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Sexting: An Exploration of Practices, Attitudes and Influences

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Executive Summary

This report develops and compliments work commissioned by the NSPCC in May 2012 (Ringrose et. al 2012) exploring the phenomenon of sexting – the production and distribution of self-generating explicit content among young people. The research was conducted by the UK Safer Internet Centre (<http://www.safertinternet.org.uk/>) in consultation and with the support of the NSPCC (<http://www.nspcc.org.uk/>). Two age groups were involved in the research:

1. 12 focus groups with year 9 (aged 13-14) pupils in 6 different schools across 3 counties, speaking to 120 pupils in total – exploring aspect of digital life, sexting, influences around sexting and education approaches.
2. 3 focus groups with year 6 (aged 10-11) pupils in 2 different schools in 2 different counties, speaking to 30 pupils in total – aspects of digital life, issues around contact, conduct and content, causes of upset and education approaches.

While the focus of the research was the year 9 pupils, exploratory work with year 6 pupils was conducted due to concerns that this age group was becoming more sexualised and exposed to explicit content and practice.

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Key findings from the year 9 research were:

- The prevalence and “mundanity” of sexting – this is something that is widely known among this age group and while not all are engaging in such practices, they have peers that are.
- The difference in gender – girls would generally self generate as a result of a request from a boy. Boys would self generate unprompted in most cases.
- There is resilience among this age group - many young people have developed coping mechanisms to issues that might arise, due in most part that these things are dealt with by their peer group.
- This age group fear being judged for the things they do and this is one of the main reasons they will not turn to adults if something has gone wrong. They know it is “wrong” to do things like self-generation but if things do go wrong they want support and understanding rather than reprimanding. They feel they are more likely to get the latter rather than the former from adults.
- Amanda Todd – the Canadian teenager who committed suicide as a result of abuse received as a result of self generation - has had a major impact on this age group
- Young people of this age do not think that teachers are there to care or look after them and do not trust them to share emotional problems.
- Sexting does not necessarily happen in isolation, it can be related to other online issues such as cyber bullying and draw from influences such as celebrity and pornography.
- Pornography is frequently viewed by boys of this age, and while they acknowledge there is potential for harm, they do not feel they are affected themselves. Girls of this age will generally not look at pornography, and view it as a negative influence on boys.
- Young people are willing to discuss these issues and want to learn about them in school but don’t get the opportunity.

Key findings with year 6 pupils were:

- The vast majority of young people of this age already have active online social lives using a number of different technologies and platforms including Facebook.
- Gaming plays a major role in many boys’ lives, including online multiplayer environments and 18 certificate games.
- Most young people of this age have had to deal with some form of online abuse, and they turn to their peer group for help.

- Many year 6 pupils spoken to have received unsolicited contact from strangers, either through social networks or mobile technology. Most will turn to parents for help but subsequently parents will not involve police.
- There is little evidence in our groups to suggest that these children were exposed to sexualised content, or asked to self generate.
- Our year 6 pupils were more likely to turn to adults than older children if they were upset about things that had occurred online, but still are unlikely to involve a teacher in case they get told off.
- Young people of this age are very willing to talk about their online lives, enjoy such discussion and would like to do more of it in school.

Introduction

In May 2012 a report by Ringrose et al.¹ “A qualitative study of children, young people and ‘sexting’”, commissioned by the NSPCC, produced ground breaking research understanding the nature of sexting for young people and identified a number of concerning issues around power and coercion, “casual” sexual abuse in school environments and how technology is used in the production and distribution of self generated indecent images. However the research, while highly detailed, has issues of generalisability due to the small number of students (35) and the fact that all in the sample were drawn from two inner-city schools.

“Sexting” is defined in the South West Grid for Learning resource “So You Got Naked Online”² as is a term that “describes the use of technology to share personal sexual content”. This content can be anything from texts, partial nudity right up to sexual images or video. Very often it is between partners, but can be broadcast to groups and can use a whole range of devices, technologies and online spaces. However, the most common ones are mobile phone MMS, Skype and social network sites where images can be posted and shared (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, YouTube etc). There have been attempts recently to try and move the term away from “sexting” to the more accurate and less sensational “self-generated indecent images”, for example in the recent Internet Watch Foundation research³.

This research explored self generated images and their destinations online either via “revenge porn” sites or other web resources. It highlighted how self-generated images would move around the Internet once online and illustrated that when distributed the self-generator has no control over the image’s ultimate destination. Clearly these two important pieces of research this year show that sexting continues to be an issue faced by young people and those charged with their care.

This research continues this exploration of self-generated images by using a similar, qualitative, methodology to the May 2012 study and worked with young people in other locations in the UK in order to extend discussions on sexting to a wider population of young people. This initial report explores both the methodology used to engage young people in this research and presents initial analysis of the results of this work. This document is a preliminary report based upon top-level analysis of the data. A more in depth exploration of the data will be produced for Safer Internet Day 2013.

Methodology and Recruitment

The research applied a similar qualitative methodology to the original work commissioned by the NSPCC and developed it by

¹Ringrose, Jessica, Gill, Rosalind, Livingstone, Sonia, Harvey, Laura (2012) A qualitative study of children, young people and 'sexting': a report prepared for the NSPCC. London: NSPCC.

²<http://www.swgfl.org.uk/sextinghelp>

³<http://www.iwf.org.uk/about-iwf/news/post/334-young-people-are-warned-they-may-lose-control-over-their-images-and-videos-once-they-are-uploaded-online>

1. Moving the focus of the research away from inner-city London to other semi-rural and rural locations in order to determine whether behaviours are similar in different locations and ethnicities.
2. Conducting a preliminary investigation into whether sexting was a problem for older (year 6) primary school children and also explore other issues faced in their online lives.

The rationale for the inclusion of year 6 pupils in the research came from the original NSPCC research – a number of subjects interviewed for this study said that they had felt that the research was pitched at too old an age group and these issues should be explored in late primary/early secondary. In addition there has been a growing concern in the media about the exposure of younger children to sexualised content⁴.

Similar research questions were used as the starting point for the development of research methodology:

- How is 'sexting' practised by a diverse group of UK children and young people?
- What meanings are given to sexually explicit content in text messages, smart phones, 2.0 activities such as social networking?
- What are the implications for risk, harm and vulnerability?

The research was also informed by the findings of the previous work that allowed a focus on more specific issues such as:

- The prevalence of sexting and the normalisation of sexual practices, particularly with the use of technology
- The power imbalance between males and females in the context of sexting
- Motivations and influences around engaging in sexting such as media, celebrity and pornography

Schools were approach mainly through personal contacts. The UK Safer Internet Centre has a strong relationship with a large number of schools across the country so it was not difficult recruit willing establishments. A deliberate decision was taken to approach schools in different counties to ensure some exploration of regionality. While all secondary schools were in the broader South West of England, they were drawn from 3 different counties:

Table 1 - Secondary schools in the research

	Location	Composition of school	Focus groups conducted
School 1	Semi-rural on the outskirts of a town in Somerset.	Comprehensive school with academy status. Mixed gender. Pupil ethnicity:	1 group with 10 year 9 boys. 1 group with 10 year 9 girls.

⁴<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2196623/Call-arms-110-000-sign-petition-porn-Demand-tough-online-controls-heard-MP-tells-parents.html>

		Mainly white.	
School 2	Semi-rural location on the outskirts of a town in Somerset	Comprehensive school with academy status. Mixed gender. Pupil ethnicity: Mainly white.	1 group with 10 year 9 boys. 1 group with 10 year 9 girls.
School 3	City centre in Devon	Selecting grammar school with entrance examination. Single gender. Pupil ethnicity: Mainly white.	2 groups with year 9 girls. 11 in one group and 9 in the other.
School 4	Suburb of city in Devon	Selecting grammar school with entrance examination. Single gender. Pupil ethnicity: Mainly white.	2 groups with year 9 boys, 10 in each group.
School 5	Semi rural location in a town in Cornwall	Comprehensive school with academy trust status. Mixed gender. Pupil ethnicity: Mainly white.	1 group with 10 year 9 boys. 1 group with 11 year 9 girls.
School 6	Semi rural location in a town in Cornwall	Comprehensive school within a wider education trust. Mixed gender. Pupil ethnicity: Mainly white.	1 group with 10 year 9 boys. 1 group with 10 year 9 girls.

For primary schools the research was far more exploratory in nature and we worked with a smaller group of schools with the intention of informing future research. In total two schools were approached to conduct the research, which followed the same format as that for secondaries, although for primaries the groups were mixed gender:

Table 2 - Primary schools in the research

	Location	Composition of school	Focus groups conducted
School 1	Urban location in Devon, outside of city centre in deprived area	Primary school in local authority control. Strong tie to local church	2 groups with 10 year 6 pupils, mixed gender.

School 2	Semi-rural location in Cornwall, edge of small town in local housing estate	Primary school in local authority control.	1 group with 10 year 6 pupils, mixed gender
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For both studies focus groups were used as the main approach to exploring these issues, supplemented with some interviews of teaching staff. Focus groups allowed for in depth discussion with small groups of young people. The overall approach to the focus groups differed between primary and secondary schools, as detailed below.

Research Approach – Secondary Schools

In each of the schools the head teacher was approached in the first instance although in most cases responsibility for assisting with the research was then delegated to another member of staff, generally a deputy head or PSHE lead. However in one school the head teacher remained the key contact throughout the research.

Heads were approached initially via email then followed up with phone discussions to go through the aims and nature of the research. Most schools were willing to participate with only one school approached uneasy about the nature of the research. Their concern was that if pupils were not aware of the issues being discussed, the research might introduce them and “encourage” them to try them.

Once schools had agreed to take part a more formal briefing occurred. It was decided that year 9 pupils would be the most relevant year group with which to explore these issues – this is old enough to be able to talk about these sensitive issues and complemented the earlier research by the NSPCC. It was also decided that schools would be best placed to select pupils for the focus groups. While it was important to have a level of randomness in the selection of pupils we did want to make sure that, firstly, no young people who could be considered vulnerable would take part and equally no-one who would take over the discussion or view it as a challenge to be as outrageous as possible would be recruited. The schools were therefore asked to identify two groups of 10 “regular” year 9 pupils who would be able to take part in the discussions. For mixed gender schools we asked for one group of girls and one group of boys to be selected, for same sex schools we asked for two groups. Therefore, in total we spoke to 60 boys and 60 girls across the six schools. Given geographical location it was unsurprising that the ethnicity of most pupils was white. However, there was also one Asian attendee in a session in School 4 and another in the girls’ session in School 3.

Once pupils had been selected parental consent was sought with a letter home describing the nature of the research and its rationale. It was interesting to note that no pupils were withdrawn from the research at this stage. However, one pupil at school 3 did request not to take part on the day before the groups at their school because she had been a victim of self generation and did not feel ready to talk about it.

The sessions themselves were audio recorded for later transcription and observational notes were taken during the discussions. After each session further notes were written up to highlight key points and how they related to the research aims. Due to the

sensitive nature of some of the topics being discussed, a trusted teacher also came to each focus group and in all but one school was an active participant in the discussion. At the start of the groups an overview of the research was given, along with guarantees of anonymity. It was also made clear that we wanted to explore issues that affect young people of their age, rather than their own personal experiences (however, during the discussions this would not always happen!) and, as such, they were asked specifically not to talk about what they have done and if they were talking about friends, they should not name them. They were also given a further opportunity to withdraw from the research at this stage, although none did.

A discussion guide was constructed with broad topics, these being:

- **Research overview** – briefing and opportunity to withdraw
- **Review of how they use technology in their lives** – ice breaker and thinking about how much technology pervades all aspects of their lives
- **General exploration of sexting** – this was introduced with a discussion around Amanda Todd⁵, and then related back to their own experiences – did they know people who had done it? What did they think of people who did? Etc.
- **Relationship with celebrity, the media and pornography** – do they know of celebrities who have done it? What do they think of this? Does body image have a role in this? Where does pressure to look a certain way come from? Does pornography play a role in their lives?
- **Gender differences** – do they think there are differences in attitude toward sexting? Do boys/girls have a different attitude toward pornography?

For each broad topic some guide questions, such as those detailed above, were prepared. However, the semi-structured approach to the focus groups meant that these questions were not rigorously adhered to in the event that the discussion moved in different directions. In addition, in the final 10 minutes of each group the young people were given the opportunity to ask questions of their own either about the research or other online issues.

Research Approach – Primary Schools

The primary school research was far more exploratory in nature given that we were unsure of whether sexting is an issue primary aged pupils had to face. Certainly anecdotally working in Primary schools with the UK Safer Internet Centre had not raised any issues of this nature at this age. However, some research (for example⁶) had highlighted that a small minority of respondents had suggested they were around 11 years old when they first used technology for explicit dialogue.

⁵ Amanda Todd was a teenager from Canada who was subjected to several bullying as a result of exposing herself to a stranger on a webcam when she was in year 7. She committed suicide after posting a video on YouTube about her abuse.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/11/amanda-todd-suicide-bullying_n_1959909.html

⁶http://www.saferinternet.org/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=ac6e94b4-3f11-4485-848c-f5360b831eae&groupId=10131

Therefore in total we worked with 30 year 6 pupils. Each session in school 1 lasted one hour. The session in school 2 lasted for an hour and a half (and the pupils were very happy to keep going!). As with the secondary school groups, a trusted teacher also sat in on the discussions and in both schools participated with the group.

We were working with year 6 pupils for this part of the research and as such it was important to not lead the discussion and raise issues of sexting if the pupils themselves did not introduce them. Equally, in leading the discussion we were very careful to not lead discussion around sexualised content. Therefore, the discussion guide looked at general issues around online behaviour and risk:

- **Introduction** – why we are doing the research, guarantees of anonymity, etc.
- **General online behaviour** – How many go online? For how long? What do they do online? Do they use mobiles? Do they use technology to keep in touch with friends? How? Do they play games? Do they use social networks?
- **Conduct** - Has anyone ever said anything mean to them online? Why do they think people are mean to each other online? What could they do about it?
- **Content** – Have they ever seen anything online that has upset them? Who showed it to them? Why do they think parents/teachers might worry about what they see online? Does anyone talk to them about this? Who would they go to if they did see something online that upset them? Do they ever look at things that aren't appropriate for their age (e.g. movies, YouTube clips)?
- **Contact** – Do any of them do multiplayer online gaming? Have they ever spoken to someone they don't know online? How did they respond? How do they know people are who they claim to be online?
- **Going for help** -What could grown-ups do to help them stay safe online? Do they talk to their parents about online issues? Are there "house rules" about when and how they do online? Would they talk to their teachers about this sort of thing?

With the primary school groups there were more questions to ensure the discussions kept flowing but as with the secondary groups the questions were not prescriptive and were only used as a guide to ensure parity between groups.

Key Findings

This report presents top-level findings from the research project based upon a mixture of transcript analysis and observational notes. While the discussion guides ensured consistent coverage of topics across focus groups the key findings are presented based upon themes that have emerged from the groups, rather than following the structure of the discussion guides.

Year 9 Key Findings

The aim of the year 9 groups was to explore the prevalence of sexting, the nature of sexting for young people, the influences faced by young people and their thoughts on how we might address issues arising from sexting and sexualised online content in schools.

Before exploring key themes in depth, it is worth acknowledging that one of the most interesting things about the groups is that there was very little variation in results and topics discussed. While there was a geographical distance of approximately 120 miles between the most westerly and easterly schools, and pupils from both selecting and comprehensive schools were spoken to, the themes emerging from all of the groups were the same and a number of common headlines can be identified:

- The prevalence and “mundanity” of sexting
- The difference in gender between girls self generating in response to requests and boys self generating unprompted
- Many have developed resilience to issues that might arise, due in most part that these things are dealt with by their peer group.
- They do not wish to be judged if they get into trouble as a result and this is the main reason for them not turning to adults
- Amanda Todd has had a major impact on this age group
- Sexting does not necessarily happen in isolation, it can be related to other online issues such as cyber bullying and draw from influences such as celebrity and pornography.
- Young people are willing to discuss these issues and want to learn about them in school but don't get the opportunity.

The following discusses a number of these issues inside key findings from the research.

The “Mundanity” of Sexting

As discussed above, the topic of sexting was introduced by speaking about Amanda Todd and in each group they were asked what they thought of the case and how they felt when they heard about it or saw the video Amanda posted on YouTube prior to her suicide. The vast majority of young people we spoke to were aware of Amanda and had seen the video. While a few felt that she should not have exposed herself online in the first place, all could reflect on the abuse she received and were clear the abuse was unacceptable and all had been affected by what had happened. It had made them think

firstly about implications of sexting and more widely the potentially tragic impact of cyberbullying.

However, perhaps one of the most surprising outcomes from these discussions early in the groups was that few thought that Amanda's age when she did pose online was particularly low. While a few respondents, when prompted, said they thought it was "a little young" to be doing such things, few could see anything too shocking about it.

This did reflect one of the key issues arising from this piece of research – that sexting is part of young people's lives and it is not something that is shocking or surprising to them. All of the attendees in the groups were aware instances of sexting among their peers (while not always friends, all knew of people in their year who had done it). The general pattern of behaviour was that an image would be distributed around a school or wider peer group and the victim would receive a level of abuse for a short time as a result. The level of duration of abuse had a relationship with how popular the victim was – a more popular individual was less likely to receive abuse for a prolonged period of time.

Many attendees said that the Amanda Todd case had caused an impact simply because most realise that sexting could lead to something as serious as suicide. Within each school sexting was something that happened and young people had developed coping mechanisms to deal with this. The coping strategies generally involved resolving the issues with friends or hoping things would blow over. In all instances discussed this was something that was resolved at a peer level – there was no case of sexting we discussed where a victim or friends of a victim turned to adults for help. In fact there was generally a look of horror on the faces of the young people when it was suggested they might turn to a parent, teacher or police for help. This is something we will return to later in the discussion.

The Practice of Sexting

In terms of the practice we have seen a change behaviour compared to what was explored in our earlier work into sexting⁷. While previous discussions with young people and education professionals lead to the belief was that sexting was something that occurred *within* a relationship, our discussions in this research showed that this was not normally the case. In some of the situations discussed in the groups (and again this is something that arose across all groups), sexting happens prior to the formation of a relationship – in some cases the young people talked about sexting as a way of their peers decided whether they would "go out" with someone. There was clear gender imbalance here – boys would request pictures of girls and girls *may* send pictures as a result of these invitations. It was considered highly unusual for a girl to request a picture of a boy. The responses of girls varied a great deal – some were aware of instances where girls had responded to request but in many other cases they had simply refused. In one group of particularly resilient girls in school 5, the general consensus was that any girl who did send an image was stupid and just because a boy

⁷<http://www.swgfl.org.uk/Staying-Safe/Content/Press-Releases/SWGfL-Sexting-Research>

asked you to do something there is no reason to do it, no matter how attractive there are!

What was encouraging in a lot of these groups was that, as mentioned above, there was a resilience around this issue – while girls were far more likely to be the recipient of a request many we spoke to in the groups were clear that for anyone it was their choice, and responsibility, to respond to a request. Just because a boy asked for a picture it did not mean they had to respond. Many were clear that just because a boy asked one girl for a picture it didn't mean they weren't asking others at the same time – there was nothing “special” about being asked to send a picture. However, in a couple of the discussions some girls did say that among their peers were individuals who did view a request for a picture, or other forms of online attention, as flattering – being asked to send a picture made you feel like you were attractive.

From the perspective of boys and self-generation, the practice seemed to be very much more self motivated. We heard of many instances where boys had sent pictures of themselves to girls. The nature of the images varied from torso pictures to those more explicit (for example genital and masturbation). There was a discussion in one group where the boys were wondering why on earth a male would send an image because they couldn't see what they would send (comparing the allure of a topless image of a girl to that of a boy). However, in some cases boys did say that they were aware of people their age that had voluntarily taken pictures of their genitals and sent these images to girls. In one interesting discussion a boy talked about someone he knew who had sent girls he “fancied” images of his genitals. When asked why he thought he might do this and what he hoped to achieve as a result, the boy was a little stuck on a response. He certainly didn't think that as a result sending such images the boy was always successful in developing a relationship with the girls.

This research validates some of what was discussed in the earlier NSPCC report that sexting will more commonly happen outside of a relationship and there is a clear imbalance between attitudes of girls and boys around this. Although that is not to say that all girls were passive victims in these situations. In one focus group with girls one attendee asked what is wrong with sexting anyway? She could see that it could be embarrassing but she could see little long-term impact on her life if she engaged in such practices. However, in the majority of discussions with girls around the “power balance” between genders and sexting, they were clear that boys called the shots.

This was not the case from the boys' perspective. Boys seemed, on the whole, to not view practices around sexting as predatory and malicious, they were just “trying their luck”. And while the original NSPCC report did show clear signs of coercion and blackmail from boys, this was not reflected in these focus groups. While boys talked about some people they knew who might collect images as “trophies” these were very much in the minority and there was clearly an impression of “why not” from boys rather than doing it to coerce into either the sending of further images or engaging in sexual practice.

In terms of technology used for the practice of sexting most young people spoken to had some sort of smartphone, although Blackberry use was far lower than in the original research. We did discuss Blackberry (as a result of the surprisingly low usage) and

many young people said that they were for younger children, or had become “uncool” as a result of service problems earlier this year. Some also said that they had got fed up with BBM, due to too many of their peers using it as a broadcast, rather than communication tool. There was a fairly equal split between iPhones and Android based devices, and most would use the standard messaging applications with those phones. However, many attendees also mentioned cross platform systems such as WhatsApp.

It is also important to note the sexting does not happen in isolation – sexting is part of young people’s online lives and relates to other issues such as social networking, mobile communication and cyberbullying. It was clear from early discussions in the groups that a lot of young peoples’ online lives happen via mobile technology as a result of factors such as availability, access and the fact that a lot of their lives are spent in schools and they need to by pass school filtering and monitoring systems. While an image will generally be self generated and distributed on a mobile device, due to distribution via channels such as BBM, these images will move from the mobile platform onto social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. This then results in cyberbullying and online abuse on these platforms.

This issue was clearly illustrated in an anecdote that arose across two schools (schools 3 and 4 as defined in table 1). In the first group one of the discussions led to the girls talking about an individual of their age who did not go to their school but was well known “online”. All of the girls knew who she was and that she was well know for self generating images which would end up on social networks, alongside posting regular status updates related to explicit activities with partners and things such as STI tests. As a result of this she was regularly subjected to abuse from Facebook “friends”, which sometimes resulted in her posting up videos on YouTube to respond to the “haters”. The discussion ended with one girl saying “everyone of our age knows everyone else in this city due to Facebook”. This was confirmed at a subsequent focus group at school 4, where discussion about the same individual arose, unprompted, by the boys. Again they were all aware of the girl and the sort of things she did. Some admitted they had written abusive comments toward her as a result of some of the status updates she had posted. While some did admit to feeling bad about this, they also felt she “was asking for it”. Although when we discussed whether this girl was a exhibiting sign of being emotionally distressed one boy did say that “after Amanda Todd” they had backed off from the abuse. In a follow up interview with the deputy head at school 4 this case was discussed and he knew exactly who the girl was, which school she went to, and that she was subject to a wider child protection case. Within this one anecdote we have a strong illustration on the nature of sexting, how it is embedded with other aspects of online life, and how swiftly things can escalate from a mobile phone to broad access on other websites.

Dealing with Sexting

The next thing we explored in groups was how young people coped with this world of self-generation and the fall out when things such as further distribution happen. In the original sexting research carried out by the South West Grid for Learning the most likely group of people a young person would turn to if they were upset by something caused by sexting was their friends. Based upon this research, this is still definitely the case and in our discussions most attendees said that friends are the first and only people they would turn to. When we talked about what advice someone might give their friend if

they came to them upset by sexting (the example given was a friend had self-generated and this image had been distributed beyond the intended recipient) there were a variety of “solutions” such as ignoring it and it would go away, taking a humorous approach (joking about what they have done to take make people know they didn’t care) or trying to get the image removed.

One thing that was only rarely provided as a solution was to tell a grown up. On the whole young people were aghast at the thought of turning to an adult to deal with these issues. There were a number of reasons why they wouldn’t turn to a parent such as the fear of being told off or having their technology confiscated, as well as parental overreaction (one girl said their dad would “kill” anyone who had asked her to send them a picture). Of the adults they might turn to, a trusted “other” family was the most likely one – especially if they were a younger aunt or uncle, as well as family friends. Even less likely than turning to parents was turning to a teacher. Most young people were clear this wouldn’t happen. Mainly this was again down to the fear of being told off.

One concept that emerged frequently in the groups was this fear of being “judged”. The implication from a lot of young people was they are fully aware they should not be doing this sort of thing, but they do in the heat of the moment or on a whim, and the last thing they want is to go to a teacher to be told, “you shouldn’t have done that”. In many sessions young people said that teachers were there to teach them, not to look after them and even that teachers would “slag us off” in the staff room if a pupil went to them looking for help. This generally came as a shock to the teachers who participated in the sessions and one did raise the fact that they were there to look after the young people as well as teach them. This was met by some disbelief from the young people but when discussed further they said they “might” turn to a “trusted” teacher in an extreme incident, but these teachers are few and far between. This is clearly a cause for concern – teachers should have a pastoral, as well as educational, role with their pupils but in our focus groups young people definitely did not appreciate this.

Finally, a group that was not even considered was turning to the police, which most young people could not see any point of speaking to. There seemed to be little awareness of the legalities around sexting. One girl mentioned she knew someone who was “constantly” being asked by a boy to send him images of herself. When asked what her friend did about it she looked confused and asked what could she do about it? When presented with an offline scenario where a male would ask his colleague in the office to send him a picture of herself every day, the girl said that was unacceptable and the male should be sacked. Which does raise the issue of difference between what is “acceptable” online and offline. A number of examples of this emerged within the discussions, for example the idea of using technology to send an image of ones genitals to someone or accessing and sharing pornography. There does seem to be a belief that, in some way, the online world makes things that would not even be considered offline ok, because technology is used. When this was discussed in the groups, there was a general feeling that technology provided a “buffer” between the sender and the receiver and this, in some way, made it ok.

Body Image and Influences

In extending the discussion beyond just the practice and responses to sexting, we also wanted to explore the influences around body perception and attractiveness. This discussion fell clearly into three areas – celebrity, the wider media and pornography/erotica. Celebrity was the first aspect that was explored, by linking sexting activities into this world. When prompted about which celebrities come to mind when talking about sexting, Tulisa⁸ was the main reference point. We had a lot of discussion around what they thought of this and whether she was a “victim” of sexting. It was interesting that in a number of instances girls were less tolerant than boys, saying that while she did not chose to distribute the video she was aware of being filmed while engaging in the sexual act so shouldn’t be surprised when a person distributed the video further. It was interesting to discuss the long-term impacts of this activity with the young people, who seemed undecided about whether there had been any affect on Tulisa’s career success. However, they were clearer that in terms of reputation, there had be a negative impact and a lot of young people who said they had been fans had lost any respect for her.

We extended the discussion to explore whether young people felt that celebrity image and behaviour had an impact of their own behaviour. Boys felt that girls did feel pressure to look a certain way as a result of celebrities. However, girls said they felt less pressure directly from celebrity and more from the fact that boys viewed celebrities as their ideal “female form” and as such they placed pressure on female peers to look a certain way. Equally girls talked about how other females use the Internet to post provocative photographs to attract attention and positive comments (for example through things such as Tumblr Girls). Boys will subsequently repost these images with comments suggesting they wished girls at their school looked like them.

We then extended the discussion to talk about the influence of other Internet content that inevitably ended up around issues around pornography. While this is a sensitive issue to discuss with year 9 pupils what became clear, particularly from work with boys, was this is something that is part of their everyday lives. When prompted with an arbitrary statistic (which had arisen in an earlier discussion) that 50% of 14 year olds had seen pornography most boys felt that this was a massive underestimation with one boy openly saying “there is no boy in this year that doesn’t look at porn”. While girls are certainly less likely to admit to looking at pornography equally they are aware of it from boys and again felt it does have an influence on boys attitude toward body image and sexual activity. However, boys exhibited, on the whole, resilience about what it means to look at pornography and felt that while it *could* have an influence, they didn’t feel it affected them. We did explore what sort of ways pornography might influence boys and several felt that it might distort perceptions of what is normal in a sexual relationship and also affect expectations of body image. Some also observed that they did know of boys that did show tendencies toward obsessive behaviour – looking at pornography on their phones at any opportunity, distributing it to friends and speaking in a highly sexualised manner. Boys in our groups also showed maturity around the nature of content they can access online, acknowledging it can be far stronger and more explicit that can be access through offline sources.

⁸<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/jul/12/tulisa-contostavlos-apology-sex-tape>

Girls, in general, had a negative impression of pornography and felt it influenced boys in terms of both expectations of how females looked and also what they viewed as “normal” sexual activity. Some girls had concerns that boys who had looked at pornography would expect them to do some of the things they had seen. However, this was not something anyone had said they were aware was borne out in reality. No girls we spoke to said they or female friends did look at pornography and felt it was “something for boys”. Some girls went as far as to say that they wouldn’t have a relationship with a boy who looked at pornography – showing their uneasiness with it and its perceived impact. However, an interesting discussion with girls that showed a gender difference was to explore whether they had read “erotica” such as *50 Shades of Grey*. While those admitting reading such books were in a minority, it was certainly something that had touched these girls’ lives and it was something they were happy to talk about. Girls were clear that this sort of thing was not as “bad” as pornography and its influence was not as strong. There were a number of reasons for this, mainly around the nature of the medium (i.e. printed fiction rather than visual) and the fact that if something was harmful, it wouldn’t be available on the high-street. Even when they acknowledged that some of the content was highly sexualised and could be considered extreme, they didn’t think it would have a negative impact because everyone would know it was fiction.

Education and influence

Finally, we also explored the nature of education in this area and also whether they felt the session they did for the research was interesting and something they enjoyed.

In all of the groups the young people mentioned that “some” coverage of these topics was carried out in schools under the eSafety umbrella, it was likely that the extent of this was an assembly or a tutorial session where videos were shown and, less widely, some discussion was held in a large group situation. No schools discussed any issues around pornography and its influence.

However, in all groups the young people said they had enjoyed the discussion and welcomed the opportunity to engage in dialogue rather than sit and be told about things (one set of boys said their Personal, Health and Social Education – PSHE – sessions involved whole year group assemblies where they were shown a video). They enjoyed the small group situation and also felt that the single gender groups allowed them to be more open without the embarrassment of talking about sensitive issues in front of members of the opposite sex. A lot of the young people also said that it was “better” talking about someone from outside of the school – not because they didn’t like their teachers but they could speak openly with the “risk” of bumping into the teacher after the session. In all cases they said they would like to do more discursive sessions around these topics.

So clearly from these results we can see a generation of young people for whom sexting plays a part of their lives, either as participants or bystanders. Sexting is used to form relationships and girls are far more likely to be asked to send an image than generate and distribute unprompted. The opposite was true for boys. Sexting also plays a role in wider issues of online behaviour and abuse, and can underpin other aspects of

cyberbullying. We also see a population who have a complex relationship with online content – they have access to an unprecedented amount of highly sexual content at an early age and while many show evidence of coping, we must ask the question how might early exposure to sexual content, and engage in self generating such, will have on adolescent development? However, when comparing our results to the original NSPCC report, we can see marked differences in terms of sexual coercion and sexual abuse in the school setting. We had no evidence of sexting being used to coerce girls into sexual acts and the predatory peer oriented behaviour that was identified in the inner city schools. While there was a gender imbalance between boys and girls the strength of that imbalance was certainly not as strong as in the original research.

Year 6 Key Findings

As discussed above, the year 6 work was far more exploratory in nature. As such the results are not as detailed and raise questions for further research, mainly outside the scope of this project. The research was far less focussed around sexualised content and activity, to ensure that these issues were not forced onto a group of young people who had not been exposed to it. What was clear, however, was that this was still a population that was very much engaged with online technology – all were online in some way and most used mobile technology. One of the main reasons for ownership of mobile technology was safety – parents wished to keep in touch with their children so had purchased a mobile device for them. However there were a number of young people who had started to develop their use of mobile technology and started using their devices (many of which were smartphones of some description) for communicating with friends, Internet access, etc. Equally, gaming played a very large part in a number of the young peoples’ lives, particularly boys. Almost all boys talked about how they used their gaming platforms (Xbox 360 and PS3 mainly) for playing in multiplayer environments.

At the time the focus groups were conducted, the game Call of Duty Black Ops 2 had just been released. The majority of boys either had this game or were anticipating getting the game at the weekend. This led to some discussion around acceptable age certifications in games. All knew that this was an 18-certificate game and should only be played by adults. Equally the boys had played other games with an 18-certificate and saw little problem with this (other than how they obtained the game, which was generally purchased by a parent). The boys did display a mature attitude toward game content, saying they knew it was make believe and didn’t feel it had an impact on them in their “offline” lives.

However, many said they did play in multiplayer settings for these games, mainly with friends but sometimes with people they did not know. While no-one raised issues of being approached by strangers they had met in the gaming environment, many said that they were regularly subjected to abuse in these games and this was part of playing. They had developed their own “coping strategies” for this sort of abuse, mainly just disconnecting the abusive player or withdrawing from the game themselves.

The issue of abuse also arose in social networking. Again, while all were below the allowed age for membership of Facebook, many had profiles on the website. Most did so because their friends were on it and the most said they had their support of their

parents in being on the site (although one said their mother had removed them after discovering they were on Facebook). All knew that they should be 13 before they should be members but none knew why this was the case. While the number of friends varied greatly, with most having less than 100 friends, one girl did have 340. We explored the concept of friends online and most could see a distinction between an online “friend” and a real one. However, the girl with 340 friends didn’t see anything wrong with this and said she knew them all. Although when explored further it became apparent that many were acquaintances rather than friends.

In terms of sexting and sexual content, it was evident that there was very little exposure to such. Only one boy mentioned pornography, saying an older friend had asked if he wanted to look at some, and he had said no. There was no mention whatsoever about sexting. When prompted to think about what sort of things there might be online that people might not want them to see, while some said there were “rude” things online, they had not seen them.

However, in all groups people mentioned contact by strangers and common online abuse, which was surprising. Strangers either approach them via mobile phone or social network. Thankfully, most young people showed sensible strategies when dealing with them and unlike year 9 pupils they were very clear to go to their parents or guardians if someone they don’t know has approached them. However, no-one said that a parent has ever contacted the police as a result of unsolicited communications, even in cases of persistent contact. Teachers were also viewed, on some occasions, as people to turn to in these situations too but, again, there would be specific teachers they would approach, as some “wouldn’t understand”.

Online abuse is something that seems to be dealt with at a peer level even at this age. Many of the attendees said that people had been mean to them online – normally “friends” who would pass nasty comments about how they looked or their behaviour. They would be dealt with by either “unfriending” the individual, ignoring the comments or moving the argument offline. Some would involve parents by talking to them about the abuse but most would resolve the issues among themselves. It was alarming, and concerning, that children as young as 10 or 11 are having to develop strategies for online abuse as a result of the communications they receive via social networks and other platforms.

In summary, while the number and size of the groups is not something from which we can generalise, we can report that while the primary aged children had very little contact with sexualised material, they did have rich and in some ways complex online lives and some of the more negative aspects of online behaviour are affecting them. While there was a great deal of resilience and coping from the focus groups, there was little evidence of education in relation to these issues, or consideration of the need to involve police in the event of persistent contact or abuse.

Summary

This research attempted to further explore the issues around sexting, the sort of practice that goes on and the implications of such. Furthermore it attempts to explore influences around sexting, and whether these influences are purely online, or a mix of factors. For secondary pupils in this research, it is clear that sexting is a very real part of

their lives and they trying to coping with it. Influences as wide a celebrity, media representations of body image and pornography all play a role in the attitudes of a population who have far greater access to highly sexualised content at an early age than ever before. However, while there is resilience what is also clear is that these young people do not get opportunity to talk or learn about these issues in the school environment, even though they welcome the chance to do so. One of the most positive things to emerge from this research is that all attendees valued the experience of the focus groups and felt that more should be done in schools.

Exposure to sexualised content, and engaging with self-generation, was not apparent in younger children. However, we still saw a population who have to deal with the complexity of relationships online and have developed approaches to coping with unsolicited contact and abuse. Equally it was very evident that these younger pupils all relished the opportunity to talk about their online lives and were very open about the problems they faced. However, they were also clear that they did not get chance to do this in the ordinary school day.

Clearly the online lives of young people in the connected age presents some novel challenges and, on the whole, they are learning how to deal with them at a peer level. While some of the results of this research might be shocking to an adult population who have not experienced technology to the degree these young people have, adults need to be aware and responsive to these issues in a non-judgemental and supportive manner. Young people upset or harmed as a result of these issues do not need to be told they should have done it; they need someone to turn to who will support them and work with them. Young people have made it clear they are willing to talk about their online lives and the challenges they face. However, unfortunately adults sometimes do not wish to listen.