



March 3, 2010



One of our jobs is to make our communities and schools as safe as possible for all residents, young and old. To this end, we want to describe one potentially harmful trend called "sexting" and suggest some precautions we can all take to limit risks, especially for our children.

"Sexting" is the transmission of nude or semi-nude photographs between cell phones or computers, or other networked devices with the photos acquired in a variety of ways. Some kids take pictures of their own bodies to share with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Others take the photographs on a dare, like a boy running into the girls locker-room to snap a photograph. Still others photos may begin as an experiment, like a group of young girls who dare each other into skinny-dipping during a slumber party. Someone takes a few photos never imagining or intending the pictures might end up on-line threatening the health, security, and privacy of our families.

A cell phone can take such a picture and transmit it to other phones or the Internet in seconds. These phones are great communication tools, but they also have built-in cameras, and even those that don't can store and transmit images sent by others. Still other newer phones or "smart phones" allow access to the Internet, like a computer, so a picture snapped by a phone is sent instantly where it can be viewed, copied, and retransmitted by millions of others. Once transmitted in this manner, such photographs are public and forever floating in cyberspace on the Internet.

We believe the best way to manage "sexting" is through education. It begins with understanding the risk that can flow from an impulsive act, even when no harm is intended. In one case, for example, a younger brother picked up a cell phone, found naked images of a girl, and sent them to his friends. His brother, the intended recipient of the pictures, had no intention of sharing them, but his seventeen year old girlfriend was just as devastated when her pictures were distributed throughout the school the following week. Once released and distributed, these pictures cannot be reliably erased from the Internet. It is a forever thing.


In addition, Oregon and federal law both make it a crime to possess and distribute sexually explicit material depicting children. It is therefore criminal to retain or transmit images like those we described, and the consequences can be severe, including potential jail time and a lifetime of registering as a sexual offender.

Please help us protect your children and our community by talking to your children about the risks associated with "sexting". One suggestion is to establish a walk up rule where you can walk up at any time and see what is on the screen of your child's phone or computer. Another suggestion is to keep communication open and know what is appropriate for your child to view or send by computer or cell phone. Letting your child know you are concerned might cause them to stop and think before they send something potentially against the law.

A childish or impulsive act may have consequences your child does not yet understand. Help us help your child, school, and community be safe. Please give us a call if you have questions or need more detail and information. We are here to help.

Sincerely,


Alex Gardner
Lane County District Attorney


George Russell
Eugene School District