

YES

By Luke Morgan, 18 Staff Writer

Whether you're tweeting updates to your friends or commenting on pictures from last night on Facebook, it's clear that we are plugged in and communicating more electronically.

If teens are looking for safer ways to communicate their sexual desires, what better way than over the computer or even a phone, where the risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or becoming pregnant are eliminated? Sending or receiving sexually explicit texts or pictures via a cell phone, or "sexting," is one way to avoid the risks associated with sex and can be OK under certain circumstances.

According to research conducted by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and *CosmoGirl*, about 20 percent of teens overall have engaged in the sending of nude or semi-nude pictures and videos, while 39 percent have engaged in the sending of sexually suggestive texts. Everyone isn't doing it, but for those who are, there are some things you should keep in mind.

Your Text in the Wrong Hands

It's important that if you're going to sext, you're sure that you trust the person you're sexting and can discuss the possible implications, including the risk of others finding out, like friends, parents or teachers. After all, you wouldn't want your partner sharing your sexy texts with their friends and the rest of the school. Right?

If you're in a relationship and sexting or thinking about sexting, you have to worry about what could possibly happen if you break up with your partner. Will the photographs or texts get into the hands of the wrong people? Even if you're not in a relationship and you trust the person you're sexting, anything can happen. The person you sexted could turn out to be not as trustworthy as you thought and decide to share the sexts with his or her friends. Someone looking through the phone of a person you sexted could see the text or

photos and decide as a prank to send them to other people.

If you're going to send a sexy text message, you have to be prepared for the fact that other people may see it.

In some states, if you're found in possession of nude photos of someone under 18 or are known to distribute such photos (even if the photos are of you!), you can be legally charged with the possession and/or distribution of child pornography and put on the list of registered sex offenders.

When Is It OK?

With all the risks of sexting, why do it? Whether you've decided to remain abstinent or be sexually active, sending sexy text messages can help you express and explore your sexual desires in *words* without the risks of STDs and unplanned pregnancy. Sexting can be a fun way to flirt with your partner. It's also an easy way to keep the relationship exciting. As long as both you and your partner are being responsible by not sending nude or semi-nude photos, sexting can be a lot of fun.

Is Sexting OK?

From the Forums at Sexetc.org

Sexting is OK, but only if you're in a relationship for awhile. 'Cause honestly, guys will say whatever they have to get a picture of you or some dirty messages to show their friends. But if you're truly in a trustworthy relationship, it's just one of those things couples tend to do. But you better hope you never break up!

—Rachael, 19, NJ

Sending naked pictures is bad, because we should be careful about doing things we might regret in the future. Pictures can be used against you.

—Elly, 16, Nigeria

First of all, after the relationship is over, they have the pictures and can do so much that could harm you. Also, if you're under 18, it's illegal, which I would not want to risk.

—Fred, 16, AL

NO

By Carly Schlecker, 18 Staff Writer

I'm sure your parents have told you stories, using their serious parental tone, about that dreaded word associated with teens: "Sexting!" I know mine have. Maybe you don't use the word "sexting," but your parents might have had a conversation with you about the dangers of sending sexually explicit texts. My parents make sending sexy text messages or nude or "suggestive" pictures sound like the worst thing you can do. But I can imagine that when you're doing it, it doesn't feel serious at all—but rather fun and sexy.

Not to sound like a mom—even though that's pretty inevitable when you hear what I'm about to say—but sexting can lead to criminal charges, land you on the sex offender list and destroy your reputation. Sexting—at least sending sexual images—is not OK.

Hitting Send

We all know sending or receiving sexually explicit pictures or videos is dangerous, yet that doesn't stop us from doing it. Twenty-four percent of 14- to 17-year-olds have been involved in some type of naked sexting, according to an Associated Press-MTV poll. I've heard many teens say that

they only sext people they trust—people who they know won't show anyone. But while you could sext someone you trust, it is possible that this person could be clumsy with his or her phone and accidentally show or send that photo or video to someone else. Now everyone has seen your lacy thong and bare breasts or your six-pack and your... package.

Accident or not, your privates have gone public, but there will be more to deal with than gossip and crude remarks. The risks can include being charged with distributing child pornography and being registered as a sex offender, which isn't only for those guys on NBC's *To Catch a Predator*.

Legal Consequences

A 17-year-old girl in Castalia, Ohio, sent naked pictures of herself to her boyfriend. After they broke up, the pictures circulated at a local high school. The girl was then charged with being an "unruly juvenile." At the time, she could have been charged with distributing material that is harmful to a child, which is a felony. But lucky for her, her boyfriend was 18 and legally an adult.

Her boyfriend was also lucky. He could have been charged with distributing child pornography, but authorities decided not to press charges.

From state to state, there are different laws recognizing various offenses that teens who

sext can be charged with. These laws were written to protect people from adult sex offenders and the makers and distributors of child pornography.

Last spring, Ohio actually came up with a new law to deal with teen sexting. The state now recognizes "sexting" as a misdemeanor offense. It is only recognized as an offense for minors. The law was created to make sure that teens do not face an overly harsh punishment or end up on the sex-offender registry for sexting. While it's great that Ohio has come up with these laws, most states still deal with sexting using laws for sex offenders and child pornographers, which carry harsh penalties.

Even when you're not the one pictured on the screen, sending sexy photos can get you into big trouble. In Florida, an 18-year-old received naked pictures of his 16-year-old girlfriend. After a fight with her, he sent those pictures to her contact list. A few days later, police showed up at his door and searched every electronic in his house: MP3s, computers and disks, looking for "child pornography." Florida prosecutors brought 72 charges against him. He pled guilty and had to register as a sex offender, so he is unable to live near schools, parks or playgrounds. He will be on that list at least until he is 43 years old.

Sexy Words

Sending sexy photos is definitely not worth all the risks. Long-distance relationships or long weekends apart can be tough. And while being apart may be hard, there are other ways to be sexy... more legal ways.

Whatever happened to good "old-fashioned" texting? Sometimes sending a simple text message that isn't sexually explicit is sexiest, because it leaves anything sexual up to your partner's imagination. A little mystery goes a long way. This way you can still be sexy and keep your privates private!