This is among findings presented by a team of researchers at the University of Edinburgh who explored why sexting has become so popular and the consequences for those involved. The study highlights how the context, meaning and intention of sharing intimate messages or images can vary widely.

Children’s charity the NSPCC describes sexting as someone sharing sexual, naked or semi-naked images or videos of themselves or others, or sending sexually explicit messages. Images can be sent using any device that makes this activity possible including mobiles, tablets and smartphones. Letting someone else look at sexual images and texts is also known as ‘trading nudes’, ‘dirties’ and ‘pic for pic’.

Children put themselves at risk when they take a naked selfie that’s then shared without their permission. However, police and social workers currently have no guidelines for dealing with these cases. Investigating such incidents also takes a lot of resources because officers first have to establish if another person is involved.

The study Self-Produced Images: Risk Taking Online (SPIRTO) was funded by the European Union’s Safer Internet Programme and set out to establish the risks of sexting. Researchers carried out interviews with 51 young people with the majority aged 14 to 17.

The study shows that all of the participants had shared naked photos and all had been under the age of 18 at the time. Some were even as young as 12. Sharing these images was seen as a natural way of exploring their sexuality, and something they did with a trusted partner. Sending the photos was seen as fun and exciting by the majority of teens (59%) as well as a good way of meeting people and flirting with them. The majority (59%) were asked to send photos by a romantic partner with many seeing it as a normal and loving part of a relationship.

Sending a naked photo of themselves was not a rash decision but instead a carefully considered act by most of the participants. Many were aware of the risks, and often tried to lessen the impact of sharing images. Not including their face in the photo or any clear identifying marks such as tattoos were among steps taken. Furthermore, many kept compromising photos of the other person as a deterrent. They felt this would stop them sharing their images without their consent with a third party.

Nearly half (47%) of participants said creating and sending nude pictures was also a way of getting attention and compliments about their looks. Girls in particular said it helped build their...
self-confidence. However, this need for self-affirmation had spiralled out of their control for a minority (8%) who described having an intense need to send images. This compulsion was starting to affect their school work or social situation with friends.

The researchers found that sending nude images did not necessarily mean the young person had started to have sex. The images did though form part of their adolescent development and allowed them to explore their sexuality.

The fact some (12%) were exploited through coercion was worrying though. They were often groomed by strangers they had met online who used aggressive threats to pressure them into producing images. Often the perpetrator threatened to share images, that had already been sent, with the victim’s family.

Others felt an expectation that sending selfies was expected of them within their peer group. If they didn’t take photos in sexual poses they were made to feel something was wrong with them. The majority (73%) of participants sent images because they were asked to, either by their partner or someone unknown to them. There was a level of pressure to please that person and to feel that they ‘fitted in’ even among consensual relationships. Some were asked to send photos as proof of loving their partner, and they found it hard to say no.

The study found that the consequences of sending images were not always catastrophic. But they were for some people - several of those young people who had shared selfies (22%) experienced harassment, threats or bullying and the police had to get involved.

In the majority of cases, naked selfies were not shared beyond the person it was intended for. However, some young people (16%) reported that their parents and school had found out they sent photos. Usually this occurred because the images had been found on a mobile phone. Often this led to the police, school staff and the young person’s parents getting involved - the consequence was intense shame and embarrassment.

The researchers acknowledge that creating images within a romantic and sexual relationship is part of growing up for some young people. Sharing naked selfies may also be a route for some groups such as lesbian, gay and bisexual young people into exploring their sexuality and first relationships. That is if it is not the result of someone being abused by other people.

The study also highlights the complex nature of sexting behaviour and the wide variation in experiences. It concludes that the challenge lies in recognising the difference between sexting within a consensual romantic relationship and behaviour that should be taken seriously. Police, parents, schools and child protection workers all face this problem.

The researchers believe that appropriate support must be put in place for those involved for when things may go wrong. This includes when a naked selfie is shared among the whole school or ends up on the internet.

Young people themselves say what is most important is for police, social workers, teachers and parents not to judge them. This is the conclusion of findings from a separate study by the University of Edinburgh focusing on the views of young people and professionals working on sexting cases. Researchers say this demonstrates that policymakers must put children’s concerns at the heart of any recommendations.

Further information
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Research reference
#letstalkaboutsexting