



'Sexting': A Disturbing New Teen Trend?

by Chana Joffe-Walt

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On a June weekend, just after high school finals, 16-year-old Brooke Nielsen was hanging out with her best friend in suburban Seattle. There was lots of laughing and taking pictures with cell phone cameras. Then they decided just for fun to take a shower, and they put the cameras up on the mirror and took a side-profile picture of themselves naked.

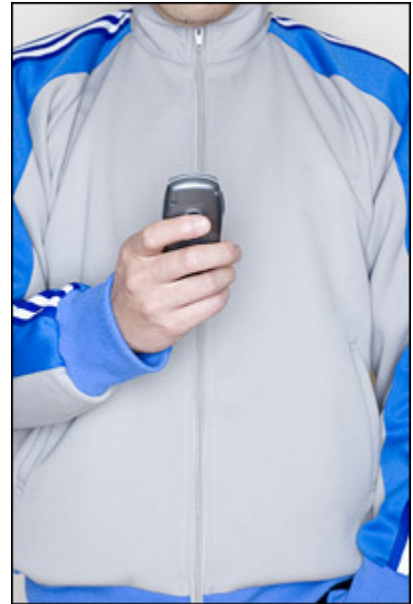
As Brooke's mother, Kathy Nielsen, tells the story, her daughter deleted the picture but the friend did not. The friend denies sending the photo to anyone, but a copy soon arrived in the cell phone of another student — and then the cell phone of a football player, then the football team, then the senior class.

Finally, an anonymous envelope with Brooke's naked photo inside was left in the mailbox of Bothell High School's vice principal. That's when Kathy and Ed Nielsen got called in.

"They sat me down at the table and they said, 'We have pictures of your daughter and another girl naked, do you want to see them?'" Ed Nielsen says. "And I said, 'No I don't want to see that!' "

There's a name for what happened. It's called "sexting," where teenagers send nude or partially nude photos to one another. And 1 in 5 teens does it, according to Bill Alpert of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

"The primary reason young people give is they say this is a fun or flirtatious activity," Alpert says. "Of more concern is the second primary reason they cite — among girls — is they do this as a sexy present for their boyfriends."



One in five teens sends nude or partially nude photos to others via cell phone, according to a representative of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

'How Is She Gonna Handle This?'

Brooke's mother says that being called before the vice principal was "terrifying."

"I mean, she just turned 16 a month before that," Kathy Nielsen says. "I was just thinking, 'Oh my goodness, how is she gonna handle this? How is this gonna affect the rest of her life?' "

Things really got complicated after that. Brooke and her friend were suspended from the cheer squad. The Niensens wanted to know, what about those who shared the photo with other people, and they reported it to the police. Then they sued the school. Brooke and her parents are scheduled to be deposed next week.

An Uncomfortable Issue

Sexting isn't exactly a comfortable issue to deal with if you're a parent or a high school football coach or a middle-aged police detective like Vern Myers.

In a separate incident, Myers got a call from Castle Rock Middle School in Colorado and thought, "OK, investigate." He interviewed dozens of white-faced 12- and 13-year-olds and pimply 14-year-olds with twitchy legs. And he tried to figure out intent: Why did you take the photo? Why did you send it? He says that in response, he heard things like "we just thought it'd be funny" or "so and so asked me to send it to him."

Myers says it was the first time he has dealt with sexting, and he didn't really know what else to do.

"On something like that it's child pornography. If you take that picture, you're manufacturing it; if you send that picture, then you're distributing it," he says.

In at least four states, sexting kids are facing charges of child pornography and sexual exploitation of a minor.

Just like parents, attorneys and police are often shocked to see nude pictures of 14-year-olds passed around. And for now, they're responding in wildly different ways, with everything from felony charges to educational assemblies on the dangers of the Internet.
