THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Safeguarding: Sexting & Youth-Produced Sexual Images

Key definitions:

Sexting is the sending, receiving or sharing of sexual messages, images or videos using digital technology (for example, phones, social media, messaging apps or games).

Youth-produced sexual images (sometimes called 'self-generated sexual content', 'nudes' or 'semi-nudes') are sexual or nude images, videos or live streams created by children or young people under 18 themselves, and shared digitally.

Peer-to-peer sexting is when sexual images or messages are exchanged between children/young people. This may be within a romantic relationship, a friendship group, or between acquaintances.

Non-consensual sharing happens when someone forwards or shows another person's sexual image or message without their consent. This is a form of sexual abuse, bullying and humiliation.

'Sextortion' is when someone threatens to share a sexual or nude image of a child or young person unless they meet demands, for example sending more explicit images, paying money, or doing something offline. This can happen between peers or involve adults, including offenders overseas. It should always be treated as serious sexual abuse and reported in line with advice from the DSO and police.

Key Statistics

- 39% of UK respondents first shared an explicit image while under 18 (UKCIS, 2024).
- 28% of under-18s have had intimate photos misused or received unwanted sexual images (NSPCC, 2024).
- Average age for receiving first sexual image: 14 years (UKCIS, 2024).
- Sextortion cases surged by 72% in one year, with 97% of victims being boys, mostly aged 14–17 (NCA, 2024).

Why is this a safeguarding concern?

- Children and young people under 18 cannot legally consent to the creation or distribution of sexual images of themselves. These images may be classed as child sexual abuse material, even when created and shared between peers.
- Sexting often happens in the context of pressure, coercion, blackmail, threats to share images, or harmful sexual behaviour.
- Images can spread quickly and be very hard to remove, increasing the risk of shame, anxiety, self-harm, depression and isolation.
- Adults may also be involved (for example through grooming or image requests), which is always a serious safeguarding and criminal concern.

Key signs to look out for

- Young people in a church youth group swapping sexual images in private or group chats.
- A young person disclosing that their ex-partner, or a friend, is threatening to share a nude image.
- A leader becoming aware that explicit images of a young person known to the church are being circulated at school.
- An adult connected with the church asking for or possessing sexual images of a young person.

What might this look like in church life?

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How to respond if a young person discloses sexting

1. Stay calm, listen carefully and take the young person seriously. Avoid reacting with shock or blame.
2. Reassure them they have done the right thing by telling you and that you will support them.
3. Do not promise confidentiality. Explain that you may need to share information with the parish safeguarding officer or DSO to keep them safe.
4. Avoid viewing the image if at all possible. Never copy, forward or save sexual images of children or young people.
5. Record what you have been told as soon as possible, in the young person's own words where you can, noting dates, times and who is involved.
6. Contact your parish safeguarding officer or the DSO the same working day for advice and to agree next steps, in line with local procedures and national church guidance.
7. If there is any indication of immediate danger or ongoing abuse, follow emergency procedures (for example contacting the police or children's services).

Always follow your diocese's safeguarding procedures and the Church of England safeguarding e-manual. When in doubt, seek advice from the DSO rather than trying to resolve the situation alone.

Key messages for children and young people

- No one should pressure you to send sexual images or messages.
- You can change your mind about sharing an image or continuing a conversation at any time.
- If someone shares an image of you without consent, this is not your fault.
- You can talk to a trusted adult in church, at home or at school, or contact a helpline if you're worried.

Further information & up-to-date guidance

Church of England resources:

- Safeguarding e-manual

- National safeguarding training portal

External resources:

- UKCIS : Sharing nudes and semi-nudes: advice for education settings working with children and young people
- NSPCC : Sexting, sharing nudes and semi-nudes
- NSPCC : – Keeping children safe online
- CEOP Safety Centre: – Report online sexual abuse or grooming directly to specialist police officers
- Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) : Report child sexual abuse images or videos; 'Report Remove' helps children get intimate images removed
- Childline : Online safety advice and support for young people