Teens, Sex and Technology

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy recently published a report entitled, "Sex and Tech." They report findings from a survey of teens (13-19) and young adults (20-26) regarding behaviors and perceptions related to sexual behaviors and technology. As with any data, one must be cautious about drawing definitive conclusions, however, it is certainly a topic of importance for anyone involved in work and/or personal relationships with young people.

Generally, the survey indicates that the sending of sexually suggestive content using technology is perceived as a fun/flirty activity that occurs primarily within girlfriend/boyfriend relationships. Adults are rightly concerned about the impact of these behaviors but will likely be surprised by the fact that most teens are equally aware of the dangers. Seventy-five percent of teens in the survey said sending sexually suggestive content "can have serious negative consequences." Unfortunately, like many other risky teen behaviors, even though they are aware of the potential consequences, it doesn't necessarily stop them. Thirty-nine percent have sent or posted sexually suggestive emails or text messages, and 20% have sent/posted nude or semi-nude images of themselves (p. 3).

Additionally, the most common words teens used to describe the activity of sending suggestive messages or nude/semi-nude pictures video were "flirty" and "dangerous"(p. 10). Immediately, this sends the clear message to adults that merely educating teens about negative consequences is not going to be enough.

In the survey, all respondents were asked whether a list of activities related to sex and technology was more common among "guys, girls or both the same." This was one of the items where a stark difference between females and males emerged. Regarding "sending sexy pictures/video of oneself to someone else," respondents perceived this behavior as "more common among guys" only 6% of the time but "more common among girls" 66% of the time (p. 8). For those of us who work with young women in the juvenile justice system, this item may be particularly alarming as the percentage is likely even higher among the young women we work with due to the greater rate of sexual abuse among this population. It is certainly unsettling that these behaviors are perceived to be more common among young women. The more complicated question is why, and there can be no simple answer. Responses to other questions in the survey do begin to give us an idea:

Of the ten possible reasons for teens sending/posting sexy messages or pictures/videos of themselves, the top few were much the same for both females and males -

* to get or keep the attention of someone of the opposite gender
* to get someone of the opposite sex to like them
* to be fun/flirtatious

Noteworthy, however, is that respondents perceived a significant disparity when it came to which gender was more likely to pressure the other into this behavior: Females pressuring males came in at 18% while males pressuring females was 47% (p. 9). Whether the pressure and prevalence of behaior was real, perceived or assumed based on cultural gender stereotypes, it is apparent that the population in this survey expects males to pressure girls to send sexually explicit messages/photos and that females will do so. Clearly, plenty of work remains to be done to break down harmful gender role expectations.

> "Thinking about suggestive messages or nude/semi-nude pictures/videos that you ever received, how did getting them make you feel?" (p. 13)
>
> Top three responses from teens:
>
> "surprised"
> "amused"
> "turned on"

On the upside, sending sexually suggestive materials via technology seems to be a phenomenon teens are conflicted about. The most common words they used to describe a person who sends suggestive messages or nude/semi-nude pictures/videos of themselves were "flirty," "slutty" and "desperate." Because the responses were lumped together, we cannot tell if there were differences in the responses based on either the gender of the respondent or the gender of the person they were labelling. As a result, we can only speculate that teens may be conflicted. If in fact this is the case, the inner conflict holds potential for adult progress in helping teens curb this behavior.

The strongest possibility for adults to get their foot in the door with this behavior is indicated in the survey through responses to the question posed about what concerns teens when they consider sending sexually suggestive materials. The top three responses were: "might regret it later," "potential embarrassment," and "could hurt my reputation" (p. 14). Given teens natural tendency to experience anxiety over what others think of them, this seems the most likely avenue for adults to tap into when discouraging this particular behavior. A simple reminder to a young woman of the regrets, embarrassment or damage to her reputation she will likely experience might be just enough for her to give pressing "send" a second thought.

"Sex and Tech". The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. 2009. www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech.

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Kathy Nesteby, Coordinator
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
1-800-558-4427 or (515) 281-6915
Kathy.Nesteby@iowa.gov
www.women.iowa.gov/girls

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women
Lucas State Office Building
Des Moines, IA 50319