



Family
Online Safety
Institute

ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2014

Panel Summary: Sexting: Felony or Innocent Flirting?

Moderator: Jennifer Hanley, Family Online Safety Institute

Panelists: Ken Corish, South West Grid for Learning; Abigail Judge, Harvard Medical School; Scott Surovell, State Delegate for Virginia

Overview: This panel covered why kids are sexting, understanding the legal ramifications of sexting for minors, and how adults can better curve these incidents to help keep kids safer.

Abigail Judge started the conversation with saying how research on teen sexting is in its infancy. She mentioned the distinction between random and non-random samples in sexting studies, and how non-random studies yield more insightful results. The question of how much sexting occurs is also up for debate, she said. She cited examples of how media tends to exaggerate details of sexting. Abigail also made the point that people need to start looking at sexting as actual sexual behavior, and realizing that if a teen is sexting, then chances are they are involved in other forms of sexual behavior as well. However, she reinforced that sexting is not necessarily a gateway to other promiscuous acts.

In looking at why sexting happens, Abigail talked about how the biological readiness of teens to sext comes before pre-frontal cortex reasoning. This can lead to poor decision making. She also said that one of the motivations for a girl to sext is to feel sexy, and that for boys, or between two people generally, sexting tends to be about power dynamics. Another motivation she mentioned is that teens have always exhibited adult behaviors, and that if adults are sexting and teens know about it, then chances are teens will sext as well.

Ken Corish also called attention to media headlines exaggerating what's happening with teen sexting. Ken said in his own studies, he's found that sexting often occurs between two people who are in a relationship. However, that relationship oftentimes isn't necessarily long term. For instance, for teens some of these relationships only last a few days or weeks, and because of these short relationships, the sending of these explicit photos can often be abused.

Scott Surovell talked about the legislation he introduced in Virginia that would have made the act of one minor sending an explicit photo of him or herself electronically to another minor, or for a minor to possess up to 10 explicit images of another minor, a misdemeanor instead of a felony. However, the bill failed. Scott Surovell went on to make the point that sexting should be covered in schools as part of health and sexual education. Abigail expanded on Scott's point, and said that sexting should be part of the sex talk that parents often have with their kids.