

What you can do



Sexting is illegal – but that doesn't mean a criminal conviction

Even though it's legal to have sex at 16, it is illegal to create or share sexually explicit images of people under the age of 18, even if the person in the picture is you.

The law was designed to protect children – in the UK, this is anyone under the age of 18 – from adult sexual predators, not to criminalise teenagers for exploring their sexual feelings.

Previously, if a school found out pupils under 18 had been sharing such images, even consensually between partners, they had to inform the police.

The guidance now advises that if the school believes that coercion or abuse has not occurred, they can handle the incident internally.

If the school does refer the incident to the police, they will investigate and it may result in a criminal conviction or, more likely, become what is known as an outcome 21.

Outcome 21

Even though a young person has broken the law and the police could provide evidence that they have done so, the police can record that they chose not to take further action as it was not in the public interest.

1 Show your child this article. Then discuss with them that the law exists to protect them from unscrupulous or controlling adults, not to stop them having fun.

2 Most young people know that nude images can be screen shot and shared, but they think it won't happen to them because they trust the people they are sharing them with. Encourage them to question why people want these images, and think about what they would do if they fell into the wrong hands.

3 Boost your child's self-esteem so that they don't need to seek the approval from others to feel good about their bodies or how attractive they are.

4 If you discover a fellow pupil has shared a sexual image of your child, talk to the school's safeguarding lead or a teacher you trust. They will refer the incident to the correct person and follow these guidelines for dealing with it. Then give your child a hug and let them know you still love them and will support them.

When to call the police

If you find out an adult has shared a sexual image with your child, has shared one of your child, or asked them to send them one, you can report it to CEOP at www.ceop.police.uk/safety-centre

How might this work in real life?

1 A pupil tells a teacher that her 13-year-old friend has been sent a naked image of a boy and is upset.

The teacher refers this to the school's designated safeguarding lead who then talks to the girl. Her parents are invited into school and it's established that the image was sent by a boy the girl met outside of school. The girl is asked to disclose the details of the boy, which the school pass on to the police. Her parents are informed about further support made available to them and their daughter.

2 A 15-year-old boy and 16-year-old girl who have been going out for a year have been sending each other semi-naked images.

A teacher refers the incident to the designated safeguarding lead, who talks to them separately, and is satisfied that neither was coerced or harmed, so tells the parents but doesn't involve the police. The pupils are told of the law relating to creating and sharing youth-produced sexual imagery, and their parents are signposted to further support and information.

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