

Those of you who read this column are aware that I usually get the ideas for the weekly topic from the interactions and experiences that I have had through the week. Quite often I notice that a topic will come up several times in different venues once it has come to my attention. This has been the case over the last couple of weeks. My first connection with the sexting issue came in the form a phone call from a mother in our community. She said she wanted to generate an awareness of how sexting is active in the local schools and how this is a traumatic experience for the youth who have been caught up in the sexting phenomenon. She asked me to help get the word out.

The next encounter with sexting happened at our conference on complex trauma that took place this week in Parksville. At one point, the participants were asked to name a topic or question for a table discussion and one of the therapists identified sexting as a sexual abuse issue that is increasing in incidents all over North America.

For those of you who may be asking “What is texting?” Wikipedia defines it as “the act of sending sexually explicit messages or photographs, primarily between mobile phones.” The term sexting is a combination of the words sex and texting. Authorities and parents are at a loss about how to deal with this phenomenon. Some responses are extreme, probably due to lack of precedence. In the US, teenage girls were recently charged for distributing pornography when they sent nude pictures of themselves to classmates. One eighth grader spent the night in juvenile detention after his coach found nude pictures of a fellow student in his locker. Some estimates of the number of youth engaged in sexting are as high as 20% for sending and 48% for receiving. WOW! The research, while limited, seems to indicate that most youth don't see a problem with this kind of behaviour. For many it is a joke and in some cases the pictures are used to bully and humiliate the sender, usually a young girl. The picture is taken out of a private context and it goes viral to everyone on several address books.

Some expert advice about dealing with sexting suggests that parents have a conversation with their children to talk about consequences to them and to others. Cell phones are common equipment these days but parents still have the right to set boundaries about cell phone usage. Professionals recommend that you ask your child “Why would someone do this? rather than “You wouldn't do something like this would you?” There is a big difference between these two questions. The first one opens a conversation and the second lets your child know the exact answer you are looking for. Don't shut things down before you can get to the heart of the matter. This is good all-around advice.

Sexting is a 21st century phenomenon that needs our attention!

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