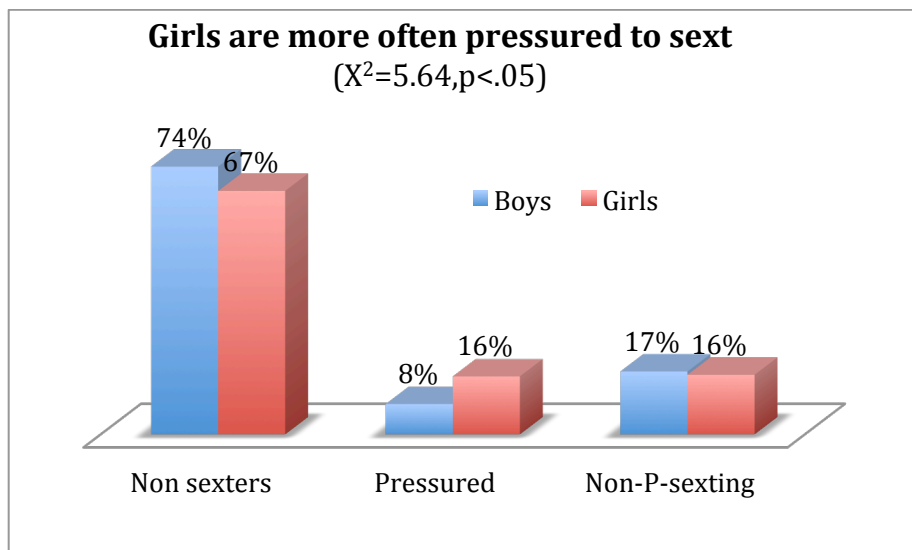


Figure 1

Both non-pressured sexters and pressured sexters were most likely to attribute the pressure they were under to a “date who wanted the picture.” However, the groups differed on other sources of pressure. Pressured-sexters were more likely to report that a friend pressured them, or that they were subjected to blackmail or a threat (although these were distant second and third choices). Interestingly, although both groups overwhelmingly attributed pressure to someone they were dating, the non-pressured daters *also* overwhelmingly reported that despite that pressure, they genuinely wanted to sext (see Figure 2). Taken together with the significant difference in their self-rated “upsettedness,” this suggests that “pressure from a date” to sext is not always experienced negatively.

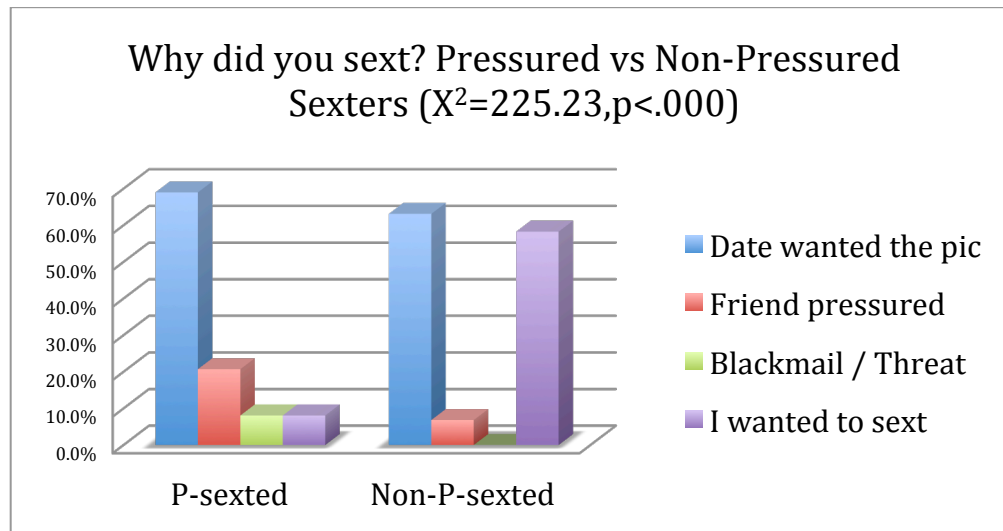


Figure 2

What on earth were they thinking? is the refrain reverberating throughout middle class America. What they often seem to be thinking about is their relationships.

Apart from the coercion issue, the most common motivation for sexting was “because a date or boyfriend/girlfriend wanted the picture” (66%). Almost as common was the idea that sexting will attract someone you’re interested in (65%) – a 21st-century equivalent, perhaps, of a new hairstyle. Less common was the idea that sexting could increase your popularity (22%), or that by sexting, you could prove to a boyfriend or girlfriend that you completely trust him or her (17%).

Although adults tend to worry about sexting between kids and strangers (either adults or other teens they don’t know), the vast majority of sexting among older teens apparently happens between those who know each other. In this study, fully 96% of subjects who received a nude picture reported that they recognized the person in the picture. Only 4% said they didn’t recognize the individual. After getting the picture, the most common action was simply to delete it. Predictably, no subjects said that they had shown the picture to an adult, or even told an adult about getting it in the first place.

Characteristics that differ between non-sexters and Sexters

A few characteristics separated sexters from non-sexters more generally, without distinguishing between pressured- and non-pressured sexters. These were: rates of receiving nude photos, being sexually active during high school, and difficulties with alcohol and/or drug abuse while in high school.

Subjects who engaged in sexting were also more likely to report that they had also received nude photos ($X^2=165.27, p<.000$). Most non-sexters (71%) reported that they hadn't received such images, while the opposite was true for both pressured and non-pressured sexters (see Figure 3).

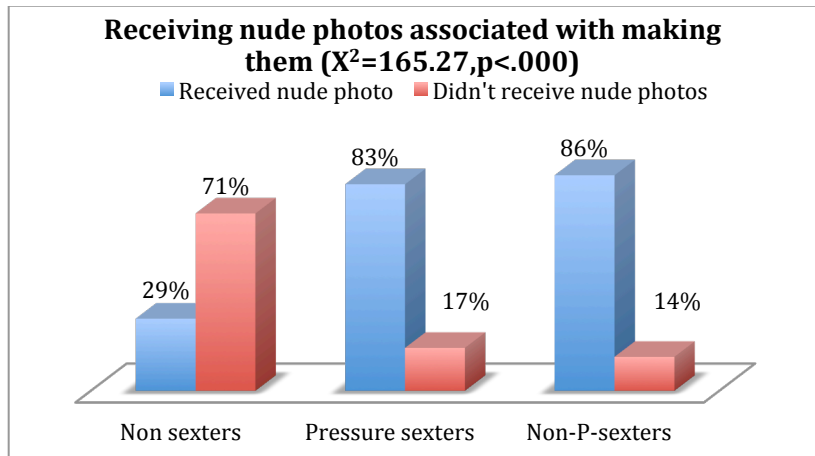


Figure 3

Subjects who sexted were far more likely, compared to non-sexters, to also report that they were sexually active during high school. Approximately 57% of non-sexters reported being sexually active, in comparison to 86% of those who engaged in sexting ($X^2=72.28, p<.000$). However, subjects who reported being pressured to sext were no more likely to be sexually active than were the non-pressured sexters. Being sexually active was associated with sexting *in general* (see Figure 4).

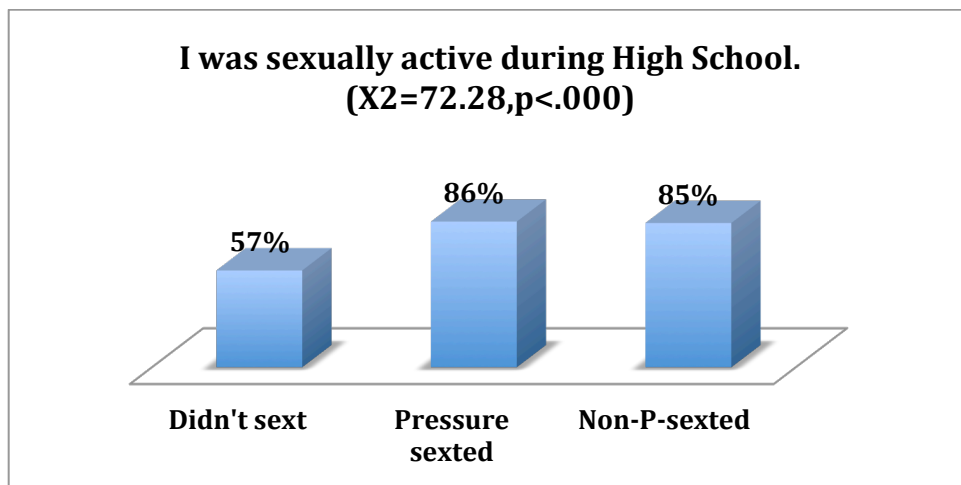


Figure 4

All sexters also showed elevations in reporting that they had had difficulty with alcohol and/or drugs during high school – again, both groups were elevated above non-sexters (but similarly elevated). Both groups were (in contrast) *less* likely than non-sexters to report being on an IEP, or having trouble with depression during high school.

Characteristics that differ between Non-sexters, Pressure-sexters, and Non-pressured sexters

Despite these similarities, there were differences between pressured- and non-pressured sexters. Pressured-sexters were significantly more likely to report having had problems during high school with excessive anxiety and prior dating violence (Figure 5).

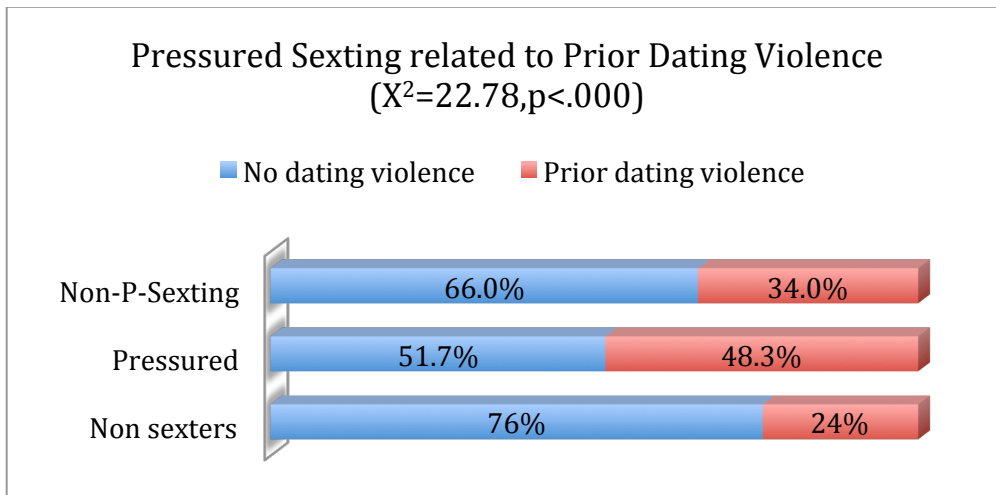


Figure 5

Pressured-sexters were also significantly more likely to report that they had engaged in self-cyberbullying, a phenomenon described in detail in another MARC Research Report (“Digital Self-Harm: Frequency, Type, Motivations and Outcomes”).⁹ Digital self-harm, also called self-cyberbullying and referred to at times as “Digital Munchausen,” is a behavior in which students create another persona or account from which they essentially cyberbully themselves. They then reveal the cyberbullying to peers and/or adults, most often in a bid for attention and sympathy. Digital self-cyberbullying is associated with difficulties with alcohol and/or drugs, family problems, and being both a bully and a victim of bullying. Here, it is also associated with sexting under coercion or pressure (see Figure 6).

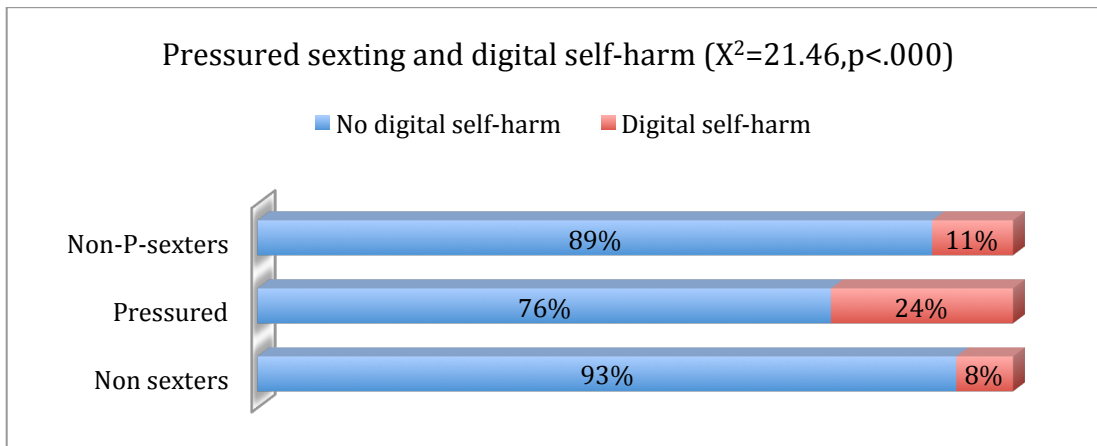


Figure 6

The Risk of Criminal Prosecution

As with other digital risk factors, the *actual* risk of sexting is hard to pin down. Theoretically the most serious risk is that of criminal prosecution. It's true that sexting may break the letter of the law; when a 15-year-old sends a nude picture of herself, she may be actually producing and/or distributing child pornography. But despite a few high profile cases early on, most jurisdictions appear to be backing off on prosecuting teens who sext as though they were adult purveyors of child pornography.¹⁰ A national study found that by 2012, few teenage sexting cases were actually being prosecuted in a criminal court.¹¹ A 2011 survey of law enforcement found that only 18% of cases involving youth-created pornographic images (with no aggravating circumstances) progressed to the point of an arrest.¹²

How often is sexting actually discovered?

Are parents aware of their children sexting? Do educators detect sexting when it happens? Does sexting cause problems for the sender? Adults may not like sexting because of its sexual nature, and may seize on any potential risk of discovery or backlash to discourage its proliferation. But from an educational standpoint, citing risks that students experience as unusual (or even rare) may greatly diminish the impact of any information. For example, many adults teach kids that once you send a picture digitally, you lose control of it and it can be forwarded and copied endlessly. This is absolutely true, of course; but the lesson may feel misleading to kids, since in this study, about three-quarters (74%) of all the kids who sexted reported that to their knowledge, the picture(s) was never shown to anyone apart from the intended recipient. That proportion

was higher for non-pressured sexters (86%), and lower for pressured sexters (64%). Pressured-sexters were significantly more likely to report that their picture was seen by one to two other people, or by three or more others. Non-pressured-sexters, in contrast, were more likely to report that their parents saw the image, although that percentage was still only 4% (see Figure 7).

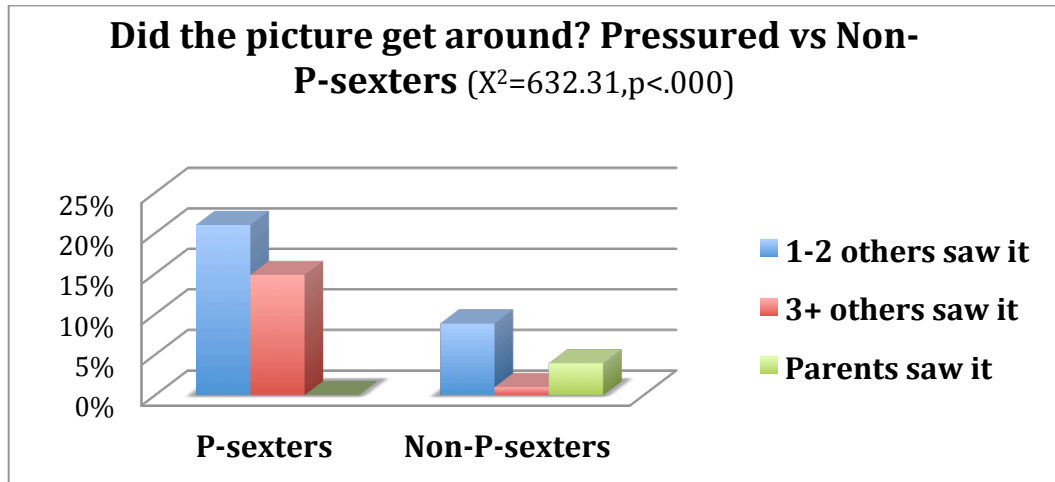


Figure 7

Did the picture cause problems for you?

Overall, 79% of sexters reported that the picture caused no problems for them. Again, this percentage was higher among non-pressured-sexters (92%) and lower among pressured-sexters (68%) (see Figure 8). Most common were problems with other kids at school who saw the picture – about 13% of sexters had to deal with that. Problems with peers were far more common among pressured-sexters (21%) than among non-pressured sexters (4%). Fewer (6.4%) said they had problems with their parents after sexting, and the difference between pressured- and non-pressured-sexters was smaller (9% versus 4%). Finally, only 2% of those pressured into sexting said they had problems with the adults at school (versus 0% of those who were non-pressured-sexters).

So if sexting is discovered and causes problems, it's most likely to be among their peers – and away from any adult awareness. Problems seem rare among those who freely choose to sext, but much more common among those who are pressured or coerced into sexting ($X^2=632.31, p<.000$). But it doesn't appear to be overwhelmingly likely that the picture will cause problems at all.

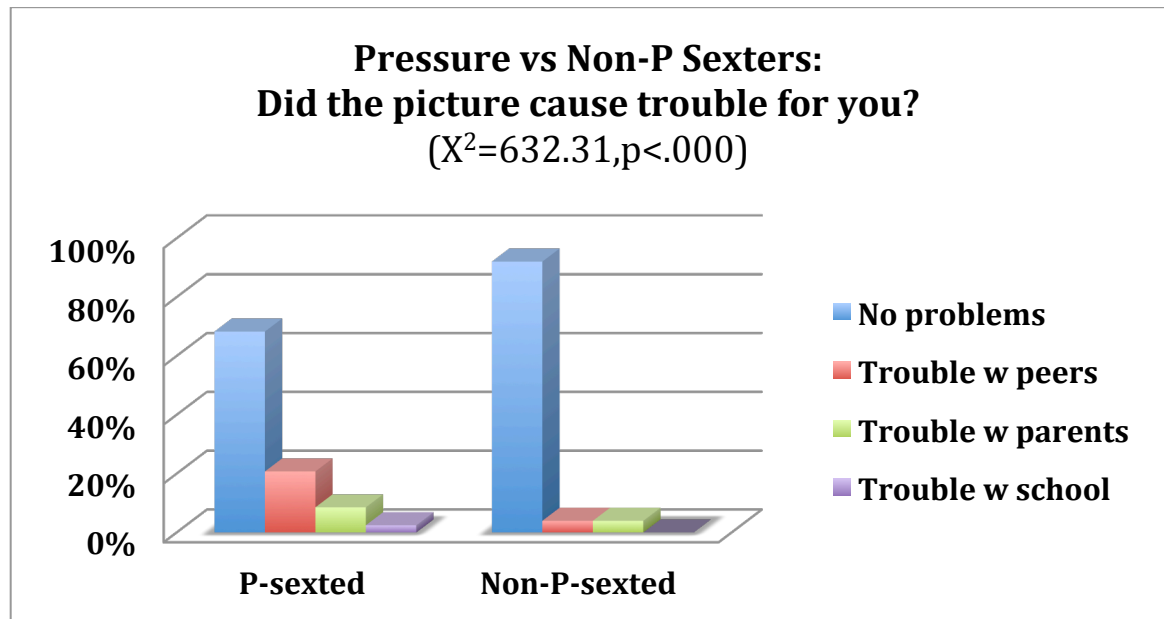


Figure 8

Discussion & Recommendations

By far, the most troubling issue currently on the horizon about sexting is the probability that many kids sext when coerced or pressured to do so. About half of the girls and a third of the boys who sexted said they did so at least once because someone else pressured or coerced them to send a nude picture. The person applying the pressure was usually a potential date (most often a boyfriend), and the gender difference in sexting rates overall was entirely accounted for by girls being more likely to be pressured into sexting. From virtually every standpoint, risks associated with sexting were significantly greater – and sometimes entirely accounted for by – the group of sexters who were pressured or coerced into sexting. Students who were pressured into sexting were also more likely to have a history of excessive anxiety, dating violence and of self-cyberbullying (that is, taking on false roles to pretend to cyberbully themselves, and thereby to gain the attention and sympathy of others, usually peers). Thus they may be victims who are being re-victimized.

In contrast, students who sexted because they wanted to did frequently report that a date wanted the photo but did not seem to experience those requests as coercive, and their rates of discovery or troubles were very, very low. Although we did not ask subjects if they had encountered legal problems from the sexting, other research suggests that criminal prosecution is increasingly seen as inappropriate in sexting cases.

These findings should inform our educational efforts with students. At present, our fieldwork in MARC means that we frequently discuss efforts that schools have taken to educate students about sexting. Those educational efforts often seem to rest on the following assumptions: (a) sexting is something that students engage in as a fun, albeit somewhat risqué activity; (b) sexting may result in criminal prosecution; (c) sexting photos cannot be controlled and can potentially be seen by anyone; and (d) sexting is something most sexters deeply regret. None of these arguments are entirely incorrect, but they may be substantially untrue in the personal experience of many adolescents. To a student who is listening to a presentation making such assumptions, the adults may appear to be greatly exaggerating risks.

Rather than making these assumptions, we should utilize available research to be more accurate. First, and most importantly, students need to become aware of the fact that sexting is too often coercive (and could be viewed as a form of sexual harassment). A student who is considering capitulating to such pressure should know that sexting under those circumstances will not solve their problems and may in fact compound them. Peers need to help protect their friends from such risks. Students need to know exactly when and how to report such problems and how to obtain help from peers and adults.

Second, great care must be taken when citing the risk of criminal prosecution; as such prosecution seems to be increasingly unlikely, and could actually frighten victims of coerced sexting away from reporting to adults, it must be broached tentatively (if at all).

Third, it may be more productive to emphasize the illegality of pressuring a minor into taking a nude picture of themselves, and any discussion of coercive sexting should be made in the context of sexual harassment. Threatening the victim with prosecution can be counterproductive (as I point out above).

Fourth, we can't just emphasize the ease of redistribution of digital photos; we also have to acknowledge that while redistribution *does* have a steep downside (sometimes a *very* steep downside), an immediate backlash isn't the norm. I think it's also worth pointing out that we really don't know if sexting is liable to create long-term problems. Of course, it remains true that sending out a digital photo entails losing control over it. But how that fact is presented can be very important. Students may view the risk of having others see your nude picture as existent but, realistically, pretty low. Hearing adults harp on the possibility as though forwarding were routine can therefore come across as a categorical overreaction.

Finally, it's worth noting that despite widespread anxiety over "stranger danger" online, only 6% of sexters in this study reported being pressured by unknown strangers online. Girls were slightly more likely to sext in response to pressure from a stranger online, but still, only 6% of female sexters and 4% of males reported that a stranger online been the source of the pressure. Consider: about four times more reported being pressured by their peers.

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- ¹ Englander, E.K., “Cyberbullying -New Research and Findings” (presented at the 2012 National Cyber Crime Conference, Norwood, Massachusetts, 2012).
- ² Jolicoeur, M. and Zedlewski, E., *Much Ado About Sexting*, Unpublished Report (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, June 2010), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/230795.pdf>.
- ³ Henderson, L., “Sexting and Sexual Relationships Among Teens and Young Adults,” *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 7, no. 1 (2011): 9.
- ⁴ Michelle Drouin and Carly Landgraff, “Texting, Sexting, and Attachment in College Students’ Romantic Relationships,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 28, no. 2 (March 2012): 444–449.
- ⁵ K. J. Mitchell et al., “Prevalence and Characteristics of Youth Sexting: A National Study,” *PEDIATRICS* 129, no. 1 (December 5, 2011): 13–20.
- ⁶ Joseph A. Dake et al., “Prevalence and Correlates of Sexting Behavior in Adolescents,” *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 7, no. 1 (January 2012): 1–15.
- ⁷ Ringrose, J. et al., *A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and “sexting”* (London, England: NSPCC, May 2012), <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/documents/MPP/Sexting-Report-NSPCC.pdf>.
- ⁸ Elizabeth Englander, *Freshman Study 2011: Bullying and Cyberbullying*, Research Reports from the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (Bridgewater State University, June 2011), <http://webhost.bridgew.edu/marc/research.html>.
- ⁹ Englander, E.K., *Digital Self-Harm: Frequency, Type, Motivations and Outcomes* (Bridgewater, Massachusetts: Bridgewater State University, June 2012), <http://webhost.bridgew.edu/marc/DIGITAL%20SELF%20HARM%20report.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ Jolicoeur, M. and Zedlewski, E., *Much Ado About Sexting*, Unpublished Report (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, June 2010), <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/230795.pdf>.
- ¹¹ K. J. Mitchell et al., “Prevalence and Characteristics of Youth Sexting: A National Study,” *PEDIATRICS* 129, no. 1 (December 5, 2011): 13–20.
- ¹² J. Wolak, D. Finkelhor, and K. J. Mitchell, “How Often Are Teens Arrested for Sexting? Data From a National Sample of Police Cases,” *PEDIATRICS* 129, no. 1 (December 5, 2011): 4–12.