

Multi-Agency Guidance for Professionals on Responding to Youth Produced Sexual Imagery ('Sexting')

This guidance has been produced for use by any agency working with children and young people in Redbridge. It does not supersede any single agency guidance e.g. [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#), or other multi-agency guidance e.g. [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#), but aims to provide more detailed support on this specific issue.

What is 'Sexting'?

Youth produced sexual imagery "sexting" can be defined as images or videos that are of a sexual nature or are considered to be indecent and usually involved naked pictures or web-cam footage, referred to as "nudes". These images may be shared electronically between children and young people and/or adults via a mobile phone or webcam, usually involving some form of social media app.

It is a crime to take, make, permit to take, distribute, show, possess, possess with intent to distribute, or to advertise indecent images (including films) of any person below the age of 18 ([Crime and Justice Act 1988, section 160](#), [Protection of Children Act, 1978, section 1](#)). Professionals should be aware the prosecution or criminalisation of children for taking indecent images of themselves and sharing them should be avoided where possible. Being prosecuted through the criminal justice system is likely to be upsetting and distressing for children and young people especially if they are convicted and punished. The label of sex offender that would be applied to a child or young person convicted of such offences is regrettable, unjust and clearly detrimental to their future health and wellbeing. It is often the case that their involvement has been under duress or at least without their full understanding.

'Sexting' within the wider safeguarding context

Sexting among children and young people is often considered to be commonplace within relationships. However, it should raise professional concerns and in some cases may require further action or involvement with other agencies. "Sexting" can be defined as being "Experimental" or "Aggravated" (based on the [Wolak and Finklehor 'model', 2011](#)) and will require professionals to make informed judgements when responding.

Experimental 'Sexting'

These incidents involve children or young people creating and sharing sexual images or films without additional concerns regarding criminal behaviour (beyond the creation or sending of images), without apparent malice towards others and involves the willing participation of those young people who were pictured. They can be classified in the following way:

- **Romantic:** Young people in ongoing relationships, make images for themselves or each other, and the images are ***not intended to be distributed beyond the pair***. For example, two 16 year olds are in a relationship and are sharing sexual images which are not shared beyond their relationship.
- **Sexual Attention Seeking:** Cases in which images are made and ***sent between or amongst young people*** who were not known to be romantic partners, or where one young person takes pictures and sends them to many others or posts them online, presumably to draw sexual attention. For example a 13 year old shares a picture of her breasts with a 14 year old during "flirting".
- **Other:** May include cases that do not appear to have aggravating elements but also do not fit into the 'Romantic' or 'Attention Seeking' sub-types. These involve either young people

who take pictures of themselves for themselves (***no evidence of any sending or sharing or intent to do so***) or pre-adolescent children who did not appear to have sexual motives. For example an 11 year old taking pictures of their own genitals because they find it funny.

If children or young people engaging in experimental incidents are aged 12 or under, or are considered to be vulnerable then existing safeguarding procedures and risk assessments/tools should be used e.g. [Brook Sexual Behaviours Traffic Light Tool](#). The wider contextual information will also need to be considered.

Aggravated 'Sexting'

These incidents involve additional criminal or abusive elements beyond the creation, sending or possession of sexual images. This may include the involvement of adults, for example soliciting sexual images from children and young people, or other illegal adult involvement. It may also involve criminal or abusive behaviour by minors such as sexual abuse, extortion, deception or threats; malicious conduct arising from interpersonal conflicts; or creation or sending of images without the knowledge or against the will of those who were pictured. They can be classified in the following way:

- **Adult Involved.** An adult (aged 18 or over) has developed a relationship with and/or coerced a child (17 or under) in criminal sex offences. ***The images are generally, but not always, solicited by the adult offender(s)***. For example, a 16 year old is coerced into sharing sexual images with a 21 year old man.
- **Youth Only: Intent to Harm.** Sexual or indecent images which were created by young people (aged 13-17) as part of a consensual age appropriate relationship, which have ***then been shared with the intent to cause harm or distress***. Cases may arise from interpersonal conflict such

as break-ups and fights among friends or partners, involve criminal or abusive conduct such as blackmail, threats or deception or involve criminal sexual abuse or exploitation by juvenile offenders (aged 10-17). For example a 14 year shares naked pictures of an ex-partner for revenge.

- **Youth Only: Reckless Misuse.** Images or films are ***taken, sent or shared by young people without the knowledge or willing participation of the young person who is pictured***. In these cases, pictures are taken or sent thoughtlessly or recklessly and a victim may have been harmed as a result, but the culpability appears somewhat less than in the intent to harm episodes. For example a 15 year old takes a photo of their friend topless whilst they are changing and shares it online as "a joke".

Aggravated cases are likely to need to be discussed with specialist children's services and/or the police. Consideration should be given to the Redbridge threshold document ["Are you worried about a child? How to access early help, and thresholds for referral to children's social care, March 2018\)](#). Wider contextual information may also be asked for.

For young people aged 18+ professionals may need to be aware of the [Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015](#) which states that sexually explicit images or videos of adults sent without consent electronically, with the intent to cause distress, is illegal. This includes the sharing of images without consent both on and offline and includes the physical distribution of images. This is also known as "revenge porn".

Risk Management

It is expected that all agencies will exercise professional judgement regarding responding to sexting, using any risk assessment tools and the threshold document to inform decision making. To support this professionals are recommended to discuss their concerns with their agency designated/named safeguarding lead e.g. in schools this is the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). The

flow chart (**Appendix A**) provides a guide to support the decision making process.

NB:

Professionals must not print, forward, distribute or save any images or content believed to be an indecent image unless Police advice has been given.

Key questions that professionals should consider, particularly in relation to the context of the incident(s):

What is already known about the child(ren) or young people involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age of child(ren) or young people • Previous/current agency involvement • Vulnerability e.g. looked after, SEND • Immediate risk of harm • Multiple incidents
How has the imagery been shared?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public or private • Apps/services involved
What do we know about the intent or motivation behind creating or sharing the imagery?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult involvement • Coercion or blackmail • Ability to “consent” • Image is extreme or violent
What is the impact on the child(ren) or young people involved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional impact • Criminal consequences • Potential long term impact

Other guidance and resources:

- Redbridge Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) – [“Are you worried about a child? How to access early help, and thresholds for referral to children’s social care”](#), March 2018
- [Keeping Children Safe in Education](#), Department for Education, September 2018
- [“Sexting in schools and colleges: responding to incidents and safeguarding young people”](#), UK Council for Child Internet Safety
- [Police Action in response to youth produced sexual imagery \(“Sexting”\)](#), Briefing Note, College of Policing, November 2016
- [Overview of Sexting Guidance, UK Council for Child Internet Safety](#) (UKCCIS)
- [Sexting Information and Guidance](#) – Childline resources
- [Brook Sexual Behaviour Traffic Light Tool](#)
- [Internet Watch Foundation](#) – to report criminal content on-line and instigate a removal notice
- [CEOP \(Child Exploitation and On-line Protection\)](#) – to report concerns to a Child Protection Advisor

Acknowledgement: This guidance is based, with permission, on documents originally developed by Kent Safeguarding Children Board (KSCB) and Milton Keynes Safeguarding Children Board (SCB).

Responding to Youth Produced Sexual Imagery Flowchart

