



Earlier education needed on sexting, says expert

*Adults have a responsibility to teach not only teens but also primary-school-aged children about the risks of sexting before it's too late, writes **Karen Fontaine***



Since time immemorial, parents have had a tendency to bury their heads in the sand when it comes to issues pertaining to the emerging sexuality of their children.

But the social phenomena that is 'sexting' – the sending of sexually explicit images via mobile phone, email and posting online – presents an urgent need for parents and educators to confront the issue collaboratively, says South Australian academic Lesley-Anne Ey.

Children as young as eight were sexting and their primary schools were not teaching them anything about the risks, Ms Ey told the Victorian Parliament's sexting inquiry.

Moreover, research conducted in a Queensland primary school had found girls as young as eight were sending naked pictures of themselves to other pupils, Ms Ey's submission claimed.

Considering the proliferation of platforms on which images could be sent – including iPhones, iPads, iPods and mobile phones – child sexting was likely to increase "because more children are becoming owners of digital technology at younger ages," she said.

The Australian Kids Helpline counselling service reported that between January and March last year, 500 young people contacted the service with concerns about sexting – 75 per cent of them female and most under 19. One in three of the callers were aged between 10 and 14.

As Amanda Lenhart, the author of *Teens and Sexting*, writes: "The desire for risk-taking and sexual exploration during the teenage years combined with a constant connection via mobile devices creates a 'perfect storm' for sexting."

Considering the phenomena of sexting and the risk it carries, children and their families need to not only be informed but also educated around this area. Schools are best placed to deliver instructions to parents and students alike, Ms Ey said. Education on sexting is not just a parental responsibility, and as such governments should embrace the challenge.

"As I am a firm believer that this process should be addressed earlier rather than later, it needs to be addressed sensitively to accommodate children's knowledge base and developmental levels," she told Insights.



As such, teaching children how to protect themselves from engaging in sexting can be implemented at an early age, but under the umbrella of digital technology education and protective behaviours education.

“At this age, discussion about sexting is inappropriate and unethical, however, carefully designed curricular can introduce concepts such as embarrassing pictures without introducing children to sexting per se,” Ms Ey said.

“Introduction to sexting as a concept should be introduced only during formal sex education, and not before, in a school environment.”

As Ms Ey points out, sexting can wreak havoc on children’s psychological, social and emotional development. A serious federal offence, it may lead to bullying, social isolation, depression and even suicide. Addressing concepts similar to sexting at an early age, and addressing sexting alongside sex education, is “only sensible,” she said.

“I believe there are no countries educating primary-school-aged children around the topic of

sexting and Australia can pioneer change around this topic,” Ms Ey said.

“Sexting does not need to be taboo topic – while it is seen as such, it will never be addressed. It can be addressed appropriately through education and, if managed sensitively, it does not need to be confronting for children.”

Lesley-Anne Ely’s tips for parents for introducing sexting to children and young people:

1. Teach children the basics of digital technology from junior primary school.
2. Explain that digital text or pictures can’t always be removed. It’s difficult ‘to put the genie back in the bottle’ once they are placed online.
3. Demonstrate to children how easy it is for information to spread online.
4. Encourage kids to consider how they would feel if an embarrassing picture of themselves was spread around online.
5. Discuss what they would do if they saw embarrassing pictures of their friends. Link this to a discussion of how good friends treat each other.