Sexting & Social Media: Staying Safe Online

The Privacy Risks

Any images sent by text are vulnerable to being instantly shared with others without your consent. Even texting applications aimed at providing greater security cannot guarantee the protection of your privacy. For example, the application Snapchat—which allows users to send a photo that then disappears from the recipient's phone after a few seconds—can be hacked to allow recipients to save a screenshot without detection.

The Legal Risks

Ohio does not have a law specifically addressing sexting, but that does not mean that minors engaged in sexting cannot be prosecuted. Prosecutors are given wide discretion regarding whether to charge someone, and if so, whether it is a misdemeanor or felony. Because none of these laws were designed with sexting in mind, they leave a lot of discretion to prosecutors on whom to charge. According to the ACLU of Ohio, under the federal Adam Walsh Act, it is possible that a teen convicted would have to register as a sexual offender.

In addition, the current patchwork of laws does not distinguish between sexting that is consensual or abusive. For this reason, victims are encouraged to reach out to community advocates who can work with prosecutors to inform them about the nuances of the case and protect a victim from prosecution.

If you are a victim of digital abuse

✓ Contact a rape crisis center for support and guidance.
✓ Document what is happening or happened and keep any offensive messages
✓ Consider taking a screenshot or printing out messages that could disappear quickly online.

What is **sexting**?

Sexting is the sending of sexually explicit messages or images by cell phone

Can sexting ever be **abusive**?

Yes. The website *loveisrespect.com* defines digital abuse as "the use of technologies such as texting and social networking to bully, harass, stalk or intimidate a partner."

What r some **examples of digital abuse**?

Someone who sends negative, insulting or even threatening messages…Someone who uses social media to keep tabs on you…someone who sends you unwanted, explicit pictures, demands you do the same… someone who tries to steal your login information, looks through your phone, or puts you down online.

Staying Safe Online: General Social Media Tips

✓ Don't share your username and password, and choose a password that is not easily detectible.

✓ Don't be afraid to turn down friend requests, especially if the request is from someone you don't know in person. It is okay to decline a friend request if you aren't comfortable having the person as part of your online social network. It is also okay to delete a friend if that person is being abusive/offensive, or if you learn that they are not who you thought they were.

✓ Use privacy settings to control who can see your information online, including photos, contact numbers, and personal information. You can find information on how to control privacy settings at https://www.facebook.com/help/privacy.

✓ Make sure other household members have their online accounts set up to keep address and phone numbers private.

✓ Be careful when posting photos online. Digital cameras and cell phone cameras embed data, called EXIF, that stores information in the image file including the GPS location of where the photo was taken. If uploaded with this data embedded, anyone can extract the information and find out the exact location of where the photo was taken. To protect yourself, configure your smartphone so that this data is not stored. You can also strip this data after the photo is taken. There are free software programs that will remove the data, or you can find instructions online for how to remove it yourself without a software program.

✓ Be careful about what content you post online. Your social media posts, or even content that others post about you, could end up being used against you in a civil or criminal proceeding (for example, a divorce or custody case). Also, the more information you post about yourself online, the more vulnerable you become to identity theft, robbery, and other crimes.

✓ For guidance on what to do if an abuser seeks you out on a social media site, or if you are considering locating an abuser online, check out http://www.pandys.org/articles/survivorsonfacebook.html

For more information

- National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) has numerous resources on technology safety: http://www.nnedv.org/resources/safetynetdocs.html
- That's Not Cool.com: http://www.thatsnotcool.com/
- Resources for parents on preventing online exploitation of children: http://www.acasa.us/pdfs/Acasa-Surfing%20the%20net%20brochure.indd.pdf
- Safety with Social Media from Women's Law: http://www.womenslaw.org/laws_state_type.php?id=13883&state_code=PG&open_id=13887

_____