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Teens bare all on phones

More 'sexting' nude pictures

By Cindy Kranz • ckranz@enquirer.com • January 13, 2009

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In the Cincinnati area, where legend holds that trends come 10 years late, "sexting" arrived well ahead of time.

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Teens here are taking nude photos of themselves or others, sending them on their cell phones or posting them online.

Some teens do it as a joke.

For others, it's the new bold pickup line to get a date.

A year ago, a 19-year-old Goshen cheerleading coach was charged and prosecuted for a misdemeanor, contributing to the unruliness of a child, for taking a topless photo of herself and a 15-year-old girl. A Glen Este Middle School boy was taken to juvenile court during the last school year for taking explicit photos of his girlfriend.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and CosmoGirl.com last month revealed results of a study that showed 20 percent of teens say they have sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves.

The results don't surprise local teens, school officials, police officers and others.

• Are Cincy teens ahead on the 'sexting' trend?

"If I were to go through the cell phones in this building right now of 1,500 students, I would venture to say that half to two-thirds have indecent photos, either of themselves or somebody else in school," said Jim Brown, school resource officer at Glen Este High School.

Turpin High School Principal Peggy Johnson thinks that the results would be similar - about 50-50 - in her building.

According to the national study, most teens who send sexually suggestive content send to boyfriends or girlfriends, while others say they send such material to those they want to date or hook up with or to someone they only know online.

Brown, who also is Glen Este Middle School's resource officer, said of the 14-year-old boy's cell phone photos last year: "They were as graphic as you would see in any Penthouse magazine, I've been told."

The study also showed that 44 percent of teens say it's common for sexually explicit images and text messages - sexting - to be shared with people other than the intended recipient.

"Guys who get pictures like this from girls, I don't think girls understand that guys gossip way more than girls," said Taylor McCleod, 17, a Withrow University High School senior who is a teen leader for the Postponing Sexual Involvement program.

"And when a guy gets a picture like that, he's not just going to keep it between him and the girl. He's going to take that and show every guy that he knows that knows that girl. And every time somebody looks at her, it's going to be a loss of respect for her."

Stakes can be high

The stakes of taking and sending sexually explicit photos can be high, compared to the thrill at the time.

The consequences can range from humiliation to losing out on jobs to going to court.

When kids are 14 or 15, Brown said, they don't often make the right decisions.

"They think, 'I have the right to decide what's best for me.' The next thing you know, it's on YouTube, and you become an international star because you're exposing part of your body. ... Then, they want to retrieve their good reputation, and they can't."

Kids have lost scholarships and jobs because of what's posted on Web sites, Brown said.

Many kids have "wised up," taking photos of body parts, but not faces, to avoid detection.

Tips to help parents, kids communicate

1. Talk to your kids about what they are doing in cyberspace.
2. Know whom your kids are communicating with.
3. Consider limitations on electronic communication.
4. Be aware of what your teens are posting publicly.
5. Set expectations.

Source: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

5 things to think about before sending

1. Don't assume anything you send or post is going to remain private.
2. There is no changing your mind in cyberspace - anything you send or post will never truly go away.
3. Don't give in to the pressure to do something that makes you uncomfortable, even in cyberspace.



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And while some teens intend for the suggestive photos to be seen by only one person, they might not think those photos will be forwarded or that something posted on the Internet lives on.

"I don't think it even crosses their mind," Daniel "Woody" Breyer, chief deputy prosecutor in Clermont County, said. "I think that kids are in the moment. What's going to happen today? What are we doing tonight? What are we doing this weekend?"

Going to court might not cross their minds, either.

Prosecutors evaluate the intent of the photo when deciding if charges are warranted.

"If this is clearly just a joke and everyone involved thinks it's funny, now somebody's mom sees it and gets mad. Technically, a charge could be filed," said Julie Wilson, chief assistant prosecutor and public information officer for the Hamilton County Prosecutor's Office.

"We're asking police to evaluate if it's a criminal charge or a matter that could be handled by the school or parents. For whatever reason, we have not seen a lot of these cases."

With so many implications, why do kids do it?

Besides peer pressure, the practice is provoked by what's considered acceptable in this culture, Breyer said, citing videos, such as "Girls Gone Wild."

"What is acceptable behavior in our country has just gone through the floor," Breyer said.

Christopher Kraus, director of the Postponing Sexual Involvement program at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, said that in his 20 years of working in adolescent medicine at the hospital, he's yet to see a teenage trend that does not mirror a larger adult trend.

"Adolescent sexuality is part of normal human development," Kraus said. "Teens are trying to figure out how to express their sexuality appropriately. They are learning, and they are learning from adults."

Kraus, who also is project manager for the Ohio Department of Health's new Guidelines for Sexual Health and Adoption Education, Grades 7-12, said teens are learning how to sort out many sexual messages in the media, including text messages.

"Some messages are complimentary. Some are offensive. Some are confusing. Each message is different."

'Kids Gone Wild'

Another teen Postponing Sexual Involvement leader, Mariah McCollum, who has received unwanted and unsolicited photos from an acquaintance, talked about the trend.

"Every day or every other day, I hear about a new video of one of my peers. There's a new video going around involving sexual activities," said Mariah, a 17-year-old senior at Withrow University High School.

"I think it's pretty lame for a male to send you pictures without consent. ... Who says I want to see your private areas?" Mariah said, adding that she lost a lot of respect for the boy who sent it.

Meanwhile, Brown said parents need to pay attention to their kids' use of technology.

Part of the problem is that kids' inhibitions are knocked away by alcohol-fueled parties, where many sexually explicit photo opportunities occur, he said.

"It's 'Kids Gone Wild,' with technology being provided by the parents," he said.

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