



‘Sexting’ teens can go too far

By Gigi Stone

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What happened to the time when if you liked a boy at school you’d pass him a note?

These days the disturbing new trend in teenage flirting is sending nude or semi-nude photos from cell phone to cell phone: instead of “texting,” they call it called “sexting.”

While the X-rated offerings are usually intended just for a boyfriend or girlfriend, the photos often wind up being shared.

While 17-year-old Matthew Younger of Maryland says he has never done anything like this himself, he has seen it happen among his peers. “If a boy meets a girl or has a girlfriend on summer break he comes back and shows all his boys the [naked] pictures he’s been sent. No one gives it that much thought really,” says Younger.

The dangerous combination of teenagers behaving provocatively and impulsively is not new, but the accessibility to the technology is. With cell phone cameras, they have been handed a tool so easy to use for some it’s impossible to pass up.

And in the transparent culture built around social networking sites, it all spreads like wildfire.

“Somebody might send it to somebody else’s phone and that person has Facebook on their phone and they automatically upload it to their Facebook or MySpace page,” explains Somalia Yaborow, 16, of Alexandria, Va.

What teens don’t realize is just how serious the consequences can be.

News reports are increasingly documenting legal repercussions after indecent photos appear online. And attorneys say there are many unanswered questions about whether young people who send their own photos could face prosecution for obscenity or child pornography.

This year in Wisconsin, a 17-year-old was charged with possessing child pornography after he posted naked pictures of his 16-year-old ex-girlfriend online.

In Alabama, authorities arrested four middle-school students for exchanging nude photos of themselves. In Rochester, N.Y., a 16-year-old boy is now facing up to seven years in prison for forwarding a nude photo of a 15-year-old girlfriend to his friends.



“I don’t think that’s what was contemplated when the laws were written, says the Rochester teen’s attorney, Tom Splain, who has worked on several similar cases this year.

“I think it was more for the older pedophile collecting pictures of young children; we’re now running into high school students getting swept up in these charges.”

The nonprofit National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has been researching the issue.

Director Marisa Nightingale says it’s crucial parents talk to their children about potential consequences, because while criminal charges are rare, compromising photos could easily come back to haunt the teens when they go to apply for college or their first job.

“Even if it doesn’t result in something official, they can get really humiliated and find something they thought was a joke can become something that haunts them for years,” says Nightingale.