

SELF/PEER EXPLOITATION — GENERAL

Self/peer exploitation is most commonly linked to the growing practice of “sexting” among youth. Sexting is defined as, “youth creating, sending or sharing sexual images and/or videos with peers via the Internet and/or electronic devices,” (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2013).

Sexting has not been greatly studied in Canada, but American studies reveal that:

- 20-30% of American teens age 14-18 have engaged in sexting
- 25% of teens who had received a sext forwarded the message to others
- Girls are twice as likely as boys to send photos

Why do youth engage in sexting?

Youth have cited various reasons for engaging in sexting. Sexual experimentation and curiosity, seeking attention and acceptance, and being coerced or pressured often come up as explanations. Exploitation may also happen without the knowledge of the young person affected. Photos and videos can be recorded at parties or during webcam conversations without the victim’s knowledge. These may later be distributed via social media to humiliate that individual.

What are the consequences of sexting?

Though many teens send images intended for one person only, some of these photos and videos are shared to the Internet where they are next to impossible to remove. This can result in severe emotional and social consequences for the victim of such exploitation such as humiliation, shame, harassment, damage to reputation, and challenges in finding future employment.

In addition, the victim may have unintentionally produced material that falls under the definition of child pornography and could technically be charged with its creation and distribution. The exploiter could similarly be charged with possession and distribution of child pornography. These types of charges for peer exploitation situations have not been laid in Canada; however, teens have been criminally prosecuted in the States.

What is being done about it?

The notion of sexting has only been around since about 2005; therefore, law and policy makers have work to do in figuring out how to deal with it.

In 2011, twenty-one America States passed legislation related to sexting. Twelve more were considering bills or resolutions aimed at the issue in 2012. Sexting legislation typically reduces certain penalties while creating educational opportunities for youth. Using education to target these issues has been a similar approach used in Canada.

Following the tragic deaths of British Columbia teen Amanda Todd and Nova Scotia teen Rehtaeh Parsons, the Canadian government has devoted more attention to cyber-bullying and peer exploitation. In May 2013, a cyber-bullying forum was held in order to strategize approaches to deal with these issues. Federal Justice Minister Rob Nicholson has stated that protecting people against online harassment is a priority for the government. Nova Scotia's Justice Minister Ross Landry has called on the federal government to create legislation that would criminalize the distribution of intimate images for malicious or sexual purposes without consent.

For now, the focus has been on providing resources to teachers, parents, and teens about how to deal with cyber-bullying and peer exploitation should it affect them. The following websites contain useful information on how to educate youth about the dangers of the internet and give strategies for dealing with peer exploitation scenarios:

- cybertip.ca
- kidsintheknow.ca
- needhelpnow.ca
- textEd.ca
- thedoorthatsnotlocked.ca

Sources

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