

Sexting sends message about changing values

Like most things, like Spencer and Heidi Pratt and that TV couple with the eight kids, sexting — sending by cell phone or Internet nude or semi-nude images of one's self — languishes at the very bottom of my don't-care list.

Naturally, I gave my 15-year-old son the lecture. The message being that sexting is anthrax. Once it's out, it's out there forever. It's also wrong and stupid.

Or wrong and stupid enough to land more than one 18-year-old "adult" in jail for transmitting child porn images of his 16-year-old girlfriend.

Then a friend of mine caught her bright and pretty 14-year-old daughter sending semi-revealing pictures of herself over the Internet to a classmate in the spirit of lighthearted fun. Which caused horrified mom to go People's Republic on the kid. This I say because China is now requiring that all computers sold in that country come with software that automatically blocks pornography.

The girl in question saw her cell phone and computer confiscated even though mom knows that there is no way short of murder to prevent a savvy kid from hopping over all the electronic barriers the feeble adult world might place in her path.

Still, this latest and damn-near-complete departure from ancient behavioral norms is intriguing, mainly because we have yet to develop legal or ethical ways to deal with a behavior that 66 percent of the population may be talking part in.

A 2008 survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies found that one in five 13- to 19-year-olds have sent revealing pictures of themselves in text form or online. This while a third of boys and a quarter of girls claimed that these "private" images were later shared with a wider audience.

Bill Albert, spokesman for the Washington-based organization, stated that today's teens need to discover — apparently nobody ever told them? — for themselves what is appropriate and what is not in a world transformed by technology.

"This technology is so new that people



JOHN BOGERT

haven't found their moral compass," he told the BBC. "The problem is that even if you think you are sending a picture only to your boyfriend or girlfriend, it can go from private to global in a nanosecond. And something like that can stick with you like a cyber-tattoo for the rest of your life."

Even as sexters laugh at long-term ramifications and the vague threat of punishment, the Illinois state Legislature has made sexting a felony punishable by a \$2,500 fine and a year in the can. Add to this the suicide last year of a humiliated Ohio teen whose nude photos were shared by a boyfriend and we're bound to see even more calls for draconian punishment.

This for what seems to be a largely consensual and mostly private practice (2 percent of sexters claim that they were pressured by another) involving people of all ages, sexes, races, creeds and colors.

Which is why I spoke last week to New York psychologist and recent Oprah guest Dr. Susan Lipkins. Having written on sexual bullying and the dangers of hazing, Lipkins — whose practice focuses on teens and families — this year conducted a survey of her own when experience began to suggest that the figures she was seeing were too low.

In Lipkins' study of 323 people she found that 65 percent of respondents ages 13 to 19 and 73 percent of those 20 to 26 had sexted.

What's more, they felt good about it.

Sexting, she claims, is about the thrill of engaging in risky behavior in a way that would appear to involve minimum risk. People sext to be turned on or to be funny. It is also a form of power-seeking practiced alone, during sexually explicit video chats or even in groups.

It's also done to hook up with someone

new, making it a kind of mating call, and as what not long ago would have been seen as an outrageous way to gain social status. Only — and isn't this perpetually the case? — when the cool kids do it it's cool and when the not-so-cool do it it isn't.

Still, Lipkins calls sexting a symptom of the current sexual revolution. Or evolution (or maybe de-evolution) in an age when younger people, apparently overpowered by life's demands, seek casual sex and see nothing at all wrong with retransmitting the images they receive because sexters should expect as much.

"The surprising part was the girls," Lipkins said. "They don't want relationships. This, I think, is similar in its way to the 1960s, when the pill made free sex possible and made parents shake their heads."

Also involved here is what she calls "a new attitude toward ownership of written words, music and images and with the way young people look at themselves in physical space."

Ownership, it seems, is something to be shared while sex is often about hits, about quantity rather than depth of relationships. This, she said, is the smoke rising from a second sexual revolution.

"What's worrying to adults is that younger people are not subscribing to our sexual morality. Meanwhile, there is no way to legislate or prosecute this behavior. Sexting is already part of the culture for the young people that grew up in a digital world. We older adults have this archaic view that we will somehow catch them."

And there is, short of screwing down a Chinese-style lid, no way of stopping a practice that — when used maliciously — can be devastating. Which is why she thinks sexting needs to be discussed in schools, churches and in the home.

She also recommends that computers and cell phones come with a built-in pop-up question to interrupt and maybe slow down the impulsive flow.

Just a simple question, "Do you really want to send this image?"

I want to hear your opinions. Connect with me at john.bogert@dailybreeze.com

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