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# Sexting: You Found the Sext, What to Do Next? How School Psychologists Can Assist with Policy, Prevention, and Intervention

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The Ohio School Psychologist

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Putting Pieces Together for Ohio Students

# You Found the Sext, What to Do Next?

How School Psychologists Can Assist with Prevention, Policy, and Intervention

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*Early Monday morning, it is brought to the school psychologist's attention that Katie, a 15-year-old student engaged in "sexting" over the weekend; she sent a naked picture of herself to her boyfriend. The boyfriend immediately forwarded the picture to a group of his friends. At school on Monday, many students are talking about the picture and Katie is humiliated. The school is unaware of how many students this sext message has reached.*

*What can the school psychologist do to intervene with the female student, her boyfriend, and his friends? What, if anything, can be done to prevent this message from being spread to other students and even other school districts? Should law enforcement be contacted? How can the school psychologist help prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future?*

**Introduction**

Increases in the number of children and adolescents using cell phones, coupled with advances in technology, have created unforeseen consequences and potential crises situations which school psychologists and other school personnel must be prepared to address. One of these situations is sexting, which is a form of cyberbullying (Russo, Osborne & Arndt, 2011). Sexting can be defined as "the act of sending, receiving, or retaining sexually explicit text messages, pictures, or video using a cellular phone or other digital media technology" (Segool & Crespi, 2011, pp.1 ).

Results from a survey of adolescents indicated the following prevalence rates of sexting among males and females: ages 13-19: 20% indicated they have sent/posted nude or semi-nude pictures of

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themselves; 71% of adolescent females and 67% of adolescent males who have sexted sent the content to their boyfriend/girlfriend; 38% of adolescent females and 39% of adolescent males report having been shown sexting messages that were originally meant for someone else (Sex & Tech, 2008). Sexually explicit pictures can spread at a rapid rate, causing both legal and emotional implications for all students involved.

Adolescents who participate in sexting can be faced with legal consequences, including being charged with the transmission of child pornography and being forced to register as a sex offender (Russo, Osborne & Arndt, 2011). These students can be banned from extracurricular activities and lose educational opportunities (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2009).

Additionally, these inappropriate pictures can be viewed by child predators and be connected to students forever following them into college, their careers, and beyond, due to the inability to retract messages which have gone viral. School personnel must be aware of the implications and consequences associated with sexting including emotional distress, bullying, alienation, loss of privacy, social rejection, depression, isolation, hopelessness, and suicidality (Segool & Crespi, 2011). Sexting, and the subsequent bullying associated with it, is thought to be the cause of at least two known suicides among adolescents, one of which occurred in Ohio (Russo, Osborne & Arndt, 2011; Segool & Crespi, 2011).

#### **The Jessica Logan Law**

The "Jessica Logan Law," which was named after a young girl in Ohio who committed suicide four years ago after a sexting message of her was spread, requires school districts to establish cyber-bullying policies, which must encompass bullying that is committed using a cell phone, computer, or other electronic communication

device. The new law, which was signed in February of 2012, also requires all staff and students to be trained annually on their bullying policy. Additionally, parents must also be informed annually of the district's anti-bullying policies. If school districts are not adequately addressing cyber-bullying issues, this act may prompt them to do so.

#### **Prevention**

##### ***Risk and protective factors***

Survey research has demonstrated that 51% of adolescent girls and 18% of adolescent males admitted to sexting because of pressure from someone of the opposite sex (Sex & Tech, 2008). Therefore, it is likely that students who are at-risk for giving in to other types of peer pressure are also at-risk for sexting. Because many students make the decision to participate in sexting due to peer pressure, and students with high levels of self-esteem are less prone to give into peer pressure (Zimmerman, Copeland, Shope & Dielman, 1997), having high-self esteem can be a protective factor to sexting. Thus, school psychologists can implement preventative measures to increase self-esteem levels among students to prevent sexting crises.

It is likely that many students are not aware of all the legal implications which may accompany sexting. Educating students about the consequences of sexting can also prove to be a protective factor. Students who have supportive families, friends, and who have received accurate information about the consequences of sexting are less likely to participate in the act. To prevent sexting, school personnel should focus on protective factors in students when designing prevention and intervention programs.

##### ***Psychoeducation***

Research indicates education is the most important factor in effectively preventing sexting (National Center for Missing and

Exploited Children, 2009; Segool & Crespi, 2011; Siegle, 2010; Russo, Osborne & Arndt, 2011). Psychoeducation can help adolescents recognize the long-term social, emotional, and legal consequences of sexting. An example of an education-based sexting prevention program in Texas, entitled "Before you Text" (Texas School Safety Center; <http://test.beforeyououtext.com/>), offers students the opportunity to learn about the consequences of sexting through a series of modules and subsequent quizzes containing information and videos. Educators can use the free information in these modules to educate students about the risks and consequences associated with sexting and facilitate their problem-solving skills by creating reality-based discussion questions centered on sexting situations. Another newly-developed interactive resource, Project PRO (Privacy and Reputation Online) can also be used help educate teens and parents about the potential consequences of their on-line reputations.

An important part of preventing problem behaviors within a school system is the establishment of a positive and supportive school climate, which can be achieved via the implementation of Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) and school wide character education programs, which encourage respectful behaviors and attitudes. All education about the consequences of sexting can lead to appropriate replacement behaviors and attitude changes among students, staff, and parents.

### **Changing behavior and attitudes**

Behavior and attitude changes, along with clear set policies regarding sexting are critical. For example, teens are accustomed to forwarding anything interesting and may not think before sending an inappropriate picture to dozens of friends and acquaintances. Educating students about the consequences of sexting behaviors, including both taking and forwarding pictures, (e.g., being charged with the dis-

tribution of child pornography, long-term consequences that will follow them into their future) can deter them from participating in sexting behaviors. Preventatively, because most teens cite peer pressure as a reason for sexting (Sex & Tech, 2008), the issue of sexting should be incorporated into the existing curricula which targets saying "no" to peer pressure.

Survey research indicated 66% of adolescent girls and 60% of adolescent boys have participated in sexting to be "fun or flirtatious" (Sex & Tech, 2008). Therefore, students would also benefit from education about appropriate "fun and flirtatious" behaviors and from practice implementing these replacement behaviors.

### **The role of parents and educators**

Prevention is the key ingredient to reducing sexting incidents. Because sexting is a recent phenomenon, there is no known research specifically targeting "sexting prevention." Parents and educators can help students understand the unintended consequences of sending irretrievable messages and the rapid nature in which messages can be forwarded to others (Siegle, 2010). Additionally, school psychologists can encourage parents to either provide their children with phones which do not have photo-taking capabilities or carefully monitor phones which do. Educators can also implement steps to combat cyber bullying; Hinduja and Patchin (2009) suggest educators take the following ten steps:

- 1 Formally assess the extent and scope of the problem,
- 2 Teach students all forms of bullying are unacceptable,
- 3 Specify clear rules regarding the use of electronic devices,
- 4 Use peer mentoring,
- 5 Consult with a school attorney before incidents occur,
- 6 Create a comprehensive formal contract specific to cyberbullying in the school's policy,

- 7 Implement blocking/filtering software,
- 8 Cultivate a positive school climate,
- 9 Educate the community, and
- 10 Designate a 'cyberbullying expert'.

In addition, education for staff members and parents via professional development opportunities and in-service trainings is also essential.

### **Policy**

Part of addressing the sexting issue is having an effective policy in place prior to the crisis occurring. Schools should develop a team to create a crisis plan the school will utilize when sexting incidents occur. All elements of the crisis plan should be clearly stated and defined in the school policy prior to the crisis occurring so all are aware of how the school will respond to instances of sexting and for potential legal ramifications which may result from the school's response.

The sexting prevention team, which might consist of school psychologists, school counselors, administrators, law enforcement, select teachers, parents, social workers, and mental health professionals, should implement a needs assessment to establish resources needed to combat sexting including curricula materials, training programs, and personnel. The needs assessment can include a survey of students, staff, and parents to establish the prevalence of sexting in the school district (Russo, Osborne & Arndt, 2011). Policies should be developed and disseminated to students, parents, and staff members before incidents of sexting occur so all are aware of the consequences.

### **Current laws**

The laws applied in sexting cases are evolving, but currently most of the laws applied in these cases are related to child pornography and were not written for these types of situations. Students involved in sexting can be charged with

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felonies, including production and distribution of child pornography. This can lead to mandatory registration as a sex offender. A typical sexting scenario involves a girl taking illicit pictures of herself and sending them to a boyfriend. In such a situation, under current laws, that girl could theoretically be charged with a more serious crime (production of child pornography) than the classmates who forward the photo to others (distribution of child pornography). While police would likely not carry out this kind of charge against the girl, knowledge of the severity of taking the picture in the first place may be an effective deterrent. In Ohio, if one changes the media in which the pornography was taken (e.g., transfer from phone to computer), that can also result in a production of child pornography charge, which is a higher felony.

If school officials become aware of a sext, they are required to report it to the police, because it is a crime (a felony sex offense involving a juvenile at school). A school resource officer can be notified if there is a “buzz” about a possible sext to investigate the situation. Police can then obtain search warrants and confiscate phones and computers.

**Current school practices**

Many school administrators have indicated that sexting is considered a form of bullying in their districts; therefore, they follow the same policies as they would if a bullying incident occurred. Even though many school districts have strict bullying policies, many incidents go unreported, as bullying is thought to be a typical part of childhood. Thus, schools should implement sexting specific policies and ensure students, staff, and parents are made aware and reminded of these policies multiple times per year. Simply sending copies of the student handbook home or making

the student code of conduct available on the school’s website (as districts have reported doing), is not enough. Schools must verbally communicate sexting policies to all parties involved including students, staff, and parents. An ideal place for this verbal communication to take place is at orientations and/or teacher-parent conferences.

Districts have also reported using suspension and expulsion as consequences to sexting. A more effective remedial consequence might be for both the original sender and those who forwarded the message to receive an in-school suspension, in which students are educated about the long-term consequences of sexting and receive psychological interventions to help them cope with their actions and prevent similar behaviors from occurring in the future. Some districts have reported that their sexting policies have not been shared with local law enforcement, which is problematic, as law enforcement must understand what kind of role they will be expected to play when sexting incidents occur. Additionally, principals have indicated the biggest challenge they encounter when addressing sexting incidents is that many incidents go unreported. Therefore, school policies should encourage students to come forward while ensuring them that their anonymity will be protected.

**Intervention**

Despite strong prevention efforts and policy, sexting may still occur. Students should be required by the school’s policy to report all suspected incidents of sexting to a trusted adult school staff member. The staff member should then be required to report the suspected sexting to an administrator, who alerts the sexting crisis intervention team (described in above policy section). The team should ensure that the report of sexting is more than a rumor before contacting law enforcement. *If any member of the team (or other staff member) is shown the suspected picture,*

*the phone should be confiscated and law enforcement should be notified.*

Each member of this team should be delegated to perform the following tasks in the crisis plan, according to his or her professional role:

**School-based mental health professionals**

School-based mental health professionals should begin by speaking to the student who reported the sexting incident to a staff member. These professionals will praise the student for following the proper procedure and reporting the incident. This student should be reaffirmed that he/she will remain anonymous in order to avoid bullying, persecution, and social rejection from peers. School-based mental health professionals should report any pertinent information they gather to school administrators. Next, they should talk to the student who sent the message (if this student is a member of the student body) and determine to whom the message was sent. It is important for school psychologists to be honest with all students involved (alerting them that they may face legal consequences). They should also work to reaffirm students’ physical health by ensuring their immediate safety. This may include allowing them to call their parents. Upon reaffirming the safety of the students, psychological triage should begin by evaluating the psychological trauma of all students involved. During this time, school psychologists should determine which students are most affected by the sexting incident (most likely the victim and the original perpetrator) and attend to their psychological needs first. Those close to the victim (siblings, friends, etc.) may also be in need of psychological assistance. Appropriate referrals should be made to community-based professionals.

**School teachers**

A selected group of teachers, ideally teachers who have strong relationships with students, should be on the lookout for discussion regarding the sexting inci-

dent. These teachers should spend their time between classes in the hallways to listen for such discussion. If and when they hear discussion of the suspected sexting incident, they should report what was said and the names of students who were discussing the incident to the administrator(s) so further investigation can be pursued.

### **School administrator(s)**

A school administrator should serve as the commander in chief during the suspected incident of sexting. He or she should be in charge of the investigation (prior to law enforcement being contacted) and determine when it is appropriate to contact law enforcement. The administrator should contact the parents of the students who are known to be involved and alert them of the situation. The administrator should also be in charge of implementing school-based consequences for both sexting and the subsequent bullying while keeping in mind the emotional consequences for both the victim and perpetrators (and the potential for suicidality). Administrators should consider that suspensions and expulsions may not be in the best interest of the students, especially if they are going to be unsupervised at home. However, they should also consider that students may face bullying if they remain in school. An appropriate alternative might be for students to come to school and receive interventions via the school-based mental health providers until a decision is made regarding the legality of their actions (which may require that the students enroll in a community-based mental health program). Finally, if the administrator suspects the message has been disseminated to other school districts, the administrator should contact those districts to make them aware of the situation and the ongoing investigation.

### **Law enforcement**

Once notified, police officers will conduct a thorough investigation. They may take

phones have been confiscated containing the sexting pictures and/or computers that have been involved in the incident.

### **Conclusion**

After the sexting crisis, the team should examine the policy and plan which were in place to determine what was done well, what could be improved, what was unforeseen, and areas of the policy that were and were not implemented correctly. Appropriate adjustments must then be made based on the evaluation data.

Sexting is likely happening in every school district, whether reported or not. Due to the psychological destructive nature of this new form of bullying, all school personnel must work together to prevent it from happening. They must also design specific policies and create appropriate interventions to effectively address it.

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**Valorie Wolcott Mendelson**  
**OSPA Scholarship NEWS**

*Just a reminder to first year students:*

Diane Higginbotham, our liaison at The Columbus Foundation, will be sending the scholarship information and applications for the 2013 Scholarship to IUC trainers within the next week. Please be aware of this and that the information and application are also available on the OSPA website under the Scholarship Committee section.

Remember the deadline is Monday, June 3, 2013. This gives you plenty of time to prepare your materials. Remember you have a great chance at receiving this scholarship – which is now \$2,000! I encourage all first year students to consider applying.

Valorie Wolcott Mendelson  
Scholarship Chair