

## Insafe insights on... sexting

The Insafe network of awareness centres, helplines and youth panels, in partnership with INHOPE (the International Association of Internet Hotlines, dedicated to the removal of illegal online content), operate Safer Internet Centres (SICs) in 30 European countries in the drive to keep children and young people safe online. Through a range of services, SICs respond to the latest online issues, helping to promote the many opportunities the online world offers, while also addressing the challenges. And while Europe's children and youth are the main benefactors of this work, BIK also reaches out to, and collaborates with, a range of other stakeholders - parents and carers, teachers and educators, researchers, industry, civil society, decision makers and law enforcement.

The "Insafe insights..." series draws on the experience and expertise of the Insafe network to tackle some of the most topical issues encountered in its day-to-day operations. Drawing on statistics and helpline case studies, this document aims to outline the issue and some possible responses, while also pointing to sources of further information and support.

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### Sexting... a definition

Sexting is a term which is widely used by adults and the media to refer to the sending of sexual images. Children and young people do not tend to use the term however, and will typically refer to "sexts", "nude selfies" or even "dick pics".

The [UK Council for Child Internet Safety \(UKCCIS\)](#) has produced a detailed document to help schools to deal with sexting which defines it as:

*"the production and/or sharing of sexual photos and videos of and by young people who are under the age of 18. It includes nude or nearly nude images and/or sexual acts. It is also referred to as 'youth produced sexual imagery'.*

*"'Sexting' does not include the sharing of sexual photos and videos of under-18-year olds with or by adults. This is a form of child sexual abuse and must be referred to the police".*

The Insafe network defines sexting in the following way:

*"The consensual or non-consensual sending or receiving of sexual images and/or texts via mobile and other devices (including appearing in such images) among peers."*

Sexting poses a significant challenge for children and young people. Images are often shared between two people as part of a relationship; both parties are willing to do this and

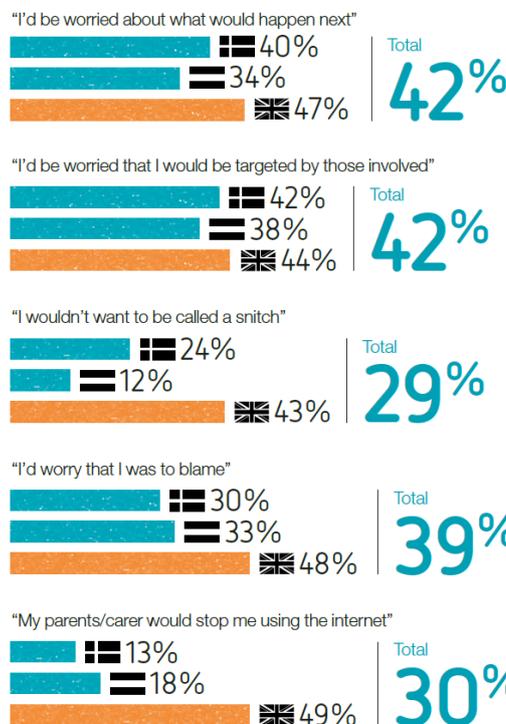
neither thinks that the images will ever be shared more widely. Sexting usually comes to the attention of a school or law enforcement authorities (LEAs) when something goes wrong and these images are shared more widely (and often without consent of one of the parties). In many countries, the sharing of sexual images of young people under the age of 18 is illegal and carries criminal consequences.

A [recent research publication](#) considered the reasons why young people might share a sexual image:

- Flirtation with someone they are interested in.
- Fun with friends – 20 per cent of survey respondents had sent a sexual or nude selfie to their friends for fun (similar proportions of boys and girls).
- Sexual enjoyment and intimacy as part of a relationship.
- Body confidence.
- Searching for validation due to low body confidence.
- Pressure from a friend or partner.
- Getting back at someone.

It is important to be aware of the different motivations behind the sharing of images, and also to recognise how difficult it can be for children and young people to be able to talk about this sort of thing when it goes wrong. However, research from the [deShame project](#), carried out with 13-17 year olds in Denmark, Hungary and the UK, found that young people were quite unlikely to report sexual harassment because of concerns about the consequences of reporting.

Percentage of young people who might not report online sexual harassment because of concerns about the consequences of reporting



Source: [Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment: A cross-country report from Project deShame, December 2017](#)

Incidences of sexting have risen over recent years and helplines report that the age of children involved is getting younger as they own devices earlier.

The Belgian Safer Internet Centre has recently produced a resource which suggests that *"there is nothing wrong with sexting as such. It can be regarded as a normal phase in the sexual development of young people and is in line with healthy experimental behaviour in discovering and examining sexuality, desires and behaviours."* It provides support for teachers when preparing lessons around sexting – either to prevent it or deal with things when they have gone wrong. Sexting@School can be downloaded from the [resource gallery on the Better Internet for Kids \(BIK\) portal](#).

## Experiences from the Insafe network

Sexting currently accounts for around 7 per cent of calls to Insafe helplines. Given the fact that young people find it difficult to talk about this type of thing, it is likely that the number of young people affected is much greater. The deShame research, as referenced earlier, found that 6 per cent of young people said that their nude or nearly nude image was shared with other people without their consent, 8 per cent admitted that they had shared such an image of someone else without their consent, and 41 per cent had seen people sharing nude or nearly nude images of someone that they knew. These statistics relate to instances where sexting has gone wrong, but other research suggests that more children and young people do exchange images regularly but without any real problems or consequences.

The prevalence of sexting is very difficult to ascertain but the deShame research found that 14 per cent of 13-17 year olds had sent nude or nearly nude images to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Another [research study in Canada](#) found that 26 per cent of 16 year olds had sent a sext, while 53 per cent had received one.

Insafe helplines are clear that the sharing of inappropriate images is a real problem for children and young people. Often calls concerning this can be logged under other categories such as sextortion (when the images are being used to coerce or blackmail), sexual harassment (when content is being shared with someone who did not ask for it or want to receive it) or online reputation (where a reputation is being damaged by the sharing of inappropriate content).

Further statistics can be found at [www.betterinternetforkids.eu/helpline-statistics](http://www.betterinternetforkids.eu/helpline-statistics).

## Insafe helpline case studies

Young people who contact Insafe helplines for help when things have gone wrong often feel that they are helpless and don't know where to go for support. This type of content is shared quite widely (and for lots of different reasons, as seen earlier) and it is the widespread sharing which can often be so embarrassing and humiliating for callers. The case below, from the Danish helpline, reflects a dilemma that many young people find themselves facing:

*"I showed by boobs... to a 15-year-old boy on Skype. I didn't know at the time he had filmed me. He is using this against me and telling me that he will post it on Facebook if I don't do it*

*again or send him more pictures and videos. I only have his Skype ID – not Facebook – I don't know who he is – what the \*\*\*\* should I do?"*

Similarly, a boy called the German helpline to say that he had met a girl on a social networking site, they became friends, and he said that it was fun talking to her. They exchanged naked images but then the girl started threatening him, saying that if he didn't give her money she would share the images. The boy said he couldn't tell his parents and was embarrassed and asked for help. This is a good example of how this type of content can be used to blackmail and coerce: something which starts as sexting (even with consent) can quickly change.

Parents and teachers who contact Insafe helplines find it very difficult to understand why children and young people would want to exchange naked images with each other, but research does suggest that this is quite normal. Indeed, the Canadian research found that 55 per cent of 20 year olds have shared sexual images. Adults will often contact helplines to ask for help in dealing with sexting, as can be seen from the case study below.

A teacher called the Austrian helpline to say that she had become aware of a naked image of a girl at the school where she worked. The teacher was aware that the image was spreading quickly throughout the school via social media and, in particular, WhatsApp groups; she was concerned but didn't know what to do. She also explained that she was aware that there was a law on sexting in Austria, but she didn't know what it said in detail. She wanted some help and support, and also to specifically know if she should inform the police. The helpline counsellor was able to provide support and clarify the situation with the teacher. He clarified the legal position and they discussed the potential outcomes of reporting the case to the police (in many countries, the law around sexting is the same as the law around a paedophile who might be in possession of indecent images of children and young people, although most agree that the crimes are very different). A discussion also took place about how to address the issue in school and how to support the girl involved.

The law is difficult in this area and, as already stated, it varies from one country to another. A boy called the Finnish helpline to ask what sort of pictures it was okay to send and what should not be sent. He wanted to be able to share images with his girlfriend but didn't want to be breaking the law. The counsellor was able to answer the question and also share some information about other considerations when sharing this type of content.

## Insafe resources

Safer Internet Centres have developed various educational resources and awareness-raising videos aimed at helping teachers, parents and carers, and children and young people, to discover the online world safely. A selection of resources touching on issues relating to sexting are detailed below:

- [Belgian SIC: Let's talk about sexting](#)  
This tool allows teachers to develop a policy around sexting and how it can be dealt with in a meaningful way. There is also a lesson plan which helps teachers to discuss sexting, online media and sexuality with their students.

- [Danish SIC: Sex, revenge and video](#)  
An anthology where seven content providers have written about sexting, cyber sex bullying, revenge porn, shaming and porn without consent. The focus is on young people who experience images being shared without consent.
- [Dutch SIC: L.O.V.E. Online toolkit](#)  
A learning content package which helps schools to consider how to prevent inappropriate or unacceptable sexual behaviour.
- [German SIC: Selfies, Sexting, Self Portrayal](#)  
A handbook for teachers which supports them in dealing with self-portrayal, sexting and social media in the classroom.
- [Irish SIC: Video discussing sexting and legal implications](#)  
A video which provides some guidance on how parents might talk to their children about the complex subject of sexting. It also makes reference to some of the legal implications for children and young people.
- [Latvian SIC: The internet remembers everything](#)  
A campaign video which aims to encourage viewers to think of possible consequences when sending naked pictures online. It provides a good opportunity for discussion and suggests solutions for what to do if images are shared.
- [Portuguese SIC: Sexting cartoon](#)  
A cartoon animation about sexting.
- [UK SIC: Crossing the Line – PSHE toolkit](#)  
A practical online safety PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) toolkit with films and lesson plans to explore online issues with pupils aged 11-14. The purpose of the toolkit is to help teachers to generate discussions around a range of issues, including sexting.

Many more resources are available from the full [resource](#) and [video](#) galleries on the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal, in a variety of languages, covering a whole range of online safety issues.

## Further information and advice

For further information and advice, please contact your national Safer Internet Centre – check the [Better Internet for Kids \(BIK\) portal for contact information](#).

To keep up to date with safer and better internet issues more generally, visit the [Better Internet for Kids \(BIK\) portal](#), subscribe to the quarterly electronic [BIK bulletin](#), or check out the Insafe [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) profiles.