

## “Sexting” - Are Your Children Sex Offenders?

By Gary Mussell

Articles on this latest teenage fad have appeared in many of the major city newspapers, *Time Magazine*, and even Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly – that bastion of American conservative morality – did a segment last month. So okay, it's time I weighed in on the subject also.

"Sexting," where kids trade X-rated pictures via cell phone text message, has made headlines recently after a rash of cases in which child pornography charges have been brought not against dangerous pedophiles where the law was intended, but against hormonally active teenagers -- potentially leaving them branded sex offenders for life.

Some parents are angry to see teens criminalized for simply being sexual, while others find the raunchy shots pornographic, another blinking neon sign of moral decay in a "Girls Gone Wild" era. In both cases, it amounts to a tug of war between teenagers' entitled sense of sexual autonomy and society's desire to protect them.

According to these recent interpretations of the law, a curious teenage girl who embarks on an "Our Bodies, Ourselves" journey of vaginal self-discovery, and simply replaces a hand mirror with a digital camera, is a kiddie pornographer. The same goes for the boy who memorializes his raging boner, or the post-pubescent girl who takes test shots of herself practicing the porn star poses she has studied online. Theoretically, this is true regardless of whether they share the pictures with anyone, and if they do share them, they could be additionally charged with peddling child porn.

There's good reason to be concerned about teens being self-pornographers. But many, especially legal experts, are disturbed by the fact that a healthy horn-dog of a teenager could be grouped in the same criminal category as a clinically ill pedophile. "These cases are picturing these teenagers as both predators and victims of themselves," says Amy Adler, a law professor at New York University who has studied child porn laws. "Child porn law was founded on a very different vision of what the major threat was."

That major threat, of course, is supposed to be adults who produce and peddle child smut. Reed Lee, a Chicago attorney and board member of the Free Speech Coalition, says: "A law to protect victims shouldn't send those very victims to jail."

Nudists have been victimized by these same law for years. We have all heard the stories of parents being arrested for taking photos of their naked children splashing in the family backyard pool to WalMart for developing. More insidious still are those cases where a burglar stole family nude photos from a house he stole items from, only to receive probation after testifying against the very people he stole from – and the family lost their children to Social Services.

One mother wrote on an Internet bog recently that her eight year old has used her cell phone to take pictures of his private parts. She wrote that he showed his siblings, and they giggled a lot. Nothing sexual in it at all. But, until she deleted the images, her phone had a few pictures of naked boy private parts and she could have been arrested has someone else seen them.

There also seems to be a sexist double standard at work here. Example: A few months ago we heard from the granddaughter of one of our members about a girl at Westlake High in Agoura who sent a nude image of herself to her boyfriend, who proceeded to share the image with several of his male buddies. The girl was suspended, but the boyfriend? No punishment except a warning not to do it again.

Teens will, as they always have, experiment with their sexuality. At one time, that meant a boy would flip through his father's stash of *Playboys* and a girl would try on her mother's ample bra.

"Older adults have a short memory. There were things we did -- people flashed each other and played spin the bottle," says Elizabeth Schroeder, director of Answer, Rutgers University's program dedicated to promoting sexuality education. "This is this generation's way of doing that."

But today's teens have an entirely different notion of privacy than past generations. They grew up in the exhibitionistic Web culture of LiveJournal, YouTube and MySpace. They've seen girls on TV playfully jiggling their breasts for plastic beads, "Real World" cast members boldly screwing in front of cameras, and Britney, Paris, and Lindsay flashing their shaved privates for the paparazzi. Vanessa Hudgens of *High School Musical* fame, for heaven's sake, was outed by her ex-boyfriend for sending full-frontal photos of herself to him while they were a couple. In a *Time Magazine* article in March, a survey of high school students revealed that one in five teens had sent or posted a naked picture of themselves, and a third had received such a picture or video by text message or email.

In a time when free hardcore porn is ubiquitous, technology is cheap and the Internet is a comfortable channel for expression and experimentation, is it really any surprise that this is a generation of amateur pornographers? In reality, this is all part of how



kids initiate themselves into our sexual culture long before they actually have sex. As face-to-face communication seems to be falling out of fashion, the way teens learn to interact socially is to use the tools at hand. Intimate text messaging has been around longer than the Internet, but the ability to send such messages almost instantly – and to strangers one only knows by what they disclose while on line – has given rise to far greater dangers for today's youth.

Clearly, there is a big difference between testifying on the wall of the boy's bathroom about the toe-curling blow jobs the school's head cheerleader gives and sending your buddies photographic proof. These digital offerings bring the potential for humiliation and blackmail if the photos or video get into the wrong hands -- and, let's face it, they often do



We hear news stories far too frequently of young girls coaxed into running away from home to meet an Internet buddy for the first time, only to discover that person's true intent when it is too late. One of NBC's higher rated shows is *"To Catch a Predator,"* a show that confirms the worst fears of every parent. The ratings for the show, by the way, indicate most of its viewers to be over age 45 – so the kids aren't watching or getting the message.

In a perfect, "nudist-friendly" world, sending images back and forth between friends should not even be an issue. But in this real "skin-phobic" world, do I condone "Sexting"? Absolutely not. There are as yet no foolproof safeguards to prevent these photos from being distributed into the hands of people who would gladly post them on a porn site for the whole world to see – including future prospective employers.

For starters, as a temporary fix, I believe these overreaching pornography laws should be clarified so that someone not attempting to make money off photographs of minors should not be considered pornographers. But what still seems to be overlooked here is that this is primarily a phenomenon of young women exposing themselves to get the attention of boys. More than anything, I feel badly that the young women feel this is the best way to be noticed

and loved, and I feel badly for the young men who are being led to believe that this is what relationships are based upon.

But is there an even better solution? Actually I have one.

If teens really want to see what other people look like without clothes, arrange to have them visit one of the 270 nudist clubs and resorts scattered across the country. I guarantee any curiosity they have will be satisfied during the first five minutes. Also, since there are no cameras allowed at these parks, there is zero possibility of any images being spread across a Friends and Family network. It also makes the "revealing" dare mutual. A guy can't bully his girlfriend into revealing herself without him also being forced to show his stuff.

As any nudist knows, our parks are not very sexual, in fact, we are rather boring all together (pun intended). Sexuality always involved clothing anyway, the titillation of hiding something from view. That is why guys who might fantasize about a girl in a bikini quickly loses interest once the bikini is discarded and the woman's is revealed to look "like everyone else." Hard to explain that to the Morality Crowd who are convinced our parks are "predator magnets." But the fact that our parks do an excellent job of screening visitors and quickly removing anyone exhibiting questionable behavior, makes nudist parks safer for these teens than a regular beach, or even a shopping mall. In the end, our hormone-driven teens will get a look at all they want to see, find the human body is simply 200 variations on two themes, and return to school better able to cope with all the surrounding peer pressure.

All we have to do is figure out a way to invite them (and their parents?) and have them actually show up.

Ironically, one of the other consequences of Sexting is the rising number of adults who refuse to shower naked at health clubs. Go into any 24 Hour Fitness Center for a workout after work, and you will notice a large majority of the men showering in bathing suits. The ritual is to go to one's locker, change out of the exercise clothes (be briefly nude) and change into a bathing suit, then after the shower drop the trunks (for about 2 seconds) and change back into one's underwear. Weird? Not really.

In a story we printed a few years ago, a study revealed that men were afraid of being photographed in the shower by other men in the locker room holding hidden cell phone cameras. Showering while wearing something seemed perfectly natural to those under age 40 since they never got to experience in high school what we in the older generation had as a daily ritual – showering after gym class. We raised a generation of stinkers. Literally. But we also raised a generation that had to satisfy their hormonal curiosity in other ways. Cable television and the Internet have stepped in to fulfill that need, yet we old timers know just the viewing of pictures doesn't really answer all the questions, nor does it resolve the pressure on those young girls who need to be "liked." And as their photos get copied and recopied, they become less a personal statement of "who I am" to the object of one's affection, and more likely they become an "object of sexual fulfillment" by some truly sick people out there in the Net.

So I offer my alternative. As your kids are about to reach puberty, if you haven't brought them to a nudist park already, do so then. Let them splash in the pool with their friends of both sexes. Let them ask all the curious questions and let them see humanity in all its shapes, sags, and ages. They will be more secure in their own changing bodies, and in the friends they keep. And I bet they no longer will have any desire to send (or receive) sexually explicit photos through their cell phones, not when they have seen the real thing. Our kids who have grown up in nudist parks truly don't know how lucky they are.

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