

Some police seeing more sexting complaints

Four middle school students are back in class after a sexting incident that led to their suspensions.

Parents attempting to stop nude photos, sexually explicit texts because youthful mistake can last a lifetime.

(Photo: Lloyd Gallman, The Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser)

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PRATTVILLE, Ala. — About once every two weeks, Sgt. Geary Graves of the Prattville [Police Department](#) handles a sexting-related issue involving teenagers.

Graves, who works in computer forensics, said it has risen from one case every three or four months that the department in this city of almost 35,000 residents had a few years ago.

STORY: [Teen sexting linked to psychological woes](#)

STORY: [Teen sexting numbers lower than thought](#)

But Graves doesn't see the increase in sexting cases as all bad. He credits much of the increase to greater awareness and involvement among parents.

"We get their phones and pull the pictures out," Graves said. "The ones that we find out about are the 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds sending pictures back and forth to each other. We ask the kids why they do it, and they say ... they don't know. They just do it."

His department, in a Montgomery, Ala., suburb about 15 miles northwest of the Alabama capital, has the capability to check phones for sexually explicit messages or images.

"We tell them that once they take a picture and they send it to someone, that picture will be there the rest of their life because that person will send it to someone else," he said.

By the numbers

A 2008 online survey showed that more than 1 in 5 teen girls, and more than 1 in 10 ages 13 to 16, said they had sent electronically or posted online nude or semi-nude images of themselves, according to [The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy](#) and [CosmoGirl.com](#). It does not list a margin of error because it was not a random poll.

A different 2009 survey from the [Pew Internet & American Life Project](#) found that 4% of teens who had cellphones said they had sent sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images of themselves via text message. By age 17, the percentage rose to 8% and nearly a third had received such an image on their phones. The survey has a ± 3.8 percentage-point margin of error.

BLOG: [Photo-erasing app heats up sexting debate](#)

STORY: [Snapchat's young audience fuels a growth streak](#)

Researchers writing in the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* followed 948 students at seven public high schools in Texas for three years, releasing its study in 2012. It found that 28% reported sending a naked picture of themselves via text or e-mail, and 31% of the teens said they had asked for such an image. More than half, 57%, said they had been asked to send a nude photo.

Most sexting cases seen in this area involve young people, and cases end up in juvenile court, said District Attorney Randall Houston in Wetumpka, Ala., whose office covers Autauga, Chilton and Elmore counties in Alabama. He said he has noticed an increase in cases.

"There's no public record of it because it involves juvenile records, which are closed," he said. "It's a fairly new crime created with the technology available today.

"Kids aren't doing anything maliciously evil. Most are just making unwise decisions," Houston said. "That's why I think it's appropriate that these end up in juvenile court as opposed to adult court."

Parental involvement, charges faced

Children who have open communication in their families — and whose parents monitor their actions — generally don't engage in such behavior, said Professor Glen Ray, Psychology Department chairman at Auburn University Montgomery. Ray focuses on children's peer relationships, including friendship and social status, and has studied bullying.

"Generally, right now, it is friend to friend," Graves said of the sexting. "We haven't been contacted by parents about the Internet. The phones — that's about the only way they communicate now."

From 2009 to 2012, at least 20 states and Guam have enacted bills to address youth sexting, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

If adults send photos among themselves, no charges are filed, Houston said. In Alabama, a case becomes criminal — possession, distribution or production of pornography, all felonies — when the photos sent are of juveniles, even if a minor sends a nude photo to another juvenile.

Still, sometimes when parents come to police because a photo was sent to their child, they don't pursue charges because they find out their child also sent a photo in return, said C.J. Robinson, chief assistant for the 19th Judicial Circuit of Alabama.

"Even if websites claim to be able to delete messages or photos forever, it's not true," said Executive Director Steve Searcy of One Place Family Justice Center in Montgomery, Ala. An expert — and in some cases less than an expert — can get at the data that sites and apps claim is deleted.

One blog warns against the dangers of [Snapchat, an app used to send photos](#) and short video clips that are billed as vanishing within 10 seconds. Users can take screenshots of the supposedly self-destructing images.

"The Internet is not secure. If corporate America can't keep their data safe, then how do you expect these companies to do that?" Searcy said. "Once you hit 'send,' you're laying down digital footprints."

Impulsive behaviors

Ray said older children, ages 15 to 17, are more likely to engage in sexting behaviors than those younger, also reflected in the Pew survey. That's in part because they have more access to smartphones but also because they face more pressure.

"They don't think of the consequences of their actions," Ray said of children. "They can engage in impulsive behavior and it can come back to haunt you years later."

At the Prattville Police Department, investigators use forensic software that allows them to extract all the information from a phone.

"Sometimes, the kids come in with the parents," Graves said. "And, fortunately, the parents are very (proactive) in us finding the stuff for them."

Children engage in the behaviors for reasons ranging from boredom to pressure from a boyfriend, Ray said.

"Among a group of girls or guys, there is sometimes the pressure to conform," he said. "But I don't think, from

what I'm reading, that a peer group 'norm' is that they expect them to sext."



Hardware at bottom right extracts information from a smartphone, left, that then is uploaded to another computer. (Photo: Lloyd Gallman, *The Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser*)

Tips for parents

- Make sure you recognize all numbers on your cellphone bill. Ask about any number you don't recognize.
- Don't be naive if kids close their phones and computers around you. Make sure they use phones and computers only in public areas of the home.
- Communicate house rules. Before your child is allowed to have a phone, discuss your expectations for behavior, the consequences for failing to meet those expectations, and the potential legal and social repercussions of sending inappropriate pictures or spreading them online.
- Understand the technology that your child is using, including the device, social network sites and gaming systems. Some could have messaging and photo-sharing options that you might not know about.
- Be a vigilant parent. Know who your child is talking to and who is trying to talk to them. The more information you have about their interactions on their phone, the better equipped you will be to interfere if anything dangerous should happen.

Source: *uKnowKids* blog

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