

Executive Summary

Sexting: consulting young people to inform practice

A project by Oxfordshire County Council and Thames Valley Police

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This report is based on findings from 10 single sex focus groups with 99 Year 9 students in 4 schools across Oxfordshire. The project was undertaken as a response to evidence from Thames Valley Police, Oxfordshire schools and other partner agencies indicating that the current approach to 'sexting' is not having an impact on changing young people's behaviour or empowering them to keep safe. Consulting and involving young people was therefore agreed to be a crucial step towards achieving a change in young people's behaviour.

The focus groups identified a variety of terms used by young people to refer to the sending of explicit images, with 'nudes' being the most commonly used. Although young people understood the term 'sexting' used by adults, they did not tend to use it themselves, and some young people described it as being 'too formal'.

It was evident that images are most commonly shared via 'Snapchat' – an Application (App) that can be used to share images for very short periods of time. When asked whether they knew about software that can be used to hide the fact that a screen-shot has been taken, a small number of young people did have knowledge of it. When provided with this information however, young people did not seem to think that this knowledge would have an influence on behaviour.

When asked to describe incidents of sexting in schools it was evident that the topic was commonly associated with rumour and gossip and there was a lack of clarity about the actual extent to which it happens. Groups varied in terms of their views about the frequency of incidents in schools; some said this was 'every few weeks' and others felt it was far less frequent. As this became apparent, the consultation was modified to ask participants confidentially about whether they had actually seen an explicit image, and 61% of those asked said they had seen an image. For many young people, sexting appears to be normalised and isn't viewed as a 'big deal'.

It appeared that in the majority of cases, sexting occurred between young people who know each other, although for some this wasn't close peer group members. Incidents of sexting between strangers were mentioned less often and young people appeared to have a good awareness of internet safety in relation to dangers from unknown adults.

Young people agreed that sexting is most likely to begin towards the end of Year 7 or beginning of Year 8 when young people are established in their peer groups, following transition to secondary school. Engaging in sexting was viewed as being part of beginning to form relationships and wanting to be seen as being 'grown up'.

Young people identified gender as having a significant impact on behaviour and perception in relation to sexting. Most young people felt that boys are more likely to ask for images first, and girls are more likely to send them. It was also perceived to be more likely that boys would share images with their peer group. This was explained by the young people as being a result of boys being more immature, wanting to 'show off' and gain approval from other boys. Girls commented that girls' behaviour was likely to be judged more harshly, particularly by other girls. A quote

that sums up commonly expressed opinions of both girls and boys was: “If a boy sends one, or gets sent one, then he’s a lad but if a girl sends one, she’s a ‘slut’”.

Peer pressure, wanting to impress current or potential partners and a desire to be seen as mature were the most common reasons given by young people for being involved in sexting. These factors were deemed significant enough to outweigh the associated risks. Refusing to send an image was seen to lead to the break-up of relationships, bullying and even blackmail. Participating in sexting was also linked to similar negative outcomes with girls in particular identifying that they were in a ‘no win’ situation. Furthermore, celebrity influence was cited as something that might encourage young people to send images.

Young people demonstrated some awareness of the law in relation to sexting, with 87% in agreement that sexting breaks the law. However, it was apparent there was a lack of knowledge regarding the age at which sexting is illegal. 37% thought that it was illegal for those under 16, 34% for those under 18 and 28% said that they were not sure, or did not give an answer. A number of young people referred to the age of sexual consent being 16 and thought that this would also apply to sexting. In addition, whilst many thought that it was illegal to share and distribute images of others, very few were aware that taking an indecent image (even if of themselves) is against the law if it is of someone under 18.

Overall, young people had a good level of awareness of the risks associated with sexting, including risks to their future social status, education and employment, as well as to their emotional well-being and happiness, making reference to self-harm, suicide and bullying. Despite a good understanding of risk however, there was also recognition that being aware would not necessarily change behaviour, as peer pressure and expectations from others had more impact on behaviour. This highlights the challenges faced in order to promote change.

In terms of current education on sexting, there were a variety of different experiences. All schools are providing education on internet safety and young people gave various examples of what they had learnt on this topic, for example watching the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) videos in assemblies. However, young people did not view the current approach, particularly the prevalence of assemblies and whole class sessions on internet safety, as the best way to learn about the risks associated with sexting. Confidential, single sex, small group discussion led by someone who is not a member of school staff was felt to be the ideal. Other factors identified as important included feeling safe, being able to learn from others in the peer group and having the chance to ask questions. The use of engaging approaches such as drama and video were also highlighted as favourable.

When asked what messages they would give other young people, they said they wanted others to realise that sexting is not worth the risk and that it can have a serious negative impact on your life.

The focus groups therefore helped to identify a number of recommendations:

1. Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) and Thames Valley Police (TVP) should produce a sexting resource pack including session plans for delivery of education

and links to appropriate guidance and resources, based on the findings of this study.

2. Schools should review the content and delivery of their Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) to include sexting as part of education on respectful relationships. Delivery of SRE should include single sex, confidential sessions run by those other than school staff, with some sessions being targeted at vulnerable groups.
3. OCC and TVP should develop a survey to investigate the current experience and prevalence of sexting in a wider sample of teenagers, which can also capture emerging trends and changes in behaviour, in order to inform policy and practice.
4. OCC and TVP should investigate commissioning the creation of a video resource relevant to local experiences that would address the issues raised by this study and enhance the education of young people.
5. Senior management within OCC and TVP should be made aware of the results of this study in order to inform policy and practice.

Whilst the focus groups were designed to be a consultation exercise, it was evident that the young people who took part valued the session, including the chance to ask questions and the opportunity to give their opinions on the topic. Essentially, the focus groups were perceived by the young people as an awareness raising tool in themselves.

It is hoped that the recommendations outlined in this report and the associated resources developed will help to address issues of sexting in Oxfordshire and the wider Thames Valley and empower young people to make informed and safe decisions.