

Sword fights and sex abuse: only 1% of minors send explicit nude photos

By [Nate Anderson](#) | Published 14 minutes ago

In 2008, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy said that 20 percent of teens had distributed nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves. Cue the moral panic about sexting!

Certainly, examples of sexting—both ridiculous and unnerving—weren't hard to find. A new paper in *Pediatrics* on teen sexting arrests contains a wealth of examples. Consider three that span the spectrum. Here's the ridiculous:

At a party where there was heavy drinking, 3 boys in the shallow end of a pool pulled down their swim trunks and had a "sword fight." A girl, 17, filmed this and sent the video via cell phone to 6 other people. The 3 boys did not know she had taken the video or sent it. The girl was charged in juvenile court.

Now the deeply unsettling:

The parents of a 16-year-old contacted police because a boy was extorting their daughter. The victim said she had accidentally uploaded a nude picture of herself to a social networking site. When she realized this, she deleted the image, but a boy from her school had already downloaded it. He threatened to distribute it if she did not send him more nude pictures. When the girl refused, the boy sent the picture to ~100 people. The boy, who was a straight-A student, was charged with a felony. He pleaded guilty and was put on probation.

And finally the truly loathsome:

A 14-year-old girl was drawn into a sexual relationship with her step-uncle who was 38 and lived in another state. They communicated online for about a month; then he introduced sexual topics into their conversations. He sent her sexual pictures of himself, and she sent him pictures of all sorts, including sexual images. After 6 months, the offender visited the victim and took her back to his home. While they were together, they both took hundreds of sexually explicit pictures of themselves and each other. The mother reported the offender to the police. The offender received two 10-year sentences in state court.

With all the stories about sexting in the news, it's easy to see it everywhere. But 20 percent of kids? Could the data possibly be correct? The responses to the survey came from an Internet panel, not a true random, national sample, so there was reason to suspect the quality of the numbers.

Researchers at the University of New Hampshire have now completed and published (also in *Pediatrics*) a major new study on "youth sexting," and their conclusions could hardly be more different. After 1,560 30-minute interviews with kids age 10-17, the study found that only one percent of respondents had distributed sexually suggestive nude photos of themselves.

Part of the problem with such surveys is definitional. What counts as "sexting"? Could "semi-nude" include underwear? Could "sexually suggestive" include a bikini?

Answers have varied, but the new study tries to sort out the mess. Its strictest definition involves kids taking pics of themselves that show "naked breasts, genitals, or bottom." Only one percent of respondents have taken such photos, which might be considered child pornography, but 5.9 percent of kids have received one. (These numbers go up a bit if "non-explicit" pictures are included.)

As for the fear of widespread distribution, with pictures ending up on child pornography boards, it appears overblown. When kids receive such photos, only three percent send them on to anyone else.

"These results are to some extent reassuring," write the authors. "Only a low percentage of young people are appearing in or creating sexting images that could be considered illegal child pornography. Moreover, few of these images were being

forwarded or posted."

But because the consequences of this behavior can be so serious, both in emotional and legal terms, the authors suggest more educational efforts are "strongly warranted."

Pediatrics, 2011. DOI: [10.1542/peds.2011-1730](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-1730), [10.1542/peds.2011-2242](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2242) ([About DOIs](#)).

Photograph by Jason Pier in DC