

Sexting

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Have you ever heard of sexting? Not a very pleasant-sounding word, is it? The activity itself is even more foul and yet sexting is making in-roads among our cell-phone using young people – and adults. It is the new frontier in the ugly world of pornography.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not against cell-phones, iPods or any of the new communication technology. They can all be used for much good in this world, including the spread of the gospel! Yet we must recognize that the same devices also open the door to do evil as well. As we adopt and adapt to using iPhones and Blackberry's, we need to consider how to maximize their good use and minimize or eliminate their evil risks. So it's time we opened our eyes to the risks of texting becoming sexting.

Texting is Huge

To those who use cell-phones it will come as no surprise that text-messaging has become more popular for a large segment of users than making a regular voice call. Text-messaging is sending a very simple message from phone to phone in digital characters that appear on the screen. Characters are typed in via the phone key-pad where three or four letters are associated with each number. A user typically uses his or her thumbs to tap the keys in order to produce the desired letters. A text message is limited to 140 characters so texters soon become quite skilled at using short forms of words. For example: "R U HM?" is short for, "Are you home?" In fact, there is almost something like a separate texting language made of commonly used short-forms.

In the last 15 years since texting has become commercially available, usage has sky-rocketed, particularly among the young. As of June, 2011, US subscribers sent an average of 196.9 billion texts (short for 'text-messages') per month! An average subscriber sends 610 messages per month.¹ Among adults, 72% of cellphone users send and receive text messages.² Usage is even higher among teens. Here is a summary of recent US statistics compiled by the Pew Research Center in May, 2010:

- Some 75% of 12-17 year-olds now own cell phones, up from 45% in 2004
- Fully 72% of all teens – or 88% of teen cell phone users – are text-messagers
- That is a sharp rise from the 51% of teens who were texters in 2006
- More than half of teens (54%) are daily texters
- One in three teens sends more than 100 text messages a day, or 3000 texts a month³

If we haven't already figured it out by our experience, this data show that our young people prefer to communicate via text than by almost any other method. Because it's a silent communicator and done where parents cannot see what is being said without making an extra effort, the content of the texts can easily go unnoticed by parents – until lines have been crossed and damage has been done.

Texting to Sexting

Most of these texts will show the usual banter back and forth between teens but some begin to strike a more personal note. Typically, parents and teens will send a quick text to keep in touch and let each other know their whereabouts and their plans. Many texts among peers are simply ways of saying “hi” or otherwise connecting with a friend. Texts are used to find out quick answers to social questions like what time someone will arrive, their current location, when they are off work or school, what their plans are for the day or night, if they are ‘busy’ studying for exams and many such things. All of this can serve a useful purpose. But some texts become bolder and veer toward the intimate, even the sexually suggestive. Once they cross that line, they become “sexual text-messages” and are known simply as “sexts.”

The concept itself is not new. Messages with sexual innuendo or which are even blatantly erotic have been exchanged among teens and adults in many forms over the centuries – verbally or in writing, in person or over the telephone, in poetry or in prose – even in the note passed around at school! Where hormones rage and desires are aroused, the temptation to explore sexuality outside of the God-given context of marriage has long-existed and been indulged. In the digital age, many forms of pornography have multiplied and while we are increasingly aware of the dangers of internet porn, are we sufficiently aware of the risks of person-to-person pornography being exchanged on the cell-phones of our teens?

According to the same survey cited earlier, 4% of all cell-owning teens admitted to sending sext messages while 15% report having received one.⁴ When it rains in the world it usually drips in the church and anecdotal evidence I've run across suggests it is the same in this case. The hormones of our teens are no different from the world's and Satan has every motive to use the vulnerabilities of our teens against them in breaking down their commitment to sexual purity. Even if our teens are not given to initiating such messages they can easily be on the receiving end, since they are hard to block. And once a person is drawn into a flirtatious exchange, it is only a small step to fall into sexual sin with serious consequences.

Texting Risks

One of the differences with texting as a newer form of communication is that the texter feels freer to say things via a text which he or she would have great difficulty saying in person. When we communicate in person, the presence of the other person and how they might react is a strong reminder to us of social expectations and also the Lord's commandments, of what is acceptable and not acceptable behaviour. In the presence of others, our conscience is on much higher alert. We don't want to get in trouble, we don't want to offend or create a confrontation, we don't want

to be thought of poorly and so when we are in the company of others, we generally guard what we say and how we act.

That safe-guard is not nearly as present when we are alone with our cell phones (or with our iPod Touch, internet or email for that matter). Your inhibitions are down. The tendency to say what's on your mind without restraint is much greater. It is much easier to text things that you feel or desires you have than it is to say them aloud in person.

It's also easier to interpret or read into a text you've received a message you would like to hear than it is to misinterpret what a person says to you face-to-face. In texting, there is no body language, tone of voice or speed of talking to help you understand the complete nuance of what a person is really saying. All you receive is bare text on a screen which may come across to you as suggestive. This is especially the case if you want it to be suggestive.

These are some reasons why a friendly exchange of texts can quickly become a flirtatious exchange and morph into a sext. Other reasons include the pressure teens face to fit in, be accepted and be liked. Imagine a popular high-school jock sending an alluring or provocative message to an unpopular girl a grade or two lower – how hard it would be for her not to respond in kind! An insecure teen could – without much difficulty – be bullied through sexting into some sort of unchaste activity. Even if it is only perceived pressure, peer pressure can – especially if one is alone with her cell-phone – make otherwise steady people act in an inappropriate, even sinful and destructive way. It takes very little for a text to turn into a sext which can quickly turn into a rendezvous to follow-up on heated desires.

Words and Pictures

It's also important to understand that sext-messages are not limited to words. With virtually every cell phone having a built-in camera, it is literally a snap to take a nude, semi-nude or otherwise sexually explicit photograph of oneself and text it to an interested party. Sexting as the new frontier of porn comes through both prose and pictures. What many young sexters don't realize is that not only can these compromising photos be sent all over the world via the internet, never to be deleted (with all the attending embarrassment, misery and fall-out with future spouses, family and employers), but if the teen is under 16 in Canada, that friend who received the nude pictures can be legally charged with possession of child pornography. This is no game.

Dealing With It

How, then, do we deal with sexting? The best place to begin as parents is to develop open and honest discussions about cell phone usage and its risks with your teens and young adults. Put this topic on your list for family prayer time. Together as a family regularly seek the Lord's help in being kept from temptation and in using this technology for the glory of His Name. Speak about employing all gifts for the cause of Christ's kingdom. Remind your teens that there is forgiveness for this sin, too, but then in repentance there must be a powerful desire and effort to flee from temptation – something the Lord will give by His Spirit only when we ask.

There seems to be little software on the current market that filters out sexting for cell phones, so

concerned parents must educate their teen or else remove the device altogether. Instruction is the first best step. However, if necessary, removal should be considered if that is what it takes to prevent a child of God from falling into sin (or relapsing). We should not forget the ‘deal-with-sin-radically’ approach of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:29, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away.” It is better to enter eternal life having texted no more messages than to sext ourselves right into hell.

Texting Guidelines

I would suggest that parents teach their resident texters to see texting as a tool for communicating very basic facts only – and the less personal the better. Comments on a person’s looks, attitude, clothes, demeanor and the like are out of place in a text. It’s the texts of a personal or intimate nature that are in danger of becoming sexts. If you wouldn’t post the message on a public bulletin board with your name beneath it, don’t text it either.

Anything involving emotions, particularly strong emotions, should be communicated via a voice call or, better, in-person so there is no mistaking the nature and intent of those emotions. When a sext has been received, it should be reported to a parent and parents should follow-up if at all possible with the parents of the sender (a sext in print is proof no parent or perpetrator can deny). If child pornography is involved, the police should be contacted. Before “send” is hit, re-read the message to check for inappropriate or misleading wording. A texter should ask, “How will this be understood by the person receiving it?” If there is doubt, re-phrase for clarity or make a voice call instead.

Accountability

It is true that a parent cannot monitor every word spoken or every text sent. But if teens know that they are accountable to Dad and Mom and that they will ask regularly and check-up periodically, the texters will have a stronger conscience about using this tool in a good way. Above all else, every cell-phone user should have these words of Christ emblazoned on their mind, “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” Text or sext, voice-call or email, conversation or communication of any kind, our ultimate accountability “partner” is the Lord Jesus Himself – and with Him there is no partiality.

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