

Sexting

Parenting Before, During And After



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2017

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Note To The Reader

I am so happy you found this booklet important enough to possess for yourself. My underlying motivation in providing information like this is for parents to have the resources they need to raise happy, responsible and productive teens.

This booklet was originally a series of blog posts. These posts are still available on my website where you can access them without charge. Or, this may be a copy someone provided to you because they thought it was worth sharing.

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Thanks for your interest. Hope you find this helpful.

Jim

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Before

There is a perfect storm that has arisen around teenagers and sex: the internet, technology, the sexualization of our culture, stupid teenagers (and politicians and professional athletes and . . .), the rise of Romance as sex and the ability to be anonymous (or at least avoid direct, face to face contact) when interacting with other people. All this has conspired to raise the specter of teenagers wantonly sending pictures of their private parts all over the internet for any Tom, Dick or Mary. The news is filled with horror stories of where these images end up and the embarrassment and shame kids feel. The results can be catastrophic.

There are a few reasons you should have a serious talk with your teen about sexting. In Tennessee (as in many states) the definition of child pornography does not take into account if you are a stupid teenager. If you have a sexually explicit photo of someone under the age of 18 (even if that someone is yourself), you are in possession of child pornography. If you request a sexually explicit image of someone under the age of 18 (even if they don't send anything), you are soliciting child pornography. If you send a sexually explicit image of someone under the age of 18 (even if that image is of yourself) you are distributing child pornography. People who possess or distribute child pornography get prison time and are placed on the sex offender registry. All this is very bad.

Another reason you should have this talk (as if any other reason is needed after being terrified by the possibility of PRISON) is that teenagers are remarkably blind to the permanence and problems with digital communication. They treat it like talking. The permanent record part just doesn't seem to register. It is important to review internet privacy and protecting personally identifying information. And, finally, teenagers are beautifully, naively trusting (at least of their peers). Their girlfriend would never let those pictures get out? Their boyfriend loves them too much to share something that special with anyone else. Uh-huh, right.

What's a parent to do?

Educate yourself. As always, know what you are talking about. Do your homework about the laws in your state regarding child pornography. Prepare yourself to talk about sex, eroticism, intimacy, sexual intimacy, respect for yourself and for others, personal privacy, internet privacy, reputation and dignity (an old fashioned concept that seems to get little attention these days).

Have the talk with your kid about sexting. So once you are prepared, sit your kid down and have a talk with them. This should include a number of components.

- **Privacy and personal information.** Review the issues of online privacy and the protection of personal information (including what your sex organs look like). Talk about both the sexting aspect but also what information they are putting out there through their social media accounts and other communication applications.
- **Trust and good judgment.** Talk a lot about the importance of good judgment. Have them give you examples when they have shown good judgment. Give them examples of what it looks like. Talk to them about how their freedom is built on trust; trust you have in them and trustworthiness on their part.
- **Permanent record.** Review with them the problems of electronic communication being a permanent record; even when you "delete" it from your device or program. There are shadow forms of the information that can be retrieved.

- Complete transparency. Every social media account, phone, texting account, email, everything is open to your review at any time. Period. They don't agree? Collect up all their technology and shut down their access to the internet by phone, device, computer or game box.
- Sex, pornography, flirting and sexual harassment. There is a difference between private sexual intimacy and pornographic displays of sexual behavior. In the old days, everyone knew what the difference was. These days it is more difficult for kids to know the difference. Given the pervasiveness of pornography on the internet and its influence on our culture, you need to talk with your kids about differentiating these two types of behavior. Another related issue is the difference between flirting and sexual harassment? It's not always clear to teenagers (and not a few adults) that there is a difference between an invitation to flirt versus imposing and pressuring someone. It is important to address these concepts in this day and age. There are any number of examples of prominent careers that have crashed and burned (sometimes, repeatedly) over people not getting the distinctions between these related but very different behaviors.
- Don't exaggerate the dangers. They will know or find out if you are trying to scare them by making up stuff or distorting information. The facts are scary enough. Talk frankly with them about the risks and problems with sexting. Know that the vast majority of sexting occurs between kids who are involved in an intimate relationship. The majority of sexting images are not shared around with everyone but kept and considered a personal, intimate things between dating partners. Unfortunately, it is still child pornography. And, sometimes their trust is misplaced.
- Sexual Communication and the law. And, of course, talk to them about the legal ramifications of their behavior regarding sex and sexual behavior.
- Encourage your kid to talk to you when they have concerns. Make sure they know they can come to you if they get themselves into a jam. There is nothing worse than a teenager trying to fix a mess they have already made. This is particularly important if it involves sexually explicit images of juveniles.

Set the Rules Ground. Once you have talked to your kids about the issues around sexting and internet use it is important to set some clear ground rules. These are some to make sure you address.

- Passwords. You wouldn't (I hope) allow your teenager to wander daily, unsupervised and without your awareness, in the bus station of your city. You wouldn't allow them to strike up a relationship with a 20, 30, 40, 50 year old person you didn't know. You would want to know who has regular contact with your kid. All these scenarios (and more) are made possible through the internet. You should have the password to every one of your kid's electronic devices, accounts and any other online presence. No password, no access for your kid. A related requirement is that you are a friend on all their accounts, e.g., Facebook, twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, etc. Any account that sends messages and information to other people should include you on the list. Note: While you can access their accounts any time you want because you are the parent, it is a good idea to review their accounts with their password while they are sitting next to you. It allows you the opportunity to talk about why you are concerned. It is a way to acknowledge the importance of their privacy while also fulfilling your responsibility as a parent. It feels a little less invasive if they are right there with you rather than finding out after the fact. It also makes it look less like you are "snooping" behind their back.
- Personal information. Have specific rules about the personal information your kid is allowed to post on the internet or reveal to other people. Their name, birthday, age, school and city of residence is pretty much a wash given how many ways your kids friends will provide this through comments and posts. However, their home address, cell phone numbers, linking their cell phone GPS to their social media accounts (so anyone can track them); these are all things you can do something about. It is an uphill battle but try to get your kid thinking about boundaries, privacy and minimizing any potential damage.

- Acceptable words and information. It can be really surprising how unguarded and frank kids are using electronic communication. It really is the case that they consider this the same as a private conversation. It is one thing to speak profanely and graphically when you are hanging with your friends. It is another to commit it to writing (electronically speaking). Review what you expect of your kid regarding their language and the kind of personal thoughts and information they reveal through their public media presence. Check regularly and require them to scrub the offending words and thoughts. Check each night. After 3-5 days of appropriate communication, drop back to random checks. If they continue to have a problem, require them to earn access to their social media/texting/email each day based on having a day without unacceptable communication. They have to earn it day by day until they have 3-5 days in a row.
- Sexting, chat rooms & self-erasing apps. Sexting is completely banned. The focus of this series is about how to discuss the issues about sexting in particular. Chat rooms should also be completely banned. The benefits of participating in a chat room of any sort is far outweighed by the potential cost that comes from having intimate conversations about personal issues with God knows who. And then there is Snapchat (or whatever current program erases communications after the person has viewed it). Take a long hard look at how they are using this app. Have a long, intense conversation about how they are to be used. Identify specific, harsh consequences if they use these apps to sext (especially after all this TALKING).
- Apps. All applications for cell phone or other electronic media must be preapproved by you. If you find un-approved apps on your kid's device, delete all apps including the offending one. Start over with them having to get your approval for reloading their apps one at a time every 3-5 days.
- Pictures (and tagging). Have specific criteria for what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable pictures your kid can post on their sites or forward to people. It can be useful to occasionally search the pictures of your kid on their friend's sites. These photos are often tagged with your kid's name and linked to their social media account.
- Private vs Public information. Have requirements about who qualifies for public versus private information. Your kid's accounts should be set on private and not be open to access by the general public.
- Friends vs "friends." It is necessary to distinguish between what a friend *really* is versus who is *called* a friend. It's bizarre. Your kids will argue with you (and the argument about what many of them think qualifies as a friend who has earned their confidence, trust and personal information can be ridiculous). Take the time. Getting this straight may save you some other kinds of trouble in the future ("I can trust him. He's one of my friends on Facebook.").
- Online bullying/harassment. Discuss bullying and harassment. Go over examples. Many kids don't recognize it even though it still has an effect. It can be considered just "how things are." Make sure your kid knows they are to inform you if they are being bullied. Make sure your kid knows what they can expect you to do to them if you find out they are bullying or harassing other people (and it should be serious).
- Aggressive messages, threats and criminal activity. Another thing that kids often don't think through is that they can be held legally accountable for angry outbursts that include aggressive responses or threatening statements made to other people. You will be able to find several examples in the national news of the ways in which kids have become part of a criminal prosecution for responding to,

encouraging or being an accomplice to criminal activity (including criminal sexual assaults). These events can bring their life to a standstill or drastically change their immediate future. Talk to them before it happens. Help them think through how it can go bad and what they could do to steer clear of problems.

During

Warning Signs of Sexting

Once you have put some ground rules in place, there are a few warning signs that your kid may be wandering into electronic media places you don't want them to go.

Using a computer parents don't check. This may be every computer in the house (if you haven't already been monitoring their internet use). Checking the computer was easier back in the old days when there was only one computer in the house. These days? Every electronic device they use can take photos and upload them to the internet (including some refrigerators!). You may forget to check phones, music storage devices, video game consoles, even televisions that are interactive. Make a list of all the devices that can access the internet and keep tabs on them.

Close/minimize browser when parents are around. It is one thing for your kid to minimize the screen every now and then when you wander by. It is another thing for them to do it every time you get close. If you aren't sure then make a point to saunter over at different times across a day or two. If your kid reduces the screen most of the time it is time to take a closer look at where they are actually going online.

Furtive, suspicious behavior/innocent, loving behavior. If your kid acts suspicious when they are on the internet, that's a bad sign. If they suddenly act all innocent and loving when you ask about their internet activities, immediately shut down all access to the internet on every device! There's no TELLING what they are up to. Teens are NEVER innocent and loving; ever. I'm just saying.

Privacy settings exclude you. If your kid has locked you out of their accounts it could be to hide what they are doing. If they lock you out after you had the talk with them and went over the rules (including that you have an all access pass) it is almost certain they are doing something they think you won't approve.

Lie/omit details of online activity. Everyone forgets things now and then. Guilty people actually lie about what they are doing or happen to forget to mention something that could lead to trouble. When you ask your kid specific information about their online activities it should match up with the facts of what they are doing. If not, it is time to dig deeper.

Hide/delete instant messages/texts. How odd that texts to your kid's girlfriend or boyfriend don't go back further than today? All those years making them clean up after themselves is finally paying off. They are keeping their texting account so neat and tidy! Right. Something is up here.

Use private browsing modes. The browser program (e.g., Internet Explorer, Google, Firefox, etc.) used to access the internet has a setting that will erase all the information about your time spent surfing the internet when you close the program down. That means you can't easily see what your kid was doing and where they were going online. Unfortunately, it is generally a good idea to set your internet browser to privacy mode. One solution is to occasionally interrupt your kid in the middle of their browsing and take a quick look at the history to see what they have been up to. (Screaming and arguing are minimized if you warn your kid ahead of time you are going to do this now and again.)

Clears browser history. If the internet history is cleared when your kid gets off the internet, it is time to take a closer look at what they are doing online. This may also be a time to unexpectedly interrupt your kid mid-internet use to see what they have been doing.

Apps that hide apps. Enterprising programmers around the world have been developing apps that are not easily detectable through your internet service provider. There are apps to text so that texts are not traceable. There are apps that automatically erase the messages sent. This has been a tremendous benefit for the advancement of freedom of speech and the fight oppression by totalitarian dictators the world over. Guess who is also in the totalitarian dictatorship category? That would be you. If your little freedom fighter has downloaded hidden apps on their electronic devices, they are definitely engaged in subversive activities. Time for the secret police to swoop in and shut down this little rebellion.

Ghost email and social networking profiles. Since anyone can create an email account or social networking profile, anyone can have more than one account. Since you are already a friend on their main account, visit the sites of your kid's closest friends. See if there is something suspicious about any of their closest friends that might suggest it is your kid in disguise. Creating ghost accounts is a serious attempt to keep you out of their business that requires a lot of planning and effort to maintain these separate identities. If your kid has gone to this much trouble you are dealing with something that may require consultation with a mental health professional to review options.

(Note: Several of these suggestions were adapted from TRU Insights and McAfee, 2012.)

If Your Kid Has Been Sending Sexts

Sexting among teens seems to be about a number of things. It is way to do something that is considered "bad" or rebellious. It is a way to flirt. Sexting allows kids to expose the sexual part of themselves to another person without all the embarrassment of having that person right in front of them. It is a way for teens to give something personal to their beloved (or belusted). Sexting provides a way for teens to be raunchy and funny (and to indirectly get some validation of their desirability to others). It can be a way to demonstrate their courage (on a dare) or confidence (when challenged). It is a way for teens to imitate the "sexy" men and women portrayed in the media and especially in pornography. Sexting is a way for teens to emulate their favorite performers by being just like them. It can be the result of teens being socialized about sex by the pornification of society (e.g., stripper pole classes, children dressed to be sexy, etc.) and the exposure to actual porn as a model for sexual intimacy. Teens (especially girls) sext because they feel pressured to do it. But mostly sexting is an awkward misguided and naïve attempt by teens to share something personal and intimate with someone they care about, usually because they are too scared or unable to share it in person. So where do you start if your kid has sexted?

Review your own sex education. You are going to be talking to your kids about sex, sexuality and relationships. Make sure you know what you want to say before you get started. There are a number of books for parents on talking to your kid about their sexual lives. (Here are some I recommend <http://www.jamesgwellbornphd.com/parents/books/h-z/#sexgen>) You need to know these things regardless of whether or not your kid is sexting.

Tell them you know they have been sexting. Start by informing them you know and y'all need to talk because some things are going to change in their life.

Foster a sense of hope and recovery. Use words like problem, mistake, bad judgment, poor decision, temporarily lost your mind, not thinking with your brain; that kind of thing. Avoid absolutes (e.g., always, never, completely, totally, impossible) and extremes (e.g., catastrophe, disaster, destroyed, ruined, horrifying, utter shame and humiliation, etc.). Talk in a way that suggests this isn't the end of the world. "We'll get through this." "There are some things you obviously don't realize yet." "It seems like you aren't quite ready for all this freedom." "There are some things you need to learn about yourself and other people."

No name calling. They are not a slut. They are not a pervert. They are not evil and sinful. (Well, they are sinful but no more than any of the rest of us.) They have not completely ruined their reputation or their future (though the reputation problem can get pretty intense if the sexting is widely known). They are naïve. They are foolish. They are careless. They aren't thinking. They are too trusting. They are letting their hormones run away with them. They are misguided. They are too easily led. They are in too much of a hurry. You are disappointed. You are worried. You are scared. You are upset. You are concerned. In other words, don't freak out on them. It will still be possible for them (and you) to get past this and have a happy productive life.

Remember that this is a very personal area of their life. You might think that someone who has just splayed their naughty parts across the internet wouldn't consider it personal and private. Well, part of why kids sext is they don't really grasp how public it is or can become. It still seems like a personal, private act to them. And, actually it is (or should be). So, treat this as a very private issue; a private issue you need to talk to them about. "We need to talk about this even though it is a very personal private part of your life. It is kind of awkward but you don't seem to realize how public it is or can become. That's why we need to talk through some things."

Be sex positive. Sex is a good thing. It is a glorious, wonderful, scary, exciting, enjoyable, powerful, delicious and sometimes overwhelming human experience. It is something to anticipate, savor and treasure. It has the ability to create a profound sense of intimacy. Don't skip this step. If all you do is talk about how horrible sexting (and sex) is and how bad they are for doing this, you will lose a crucial opportunity to help your kid start to figure out how to handle this crazy sexualized culture that surrounds them. If you present sex as a bad, sinful, evil thing you will handicap your kids in an important area of their life and your kid will be unlikely to come to you for advice; and they need your advice about this. You can't afford to have your kid tune you out.

Acknowledge the temptation, desire and opportunity. Our culture is saturated with sexual imagery and the allure of sex. Marketers in virtually every area of commerce use sex as a way to get the attention of customers. The long overdue recognition that girls and women have a sex life they are entitled to explore without shame has unfortunately left teen girls confused about how to express this new found freedom. Teen boys have tragically become victims of the objectification of their own bodies leading them to be tempted to display it to gain the attention of others. And no one is telling teens how to handle all this freedom, permissiveness and opportunity. It is important to talk to your kids about how their view of sex is being shaped by these forces.

Start the conversation with your sexting teen by talking about sex and sexual desire. Talk to them about the natural urge to act on their sexual feelings. Talk to them about how natural it is to be curious about whether others find them sexy and desirable. Talk about how tempting it is to try to pique the interest of someone they are attracted to by using sexuality. Talk about how strong the feeling can be to share something intimate and personal with someone you are attracted to and care about. Talk about how casually and blasé everyone takes sex and nudity these days (when it is really a very personal, vulnerable part of ourselves).

Talk about how easy it is to get attention from others (wanted or unwanted) by being sexual, especially by exposing your body (and how it is often turned back on you). Talk to them about the importance of sharing this powerful, fun and very personal part of themselves with someone BUT under the right circumstances. Talk about what those circumstances should be. Talk to them about the consequences of rash, impulsive actions in the internet age.

Talk about the risks. Here's the list.

- Sending pictures of yourself when you are younger than 18 is distributing pornography. Having a picture of yourself stored on a phone, computer, etc. (or recoverable from the secret, undeleted areas of things you have deleted on your device) is possession of child pornography. Having pictures of your sext buddy who is under the age of 18 is possession of child pornography. A sext buddy having images of themselves or of you (if you are underage) is possession of child pornography. Accepting nude pictures of someone who is under the age of 18 sent to you by your friends or acquaintances is possessing child pornography. If you are over the age of 18 and send nude images to someone under the age of 18 it is a form of child sexual abuse. If you are over the age of 18 and receive nude images of someone under the age of 18 it is solicitation of a minor for sexual purposes. If you ask someone under the age of 18 to send you nude images you are soliciting child pornography. All sexting roads lead to child pornography and a big, unholy mess. They are all felonies. In many states, the law does not distinguish between minors and adults in the solicitation or possession of child pornography. If you are over 18, you are very likely to be prosecuted and will very likely have to register as a sex offender. (Innocent mistakes can lead to plea arrangements but you can't count on it.) If you are under 18, it is not so straight forward but there will be discussions by law enforcement personnel about prosecutions and the possibility of having to register as a sex offender.

If you haven't already run screaming into your child's room, snatched the cell phone from their hands, smashed the computer on the floor and confiscated all the other devices that take photos or have contact with the outside world, here are a few other risks from sexting.

- The person who gets the sexts may distribute them among their peers. Maybe they are sharing something personal with a close friend. Maybe they are bragging. Maybe they tried to see if they could trick you into sexting. Maybe they are mad at you and want revenge. Maybe they just want to hurt you because they are that kind of person. Whatever the reason, it can have a really serious effect on your reputation. It can lead to some people being kind of scared to be around you. It can lead to some people not wanting to be seen as someone who hangs with a person who lets just anyone see them naked. There will definitely be people who will ridicule, insult and harass you.
- The person who gets the sext can misunderstand why you are sending it. They can actually think that you must not care much about whether other people see you naked since you sent it over the internet. They may wonder if you send these to just anyone. It may start to seem less like an indication of something special for them.
- When you sext someone, they may think you are the kind of person who does sexual things with whoever. They may want to be with you to see if you will do sexual things with them. People who are not ready to be sexual in a relationship will be intimidated and afraid to date you because you might want to do sexual things before they are ready. Or, they may think they are not experienced enough to be with you.
- Sexting is a big risk if you do it for the wrong reasons. Are you sharing something very intimate with someone you know and trust very well? Are you trying to interest another person in you (before you know for sure they are interested in you)? Are you trying to shock someone? Are you doing it to feel

sexy? Are you doing it to try to attract someone? Are you trying to prove something? Are you giving in to pressure from someone? When you sext for these reasons, you often end up feeling bad, exposed and vulnerable. It can even make you feel kind of dirty. Sometimes, you can even end up thinking it doesn't matter anymore (if the person you sexted showed it around). Then you can start digging a hole that is very difficult to get back out of without a lot of embarrassment and shame. You can even end up feeling like it is your fault and you deserve it.

- Sexting is personal without being personal. Intimacy is something personal shared between people. Sexual intimacy is something very personal shared between people. Sexting cheapens and disrespects the personal, intimate aspect of sharing a physical part of yourself with someone.
- Sexting, like sex, can change the focus of even a really good relationship. It can shift the focus to the sexual part rather than the relationship part. Conversations can start to focus on sending more pictures or what else you will do rather than relating to each other about feelings and what is going on in your life. Even someone who cares a lot about you can get distracted by sexting/sex. It can cause a lot of misunderstanding and tension that could ruin the relationship.
- Sexting skips a very big step. If you are going to share a personal, physical part of yourself with someone it should be in person; something just for the two of you. Sexting can sometimes lead to your or your sexting partner feeling kind of awkward and confused. Sharing physical intimacy in person helps you see how the other person is reacting, helps you go at a pace both of you are comfortable with and lets you stop because you can read someone's reaction better in person.
- Sexting can really embarrass, worry and disappoint your parents (or your GRANDMOTHER). If problems occur, it is more difficult to talk to your parents because you know they would disapprove. You are kind of stuck when you need their help the most.

(Here <http://www.athinline.org/facts/sexting> is a site your kid might find instructive along with other forms of what is called digital abuse. This British video may be worth watching together. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ovR3FF_6us&feature=youtu.be)

After

What to DO after your kid has sexted

Confiscate all forms of electronic communication. First, get control of the means by which your kid can sext. Gather every device that accesses the internet or transmits signals. Change the password to your wireless server so that only YOUR computer or devices can access the internet. This is not a permanent solution. It is a way to bring everything to a screeching halt while you address this serious issue.

Gather information. Who knows about the sexts? Who sent (or forwarded) the sexts (i.e., distribution of child pornography)? Who received the sexts (i.e., possession of child pornography)? Who asked for the sexts (i.e., solicitation of child pornography)? You MUST know what you are dealing with. Think carefully before you look at the images. It is surprising how disturbing it is to see your child being sexual. Some images can be difficult to get out of your head. It is often easier for the same-sex parent to view the images. Do not provide the images to anyone else, even the parents of the kid who appears in the image (otherwise *you* could be charged with disseminating child pornography).

Have the talk. Refer to the previous column for talking points in addressing sexting when your kid has been involved.

Erase all sexts? The most obvious thing to do if you discover that your kid has sexted or received a sext is to erase every image (and then empty the trash file). (Notice that I stated this is the most obvious thing to do. This statement in no way is encouraging you to tamper with potential evidence and thereby making me an accessory after the fact to potential criminal activity. Just wanted to make that clear.) Here is one problem. You really can't easily or reliably erase files or images from your computer (for a number of technical reasons). The police have sophisticated programs that can recover deleted electronic files <http://money.cnn.com/2013/05/22/technology/mobile/smartphone-forensics/>. In addition, images that have been posted on the internet are digitally immortal. Do what you can do to get rid of them on any devices or servers that contain the image(s).

Another problem with erasing sexts is that, technically, you are committing a crime by destroying evidence or not reporting a felony (i.e., child pornography) to the proper legal authorities. It is really interesting how difficult it is to get a straight answer from people in the legal system about what you should do with the sexting image in your child's possession. Officers of the court (i.e., police officers, district attorneys, defense attorneys, judges, etc.) cannot recommend that you destroy evidence of a potential felony. That is breaking the law. On the other hand, when the sexting is private, consensual and between two kids, many criminal justice people give the impression you should quietly delete the images and address the issue within the family. (Here <http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/userfiles/file/Judicial/Effective%20Responses%20to%20Teen%20Sex%20ting.pdf>, here <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stop-sextortion-brochure.pdf/view> and here <http://www.secasa.com.au/assets/Sexting/Sexting-infosheet-parents-v8.pdf> are a few resources from the perspective of the legal community.)

What you do about deleting the image will be based in part on how the images have been sent or received. If it is between two kids who are involved in a private exchange, it is reasonable to shut the whole thing down, delete all copies of the image and address this as a personal family matter between both families (as long as you understand that you may be committing a felony and that I am not personally recommending that you commit a felony. Just being clear.). However, if your kid has distributed the images (or if your kid's images

have been distributed) to multiple people the police are going to be involved. Get a lawyer. Seriously. Get a lawyer. Then begin the expensive process of damage control and trying to save your kid from criminal charges and being identified as a sex offender.

Inform the parents of the co-sextee. While you are not responsible for determining what is appropriate for some else's kid, in this instance it is important to contact the parents of your kid's sexting partner. They are both involved in illegal behavior. The parents of your kid's sexting partner need to know. You need to be seen as taking proactive measures in addressing this issue if things take a legal turn. Stick to the facts. Tell them what actions you are taking. Talk in terms of decisions made by both kids.

Be prepared for the possibility that the parents of your kid's sexting partner will blame your kid. Parents often think first about the evil influence of the girlfriend/boyfriend that has led their little angel astray. (You probably had similar thoughts when you found out about the sexting.) Keep your cool. Maintain a position of compassion toward them. If the accusations get too personal, end the conversation rather than getting drawn into a "whose kid is the worst" kind of argument.

"I don't appreciate you speaking about my son/daughter that way. S/he certainly has some responsibility for this situation. I wanted to make sure you knew what we discovered in case you weren't aware of it. All the images have been deleted on our kid's devices. Please make sure that this happens on your end. We will be addressing it with him/her. Let us know if you discover anything else involving sexting that we need to be aware of."

Re-establish trust. Teenagers make mistakes. Sexting is a really significant error in judgment. There are several ways for your kid to begin the process of reestablishing trust. First, they must be able to talk to you in a convincing way about why sexting was a serious mistake. You can't even consider giving them access again to electronic means of communication if they don't even get that this is a problem. They will need to demonstrate that they are using good judgment when communicating by electronic means. This means you will be checking their texts and social media accounts on a regular basis (daily) until you are convinced they have enough sense to not display private, sexual matters across the electronic stratosphere. Make them text and email like a prude (i.e., no bad language and no references to impolite behavior including sex). They should be able to go for a significant period of time (e.g., 2-4 weeks) without using bad language before you decrease your supervision. There is this really excellent book I heard about on parenting teens (<http://drjameswellborn.com/raising-teens-in-the-21st-century/>) that presents a system for your kid to earn unsupervised access to the internet.

Have (another) sex talk. Sexting is a clear indication that your kid has taken a significant step in their sexual interests and development. You need to know what they think and believe about sex. You need to get into the issues of relationships and the role of sexual intimacy in emotional intimacy. You need to address the issue of casual sex. There are lots of resources <http://www.jamesgwellbornphd.com/parents/books/h-z/#sexgen> you can access to prepare yourself for this conversation.

Educate your kid about flirting and sexual innuendo. Young (and old) people have been trying to entice and seduce potential sexual partners since the dawn of creation. But these days seduction has become a hodgepodge of crudity, explicitness and graphic solicitations. Kids often don't even know how to flirt. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2394591/Arrested-development-Wide-spread-sexting-sign-todays-teenage-boys-dont-know-communicate.html>. Whatever happened to subtlety? In the old days, when no one could talk openly about sex, people had to learn how to talk about sex indirectly. It is fun. It is respectful. It is an important skill for your kid to cultivate. There is a time for directness and putting your cards on the table. But if that is all your kid knows how to do, they end up flopping their cards out and

showing their hand to the horror or dismay of their potential partner, society, or, worse, YOU. Sexual seduction is a powerful, important force of nature. It should also be a dance. Your kid needs to learn how to tango in addition to twerking and grinding. Have a talk with your kid about seduction and flirting.

A Last Word (or two)

So, yet another new and exciting parenting challenge has arisen from this amazing electronic age. It is easy for kids to thoughtlessly and impulsively create problems for themselves by sexting. However, it is, in many ways, just a version of the challenge teens have always faced: how to deal with their sexual urges, relate to a potential sexual partner and be sexually intimate with another person. Get in there and talk things over with them. It is a bad idea to leave them to figure all this out on their own.

And don't forget to enjoy your teenager. They are REALLY funny (sometimes without meaning to be).

Jim