

There are a variety of surveys and studies regarding "sexting" amongst teens available online. Some report as many as 26 percent of teens surveyed have participated in sexting (either sending or receiving). This is a growing problem which is difficult for law enforcement to address. The "fix" for this problem is knowledge and parental involvement.

In Georgia, it is unlawful for anyone under the age of 18 to take photos of themselves nude or conducting sexual acts and send them to anyone. This is a violation of O.C.G.A. 16-12-100 (Sexual Exploitation of Children) and its subsections and is considered the manufacture and distribution of child pornography. To be clear, a minor willingly taking and sending a nude photo of themselves can be charged. This is in addition to those on the receiving end of such material. Anyone found with nude photos of minors stored digitally on any device (flash drive, phone, tablet, computer, video game system, etc.) can be charged with possession of child pornography.

Aside from the criminal aspect, it is important to remember that there are no "take backs" on the Internet. This goes for adults and children. Too often a photo sent in confidence to a significant other is shared with a friend or posted to the Internet. Once a photo makes its way onto the Internet, it is very difficult to remove. In many cases it is impossible, especially when an image "goes viral" (even on a small scale, i.e., within a high school community). These photos can affect a person for the rest of their lives.

Removal of photos and prosecution of offenders is often problematic at best and impossible at worst. The methods used to share photos (Internet, social media, texting, etc.) change and evolve quickly. Acquiring data on offenders from reputable sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram is a slow process, requiring subpoenas to be served out of state. It can be impossible to obtain offender data from websites hosted in other countries.

Prevention is the key. Parents must supervise their children's activities on cell phones and Internet-capable devices. Parents should conduct checks of their children's phones, electronic devices, e-mail and social media accounts on a regular basis. Children should not have secret accounts or password protection that parents do not have access to. This is admittedly a difficult proposition with teens, however, teens and parents alike must realize that a child's expectation of privacy is reduced while living in a parent's home and using devices provided by parents.

There are several online resources with additional resources and tips for parents. One such website is www.netSMARTz411.org, which is hosted by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). NCMEC also runs a tip line and works hand in hand with law enforcement.

