

Summit County Prosecutor warns parents about 'sexting'

Editors note: Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh released the following message about 'sexting.' It is reproduced here from her recent newsletter for Herald readers.

We've all seen them: teens furiously typing out cryptic messages on cell phones. It seems texting is the new mode of communication among teens and pre-teens. But there is a shocking phenomenon becoming more common with teens called "sexting."

Sexting is the act of sending or receiving nude or partially nude photos via cell phone text messages, and it has the potential to be a very serious crime.

Surprisingly, it is quite common among youth, especially high school students, who frequently dismiss the act as "harmless flirting." It's not just those in high school who are involved: kids as young as 11 and 12 have been discovered taking risqué photos of themselves and sending them off to a boyfriend, and a few cases have recently made national news. Not only can sexting ruin reputations, it can have very serious ramifications for those who participate in it. A few cases have made national headlines where participants in sexting cases have been charged with felonies for disseminating sexually oriented material involving minors.

Sending or receiving naked images of those under the age of 18 is very serious. If caught, it can hinder a teen's chances for college entry or for landing a job, and, more significantly, can put a teen at risk for prosecution on felony child pornography charges and force them to be registered as a sexual offender.

It is important that parents communicate with their children the serious impact

this crime can have on their lives. As the statistics below illustrate, sexting among teens is surprisingly common. Teachers: If you have questions about laws concerning sexting or would like to set up an informational talk about sexting in your school, please contact my office.

Did you know?

A recent study of teen and young adults' behavior online was conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group. Here are the findings:

- 20 percent of teens, ages 13-19, admitted to sending/ posting nude or semi-nude photos or videos of themselves (22 percent girls and 18 percent boys).

- 11 percent of teen girls ages 13-16 admitted to sending/posting nude or semi-nude photos or video of themselves.

- 51 percent of teen girls and 18 percent of teen boys said they felt pressure from the opposite sex to send nude/semi-nude photos.

- 15 percent of teens who sent or posted nude or semi-nude images of themselves say they have done so to someone they knew only online.

- Overall, 48 percent of teens report receiving such text images.

- 44 percent of both teen girls and boys say it is common for sexually suggestive text messages to be shared with people other than the intended recipient.

Communicate the seriousness of sexting

- Talk to your kids, even if it's uncomfortable. It's better that uncomfortable topics come from you than someone else.

- Talk to your kids early.

Statistics show kids are engaging in this activity as young as 11 years old, and experts suggest it's better to be proactive than reactive. Don't wait until you find pictures to talk to your kids about sexting.

- Hear your child's thoughts. Instead of the "don't do this" lecture, open up the conversation. "What do you think about this?" or "have you heard about this crazy thing I heard happening with kids your age?" might be good ways to open a conversation up with your child.

- Talk to your child about privacy. In an age where people announce their "status" to everyone on the Net via social networking sites like Facebook, it's likely privacy means something very different to your kids than it does to you. Let them know nothing is ever truly "erased" in cyber space, and that includes images on cell phones.

- Set limits if necessary. If your child must have a cell phone, opt for one without a camera or contact your cell provider and ask them to disable your child's "send" button on the camera feature; some cellular providers can do this.

- Let them know your expectations and that you will take charges of sexting very serious should they ever engage in this illegal activity.

- Let them know what to do if they receive a text they think might contain nude photos. Tell them to immediately delete anything they find suspicious. If they do accidentally open a text that contains a nude photo, they should tell an adult immediately, a teacher or parent, and never forward it to anyone else.

- Most importantly, let them know sexting is illegal with potentially serious consequences.