

Our Confusing Relationship with Sexting

Each day I get the daily news feed from Google on topics related to my field, sex addiction, mindfulness, sexting, etc. If you are unfamiliar with the news feeds, Google culls the internet each day for new things with your keyword and sends you the links to all the new pages. Sometimes this yields a treasure trove of new information and sometimes it is just junk.

When it comes to the sexting news feeds, I am always struck by how dichotomous the links are. The news feed links tend to come in three categories:

1. People being arrested for sexting with minors or some other sexting related scandal.
2. The dangers of sexting and how to protect our teens from the behavior.
3. How to use sexting to improve your relationship and have better, hotter sex.

We seem to not know what to think about sexting and the lines between good and evil seem rather gray.

Scandal, Disgrace and Jail:

Many headlines regarding sexting involve adults sexting a minor or engaging in a sext relationship with a co-worker, subordinate or patient. Two recent headlines from my geographic area include a juvenile probation officer who has been criminally charged for his behavior. He was sexting with a juvenile female who was on his juvenile probation case load. Another recent headline involves a New Jersey police officer who was caught sexting teenage girls. The message here is clear. Adults sexting with minors is not tolerated and is to be criminally charged and frequently publicly shamed. In truth, sexting in these cases has become the newest extension of abuse of power and inappropriate sexual conduct with minors provided by digital technology. The message here is clear and not terribly confusing.

Sexting is dangerous for your kids

Another prevalent headline involves warning parents over the dangers of teen sexting. This can be results from a prevalence study to a public service program put on by the police to warn about dangerous sexting. The coverage sometimes includes articles about how texting and sexting fit into the social dynamic of teen relationships. The message here is confusing at times. It is clear from the research that sexting has become a normal part of the lives of some teenagers. Data shows us that it has been integrated into courtship rituals. However, the press tells us that parents are terrified and worried about teen sexting, clearly one of a parent's biggest fears. Perhaps this fear is based on the outdated or non-existent laws regarding minor sexting in some states or concern about cyberbullying. To me, it appears as though parents' fears are based on a lack of understanding of their own children's culture, a fear which could be abated with open communication with their child.

Sexting can make your relationship better

Learn how to write hot, sexy sexts to turn on your lover and spice up your relationship. This is where my confusion really takes hold. Our press and culture focus on sexting being something to shame, ridicule and fearful. People in power can abuse others via sexting. Children can be damaged for the duration of their lives from sexting. However, that magic moment when we are now an adult instead of a minor, sexting moves from something to fear to something to embrace. What? How does that happen?

It is true that using digital communication like texting and sexting can increase the connection in a relationship. The data are starting to bear fruit. Tindr is not ruining dating for everyone and smart, loving and committed couples do, indeed, sext each other for fun. It seems to help their intimacy, connection and relationship satisfaction as well.

Why are we so confused about the role of sexting? I truly have no answer but the strange mix of news stories that arrive in my email each morning mimic our culture's confused relationship with sex in general. Drive down a highway and you can find nearly naked women (and sometimes men too) plastered on a billboard. You can watch very intimate sexual encounters on prime time television (nearing soft core pornography). You can have sex with prostitutes in video games if you are 12.

However, the one thing we can't do is talk about sex. We can watch it. We can see it. We can do it in a video game but we can't talk about it. Our culture still carries so much shame around sexuality that it is incredibly uncomfortable to talk about for most people. We don't talk to our children about sex (but we let them play grand theft auto).

Sexting, like sex itself, is neither good nor bad but rather context dependent. There is nothing inherently wrong with using a cell phone for sexual conversations. As with most things online, the problem is in the hands of the user. Any means of abusing a power differential in a relationship is unacceptable and sexting provides an additional avenue for abuse. If sexting is inherently bad because it opens new opportunities for abuse, is chatting or emailing bad because some people can use it for abusing children? If one uses that logic, it could be said that going to church is dangerous because children have been abused by clergy. Obviously, this logic isn't sound.

Sexting is a means of communication. It is our responsibility as adults to use it wisely. Be aware of the potential ramifications of sending images of yourself that you might not wish the world to see. Be aware of the fact that chat transcripts might be read by someone else.

Be aware that your children are likely either engaging in sexting or know of people who are sexting. Educate yourself about the law, the outcomes and your child's culture. Talk to them about sexting and the possible consequences, both social and legal. If we just say that sexting is a bad thing, we are shaming an expression of sexuality. Let's teach healthy sexuality and how to express it in a healthy manner.