

Los Angeles Times

Editorial: Keeping an eye on ‘sexting’

Parents and officials are wondering what to do about the practice of teens transmitting nude photos of themselves via cellphone. Education and attentive parenting are probably the best answers.

Let’s talk about “sexting.” It’s the practice of teenagers, usually girls, sending nude or semi-nude photos of themselves, often to boys, usually by cellphone. And it’s common: 20% of teens participating in a survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy had either sent or posted nude pictures of themselves.

Those for whom this trend is news might be wondering: Whatever happened to streaking? Or mooning? Or skinny-dipping? If the pranks and peccadilloes of previous generations seem more innocent, they certainly were less fraught with life-altering consequences.

Today’s kids are learning the hard way that the digital age has created a mass audience for every ill-judged tap of the “send” button. Boys used to kiss and tell, and a girl would get a “reputation.” Now girls reveal and boys show and tell, leading to public humiliation and far worse.

Take the heartbreaking case of Jessica Logan, an 18-year-old Ohio teen who sent nude photos of herself to her boyfriend. After they broke up, he forwarded the pictures to hundreds of other high school girls, and Jessica was harassed relentlessly. Last July, she hanged herself in her closet, her cellphone on the floor nearby.

Forwarding nude pictures isn’t just cruel. It can be illegal if the pictures are of children under age 18, as schools and parents across the country have learned when prosecutors became involved. But doing something about sexting begins with disagreement about what precisely to consider it. Is it child pornography? An exercise of free speech? A school disciplinary matter? The parents’ responsibility? Logan’s mother is fighting for a national School and Family Education About the Internet Act (SAFE Internet), which would provide funding for new and existing Internet-safety programs for children, parents and educators. That’s one approach. Another, being debated in Ohio, is to reduce penalties for sexting teenagers to those of a first-degree misdemeanor, sensibly distinguishing between an act of juvenile irresponsibility and one of depraved distribution of child pornography.

By sexting, to quote one expert, teens are giving themselves “cyber tattoos” for life. So although it may be necessary to bring charges in the most egregious cases, that shouldn’t be the rule. Education and attentive parenting will go further toward addressing this worrisome trend than new laws and tough prosecutions.