ADOLESCENTS AND SEXTING

Submitted by the Child Witness Institute

KEY CONCEPTS	
Sexting	Child sexual abuse material
Adolescents	Pressure to sext
Online behaviour	

The following is a summary of the following research article on adolescents and sexting: Lunde, C. and Joleby, M. 2022. *Being Under Pressure to Sext: Adolescents' Experiences, Reactions, and Counter-Strategies.* **Journal of Research on Adolescence**. 1 – 14.

This article explored the experiences of adolescents with respect to being pressured to sext, examining the situations they view as causing pressure, how they react and what counter-strategies they have developed.

BACKGROUND

Since adolescents spend their lives within the digital world, some of their developmental stages will occur online. This has the implication that adolescents will use the internet for sexual activities and interactions.   Previous studies have shown that adolescents use the internet to search for information about sex, to watch pornography or to engage in sexting. Sexting includes the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive images or messages over a digital medium.

The digital world as a medium for sexual activities offers both opportunities and risks. Although the majority of teenagers engage in sexting within romantic relationships and have positive experiences, unwanted sexual requests and sexual coercion are also relatively common.[1]

Previous studies have provided the following information:

- 11,5% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16.5 years had received requests to engage in unwanted sexual activities or sexual talk online.
- Studies have shown that many adolescents regard online sexual requests as bothersome, and some may engage in sexting as a result of pressure.
- Sexting undertaken as a result of pressure is associated with a range of negative outcomes i.e. greater risk of unauthorized sharing of naked images, depression, self-harm and emotional dysregulation.
- Some adolescents describe being bombarded with a vast number of sexual requests from many different sources.[2]
- Girls seem to be more often asked, coerced, or pressured to send sexting images, although findings are mixed.

As children are going online at increasingly younger ages, the available evidence suggests that pre-adolescents too are exposed to unwanted and negative online interactions, including sexually

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abusive acts. Therefore, in order to safeguard and support young people against unwanted online sexual request and pressure, it is essential to understand this phenomenon. The authors argue that adolescents are the ones who experience this first-hand and it is, therefore, important to investigate their experiences, how they have reacted and what counter-strategies they use to cope with the pressure to sext.

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS IN A DIGITAL AGE

From a developmental perspective, adolescents are in the process of forming an adult sexual identity. Some of these experiences are happening online, which provides adolescents with a venue where they learn sexual norms, roles and behaviours.   Since adolescents' sexual learning experiences form a basis for healthy adult sexuality, any sexual experience (whether positive or negative) is associated with sexual development. Although research has found that the majority of adolescents find being approached with sexual requests to be bothersome, this may result in some adolescents, who are in need of attention, overstepping their boundaries. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that there may be ambivalent feelings about being asked to expose oneself – feelings of affirmation and attention, but also objectification.[3]

Although adolescents may be experts in their digital worlds, their limited sexual experience makes them vulnerable. There is a mismatch between their physical, cognitive and emotional maturity, which makes them vulnerable as they are naïve and have limited ability to assess risks. Receiving unwanted sexual requests may influence adolescents' expectations about sexual interactions. For instance, girls and boys may have different perceptions of unwanted online sexual requests and pressure, because they may (as a result of gender socialisation) internalise different ideas of how they should behave and feel. Gendered norms portray males as being eager for sexual encounters, while girls are seen as ambivalent - they are "expected to guard themselves yet be sexually submissive, and to be resistant yet available." Girls are taught to self-sacrifice in relationships and put the desires of others first. This contributes to disempowerment of women and girls in relationships.

ADOLESCENT VIEWS ON PRESSURED SEXTING

The following information was gathered from qualitative studies related to unsolicited sexual requests online, online sexual harassment and non-consensual sharing of naked images:[4]

- Participants in the one study identified competing pressures: the traditional pressure to abstain from sexting vs the contemporary concept of empowered female sexuality that admit to the sending of naked images.
- In another study, pressured sexting was defined as a form of online sexual harassment with boys asking for naked images. For the boys, there was pressure to share sexting images of girls' bodies. Boys gained social currency by the non-consensual sharing of naked images.
- In a study of Swedish adolescents, boys shared girls' images without their consent, and while girls were exposed to nagging and threats to send images, the boys were not seen as perpetrators and "got away" with pressuring girls for texts.
- In a Danish study, adolescents and young adults viewed non-consensual sharing of sexting images as a form of "visual gossiping" that functioned to strengthen social bonds and gendered power relations.

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- In another Swedish study, 10% of adolescent boys (vs 36% of girls) reported being under pressure to sext.
- In a British study (Setty) found that boys also ran the risk of harm and social shaming due to sexting.

Although these studies have provided valuable information, there are still important issues that remain unexplored. These include:

- What types of situations do adolescents perceive as pressuring?
- What do adolescents feel about different situations perceived as pressuring?
- What strategies do adolescents use when they face pressure to engage in sexting?

METHOD OF PRESENT STUDY

1653 Swedish primary school children between the ages of 12 and 16 in 10 different schools were requested to answer a questionnaire. Of these, 349 participants (10% of boys and 35,7% of girls) had experienced someone trying to pressure them into sending sexting photographs or videos.[5]

FINDINGS
Occurrence:
- One-time experience of receiving pressure to sext was most common
- A large group had received pressure to sext on multiple occasions

Perpetrators:[6]
The following were identified as perpetrators:
- Strangers (n = 54)
- Acquaintance (n = 17)
- Partner/ ex-partner (n = 12)
- Romantic interest (n = 7)
- Friend (n = 7)
- Online friend (n = 4)

Response:
- 80.4% did not send a sext as a response to the pressure
- 19.6% did send a sext in response to the pressure

Age:
The mean age for being pressured was 13.4 years.

What range of situations were perceived as pressuring:[7]
The situations were divided into 3 themes: unexpected requests, unsolicited nude pictures, nagging or threats.
Unexpected requests
- Most common was an unexpected request for naked pictures from either an unknown person or someone known to the adolescent.
- The request sometimes followed a longer period of normal conversations so the adolescent was unprepared for the sudden sexualisation of the conversation.

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- The request was often combined with compliments to entice the adolescent into sending.
  - If a picture was requested and the adolescent sent a photo of their face or body fully-clothed, they would get a response that they had a great body and could they send a picture without their clothes on.
- Other times the request appeared without any prior interaction, and the adolescent was found by unknown people through social media. A profile will add them on social media and simply send a request for a nude picture.

Unsolicited nude pictures[8]
- Another pattern of experiences was receiving unrequested nude pictures with the expectation to send one in return.
- This emanated from either an unknown person or someone known to the adolescent.
- Although the adolescent did not initiate sexual contact or invite it, they were expected to participate, and refusing to do so could lead to reprisals. The person sending the naked picture seemed to automatically think that they were owed one in return. If the picture was not sent in return, then they were labelled as boring and useless and would be blocked.
- Although the above themes do not include any force or explicit pressure, there seems to be a more implicit type of pressure in how an expectation to respond is enough to cause pressure.

Nagging or threats[9]
- This refers to situations with a more explicit form of pressure.
- They range from mild forms (e.g. nagging) to more overt or aggressive forms of pressure (e.g. threats).
- The most frequent occurrence here was that the person asking for the naked picture kept nagging if the adolescent did not comply.
- Adolescents were also threatened because they refused to send pictures. Threats included:
  - dissemination of revealing images that adolescent had previously sent unless they sent new ones
  - starting a rumour about the adolescent
  - more general threats aimed at inducing fear.
- "I was 12 years old. A guy that I did not know at all wrote to me. He knew exactly everything about me: where I lived, my name, and so on. At first, I refused, but then he wrote even more horrifying stuff, so I got scared and sent a picture." (14-year-old girl).

Emotional reactions elicited by pressure:[10]
Very different reactions were elicited amongst the adolescents in response to pressuring situations, and included: severe physical and psychological reaction; becoming distressed; and seemingly unconcerned.
Severe physical and psychological reactions[11]
- This made up two-fifths of all the responses.
- The responses included the following:
  - The situation made them feel bad.

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- o It invoked intense physical reactions ("I panicked, felt sick, started cold sweating, and cried.")
- o Fear and coercion were recognised as causing the negative reactions.
- o Some experienced an intense emotional response even when they handled the situation (i.e. blocked the person).
- o For some, the sheer unexpectedness of the unsolicited contact seemed to cause anguish ("He decided to send naked pictures/dickpics to me. He sent several … I was disgusted and shocked that I almost vomited ….I got sad but mostly angry." 12-13 year old).
- o Some participants acknowledged responses of a more lingering psychological character ("I thought it was tough because I do not like my body, and it only got worse through this." 13 year old).
- o Those adolescents who did send naked pictures in response to being pressured experienced additional feelings like anxiety and fear:[12]
  - ▪ Fear of not being in control of what would happen to the picture or who could see it:
  - ▪ "I was writing with a guy and he nagged me like hell, and eventually I gave up and sent him a picture on Snapchat. He saved it. That made me feel really bad, because it did not feel good to know that he had it and could look at it at any time, and that he could disseminate it to anyone. That really made me feel bad … I am so ashamed of it and feel bad every time I think of it." (13-year-old)
  - ▪ Distress was caused by the actual dissemination of the pictures:
  - ▪ "I guy my age that I kind of knew … he nagged and nagged and sent me a lot of pictures. Eventually, to make him stop nagging, I sent him one. He screenshotted it and sent it to my friends. I was 14 at the time. Of course it was very humiliating and it did not feel good (15-year-old)

Becoming distressed[13]
- • This theme included all the negative responses received that were milder than those received under the previous theme.
- • Many adolescents expressed feelings of disgust, but these were of a relatively mild intensity.
- • Some attributed these feelings to the fact that the sexualisation of the conversation was unwelcome.
- • The most common reaction was that it felt "strange" as many adolescents appeared to be puzzled about receiving unsolicited sexual invitations in situations that they did not view as sexual. The feeling of strangeness was due to the sexual contact being unexpected and sudden. It was viewed as an invasion of privacy.
- • It made some of the adolescents feel uneasy. ("It makes me feel uncomfortable because my body is mine, and I decide who I want to share it with." (15-year-old)

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Seemingly unconcerned[14]
- This included the adolescents who did not experience any emotional reaction to the unwanted sexual request.
- They appeared not to be bothered by the contact and often expressed this a "I don't care."
- The unconcern seemed to stem from not experiencing the pressure as threatening. Most of these adolescents described that it was easy for them to say no to the request.
- For some, the normalisation of being pressured to sext seemed to add to their indifference: "It did not feel strange at all because there are so many people who ask both me and my friends, so I just say no," (13-year-old)

Other responses

- Five adolescent responses did not fit under the above themes.
- Three of them perceived the pressure to sext as a positive experience: "It was kind of good," "It is fun and you feel a bit sexy."
- One adolescent thought it was funny: "I mainly thought it was a bit funny because he seemed pretty stupid."
- One described the situation as being within a relationship and was therefore okay.

Responding to unwanted sexual requests:[15]

- From the responses, it was clear that many of the adolescents had developed strategies on how to respond.
- These strategies were grouped into two: stand up for oneself and blocking:
  - Stand up for oneself
    - Here the adolescents stood up for themselves in different ways to unwanted sexual requests.
    - Most common strategy was just to say no and explaining that one did not want to take part in the request.
    - Some explained that they had to patiently repeat their decisions in response to nagging: "...they ask, you say no, they continue to try..." (15-year-old).
    - Others tried to argue and explain why they did not want the sexual contact.
    - Some adolescents felt confident in their right to resist, while others stated that resisting or bluntly saying no was not an obvious way out for everyone.
    - Some described it as a skill learnt over time, while others described it as an inner strength.
    - Knowledge about bodily integrity (no one has the right to do something to your body without your consent) served as a resistance: " No! I make decisions about my body and I only show it if I want to, which I do not want to and do not feel comfortable doing. Goodbye!" and then blocking the person.
    - The situation was taken control of in the following ways:
      - By threatening the person that pressured them
      - By using humour to disarm the situation
      - By lying to escape pressure and using a fake excuse, like they had a boyfriend or were at a friend's house and could not send a picture.

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- o Blocking
  - Refers to the strategy of deleting or blocking the person behind the unsolicited sexual request.
  - Some adolescents said that they did it regularly while others only did it on one occasion.
  - Most adolescents described blocking in a way that was instinctive and obvious and not something they had to think about, indicating that many adolescents have well-developed strategies to address online threats.

DISCUSSION[16]

In addition to explicit pressure, such as nagging and threats, adolescents also felt pressured in situations in which they felt an implicit expectation to engage in sexting, where, for instance, someone else had sent a sexually explicit image first. This finding indicates that unsolicited sexting images may be used to initiate an exchange of nude images, which creates the implicit expectation among young people to "return the favour."

Receiving unwanted sexual requests online is common, perhaps even normalised in adolescent populations and. Although some adolescents described being unconcerned by it, the majority reported being negatively affected. The severe reactions often seemed to be due to the shock of unwantedly and unexpectedly becoming the object of someone else's sexual desire, which violates sexual autonomy and privacy, especially when being thrown into a sexual context outside of one's own maturity. There were also reports of the adolescent being threatened and scared. For those that sent the images, there were additional feelings such as shame, regret and anxiety about what would happen to the picture.

For adolescents, being exposed to explicit forms of pressure may be particularly challenging as their brains are not yet fully developed. This would make the following tasks difficult for adolescents: foreseeing and adequately assessing potential threats, identifying long-term consequences or making well-considered decisions difficult. In additional, hormone changes make adolescents more likely to engage in reward-seeking and sensation-seeking behaviour, become more easily emotionally aroused and more responsive to stress.

A large number of the adolescents described concrete techniques that could be helpful in warding off unwanted situations, including confident ways to say no or block the person. However, the nature of the relationship between the person asking for the image and the one being asked may be a complicating factor for how the situation is perceived and dealt with.[17] It may be much more difficult to say no to or block someone where there is a friendship or romantic relationship. It is, therefore, necessary that educational efforts and discussions about consent in relationships should stress that the same principles apply online.

The research also highlighted the fact that none of the participants described help- or support-seeking strategies, like turning to a trusted adult or peer despite a large number of them experiencing emotionally stressful encounters. Of interest is the fact that the sample also reported significantly lower life satisfaction, and this may indicate that some adolescents may be more vulnerable to adverse situations online due to poor family support and, therefore, even less inclined to seek support from adults.

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LIMITATIONS[18]

The limitations of this study include the following:

- The results are based on written free-text answers in the context of a questionnaire. Individual or focus group interviews would have yielded richer data and allowed for follow-up questions and a deeper investigation of individual experiences. Free-text answers, however, enabled the collection of a larger number of statements and gave anonymity.
- Research based on "risk frame" applicable to adolescents' sexuality and their online behaviours and did not focus on adolescents' positive skills and experiences gained online.
- The study omitted the experiences of more mixed and cross-cultural samples of sexual minority youth.

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[18] Page 11 – 12.