VIRTUAL COLLEGE

Health & Social Care
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How can you safeguard children from sexting?

A guide by Virtual College

Introduction

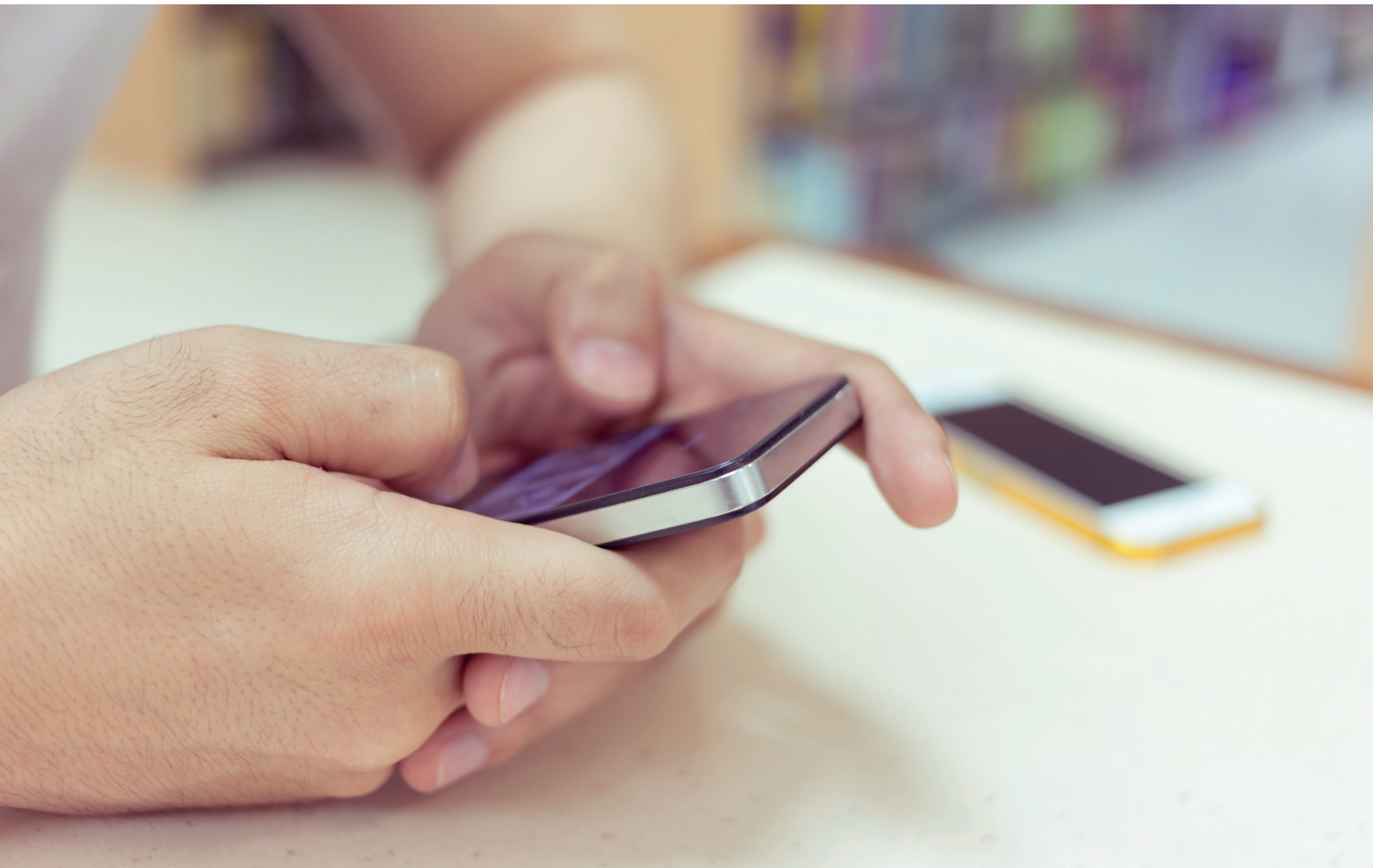
More and more children and teens are engaging in or being affected by sexting. With more young people having access to phones and social media accounts, it is becoming easier for them to send and receive explicit messages and images.

There has been a rise in the number of sexting cases among young people being reported in recent years, with schools and local authorities taking steps to attempt to combat the issue. However, it is also important to address the issue of sexting with your children at home.

What is sexting?

Sexting means sending sexually explicit messages and/or suggestive images, such as nudes. While the name suggests that this is only done via text messages, these types of messages can be sent via any messaging service, including emails and social media.

This also means that sexts can be sent or received via a number of electronic devices, such as smart-phones, computers and tablets.



Sexting is illegal among children

If a child is under the age of 18, it is illegal for them to take a nude photo of themselves or a friend, as well as distributing them. Even though the age of sexual consent is 16, the Protection of Children Act means it is against the law for a child to share a sexual image, even if it is with someone who is also under the age of 18.

Images covered under the law include, but are not limited to, naked pictures, topless photos of girls, any sex acts and sexual images in underwear. If it is found that a child under the age of 18 is in possession of any of these, has been sending them or taking these types of photos, the police can record it as a crime.

However, since the start of 2016, the police can simply record the crime, but take no further action if it isn't in the public interest. This means that it is unlikely to show up in future records. This decision is totally at the discretion of the police, who will judge on a case by case basis.

How are children protected in schools?

Guidance on dealing with sexting in schools has been issued by the government this year, which means that there is a process in place for dealing with any cases. The 'Keeping Children Safe in Education 2016' guidance means all schools must report any cases of sexting to a designated member of staff, who will then lead an investigation.

This investigation will involve the children who have been found to be sexting, as well as their parents. Punishment can then be given by the school, but if it is thought that the children involved are at risk of harm or have been harmed, the case can be referred to the police or children's services.

In order to combat sexting, schools also have the power to search for electronic devices, such as smartphones, as well as check what data is on these devices. They can also delete any explicit images they find.

What can parents do to safeguard children?

One of the most effective ways you can safeguard your children against sexting is to talk to them about it. Ensuring they understand what it is, how it is dangerous and what the results of engaging in sexting are, could enable them to make the right choices.

This will also make sure they know what to do if they are sent any unwanted images or messages, which can be distressing, especially for younger children. If they know they have your support, they are more likely to come to you with issues and questions.

It is also important to set rules for them regarding the use of their electronic devices and social media. Ensure they know what they can and cannot do with their devices and what they shouldn't post online, such as their address.

You may want to install parental control apps and programmes onto their devices too, which will block certain activity and/or allow you to monitor their behaviour. Doing checks on their messages and online activity can also help you safeguard children, especially if they are quite young.

It can also be a good idea to check what parental controls your broadband provider offers, as they could help you further safeguard your children.

While it can be tempting to just put a blanket ban on social media accounts, this can mean that they just set them up without your knowledge and so will not understand how to keep them secure and the correct ways to use them. It is much better to set their profiles up with them when you think they are ready, take them through all the features and ensure you have access to them.

If you do find that your child has been sexting, it is possible to get the images removed by contacting the Internet Watch Foundation, which will search for any explicit photos or videos of your child in order to protect them from possible ramifications.

Sources

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