



## Researchers call for decriminalization of consensual teen sexting

by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor

Several pediatric researchers are calling for states to stop prosecuting teens for consensual sexting, which some classify as a felony.

"Just like sex, sexting should be considered a health and development issue, not a legal issue," authors wrote in a new state-of-the-art review "Teenagers, Sexting and the Law," (Strasburger VC, et al. *Pediatrics*. April 15, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3183>).

As smartphones have become ubiquitous in the hands of teens, sexting - sending or receiving sexually explicit images or messages - also has increased.

Authors cited a 2018 meta-analysis of 39 studies that found 15% of teens had sent a sext and 27% had received one. Additional studies in Los Angeles and Utah found relatively similar rates, although 40.5% of males in the Utah group reported receiving a sext message.

Sexting often is a "modern form of flirting" between consenting teens, authors wrote. Still, in 23 states, it can be prosecuted under child pornography laws that carry a sentence of up to 20 years in prison.

Authors said there is not a "victim" to protect in these cases, and they would be better handled by parents, educators and pediatricians.

"In addition to the human desire of sexual curiosity, teen brains are not fully developed, making them susceptible to impulsive decisions and less consideration of consequences," they wrote. "Furthermore, younger teens may be unaware of the potential dangers of sexting."

They called for states to consider laws like that of New Mexico, which allows sexting if it is consensual, depicts someone ages 14-18 and is sent between teens.

"We argue that prosecutions should be limited to the more egregious and non-consensual acts where there is exploitation via further distribution, commercial or otherwise, or in which a third party might be involved outside of the adolescent relationship scenario that might be indicative of coercion or exploitation," they wrote.

They recommended pediatricians talk to patients about potential consequences of sexting and encourage parents to talk to their children about healthy relationships.

### Resource

- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on talking about sexting with children](#)