NSPCC Safeguarding in Education Service

Briefing: The role of schools, colleges and academies in protecting children from Sexting

May 2013

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Introduction

Sexting is _"the exchange of sexual messages and images, creating, sharing and forwarding sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images through mobile phones and the internet"_ (NSPCC).

This briefing paper will help schools to understand the issue of sexting, how the curriculum can teach pupils about it, how to respond to disclosures about sexting and will signpost to useful teaching resources.

Understanding Sexting

Sexting is a complex area and the scale of the issue is largely unknown. Statistics range from between 15 and 40 per cent of young people being involved in sexting, but more qualitative research is needed. The South West Grid for Learning and the University of Plymouth carried out an online survey of young people in Years 9-13.

It found that young people's judgements about what makes an image inappropriate for sharing is different from that of adults. Nearly 40% said they know someone who had been engaged in sexting, 24% said it is a regular occurrence and only 24% would talk to a teacher.

A small scale study by NSPCC in 2012 found that it is practised as a group networked activity as well as on a one-to-one basis. The real extent of sexting is hidden: young people often do not tell adults about their experiences because they think that adults will judge them. They also worry about retaliation from peers.

E-safety lessons in schools have been successful in alerting children and young people to the dangers of engaging with strangers on line and the NSPCC research supports this. The young people interviewed said they would dismiss approaches by a stranger online very quickly. The challenge in teaching about sexting is that it occurs between peers or online 'friends'.

Sexting affects girls and boys. Although girls are more adversely affected, it should not be seen as a 'girl' problem. Initiatives to tackle sexting need to take account of the different experiences of boys and girls. Rather than an issue in isolation, sexting is part of a much wider picture of sexual pressure including pornography, body image and appearance. For boys, boasting about their sexual knowledge or experiences is applauded by peers, whereas girls who do the same would be labelled negatively. Gender differences need to be explored

sensitively and it might be appropriate to organise pupils into single sex groups to discuss the issues.

Sexting can be seen as an unwanted consequence of access to technology. The reality is that mobile technology and social networking is a constant presence is young people's lives. So banning technology is not a solution. Sexting needs to be seen as part of a wider picture which has received a lot of recent media coverage and has been called the 'sexualisation of children'. This includes issues such as pornography, gender based bullying and coercive sexual pressure placed on young people.

Sexting and PSHE

The Ofsted report ['Not Quite Good Enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools'](#) (May 2013) evaluated the strengths and weaknesses in PSHE across primary and secondary schools. It concluded that where PSHE teaching was good or outstanding, pupils felt able to make informed decisions in dealing with risk and were able to resist peer pressure more effectively. Other features of good PSHE highlighted include:

- Short courses to teach about a topic or issue.

- Use of external speakers.

- Links with the local community.

- Use of theatre groups.

- Use of case studies, scenarios, visual images and video clips.

- Teachers who are confident in dealing with controversial and sensitive issues with good subject knowledge.

- Consulting with pupils to include relevant and current topics and issues.

[Brook](#) recommend that PSHE in primary schools should help children learn about friendships, feelings and boundaries. In secondary schools, pupils should be taught about relationships, respect, consent, risk taking and feelings and emotions.

What can schools do?

(a) Teach pupils how to reduce the risk of harm when using technology.

(b) Help them understand what material is appropriate to share and what is not.

(c) Build their resilience so they can cope with risk and make informed choices.

(d) Enable pupils to feel confident about telling an adult about any concerns related to sexting.

(e) Include teaching about online safety in the PSHE curriculum.

This can be done through:

- Use of gender and culturally sensitive materials to address peer-to-peer sexting. This can be included in anti-bullying work or as a separate issue

- Use of realistic scenarios, film and DVD resources.

- Use of single sex groups to address gender specific issues.

- Work in small groups to help facilitate openness in discussion.

- Explicit teaching about the role of technology – this should be covered in the PSHE curriculum and the e-safety curriculum.

- Reviewing e safety procedures regularly to include developing technology and the technology most frequently used by children and young people. Teachers also need to be knowledgeable about the technologies most often used by pupils.

- Addressing sexting in the wider context of other issues such as body image, bullying and well-being.

Disclosures about Sexting

If a pupil discloses an incident of sexting or expresses concern about sexting staff should follow the usual procedure for dealing with any child protection disclosure or concern. In relation to sexting the adult will need to establish whether the disclosure is about sending, receiving or sharing an image and whether it involves the pupil themself or someone else. It will need to be established if the pupil has the device on which the image has been stored or shared. Devices should not be searched unless the pupil is in immediate danger. Otherwise schools should follow the guidance from the DfE. Section 15 of ['Screening searching and confiscation – Advice for head teachers, staff and governing bodies'](#) (2012) provides statutory guidance on searching electronic devices.

If indecent images of a child are found staff should:

- Report the incident to the DSP (following the child protection procedures set out in the school's Child Protection policy).

- The DSP should assess the risk to the child or young person and make referrals as appropriate, taking advice from the local authority if necessary.

If the image has been shared on the school network, social network or website the school should:

- Block the network to all users and isolate the image.

- Images should not be moved, sent or printed.

Schools should make reference to the procedures to follow in the event of a sexting disclosure in their acceptable use policy, the e-safety policy and the child protection policy.

Resources

There are resources available to help schools teach about the consequences of sexting and how to prevent the sharing of images. These include:

- Picture This – drama based resources to address sexting. Includes discussion and role play to help young people understand the consequences of creating and sending inappropriate images

- So You Got Naked Online – can be used by teachers and parents

- With Friends Like These – film exploring what happens when images are shared and get out of control

- Exposed – film about images being widely shared and the consequences for the young people involved

All of the above available from UK Safer Internet Centre.

- Advice from BeatBullying for children and young people about posting photos online.

- CEOP advice and resources for teachers and others working with children and young people.

'Sexting' in schools: advice and support around self-generated images What to do and how to handle it (PDF) contains practical advice about how schools should respond to an incident, including how to support a child whose image has been shared and whether or not devices can be searched.