



UPDATES FROM SCIP

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"SEXTING"

A Dangerous New Craze



An alarming number of teens are engaging in a disturbing new practice called "Sexting", the practice of sending nude photos of themselves in cell phone text messages. They are also taking shots of friends at parties doing certain things while under the influence of alcohol, and then circulating the pictures.

In one study conducted by the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children's Research Institute and the University of Washington, 500 randomly chosen teenager profiles on MySpace showed 54% contained high-risk behavior information, with 24% of those discussing and/or posting photos of a sexual nature.

Teens may view this as innocent adolescent behavior, however, some teens around the country are now being charged with child pornography, and more prosecutors are considering this option as well as other serious felonies. There are those that disagree, saying those charges should be saved for sex offenders, not teens who may have used poor judgment. Some are calling sexting a victimless crime; however, some photos are being forwarded to other teens or are being posted on the Internet as a way to bully, harass or humiliate other teens. This has led to a few cases of teens committing suicide because they couldn't handle the embarrassment and abuse. Additionally, sexting may leave teens exposed to online predators and unwanted solicitations.

The study also showed that teens with a sexual orientation other than "straight" displayed increased sexual references. The profiles of teens involved in sports, hobbies or religious involvement showed fewer displays of risky behavior.

So what can parents do? Parental engagement is key. Set ground rules and develop a contract for phone use. Don't be afraid to check your child's phone; make that one of the stipulations for them getting a phone. Install parental controls. Some companies have developed software and several cell phone networks are providing parental control services that parents can use to monitor activity and block or provide notification of X-rated messaging. Many of these also include other safety features such as no texting and driving, limits on when and where the phone can be used, blocking unwanted callers, and GPS locators. Following is a list of some of the options available:

- WebSafety is a software that can be purchased that includes a wide variety of safety features. It can be used for select phones on Sprint, T-Mobile, AT&T, and Verizon networks. It also provides applications for your computer.
- Kajeet is a pay-as-you-go cell phone service with a wide variety of safety features. You must purchase one of their many styles of phones, then choose a plan, which can be as little as \$4.99 per month. Service is provided on the Sprint Network.
- AT&T provides "Smart Limits" where parents can choose from a moderate amount of features to add customized controls for \$4.99 per month, per phone line.
- Alltel provides an application that allows parents to filter offensive sites.
- Verizon's content filter consists of 3 age appropriate ratings: 7+, 13+, and 17+.
- Sprint offers a phone you may purchase that includes the free parental control feature, as well as a GPS locator.

Not all options will work with certain phones or networks so you will need to check with your carrier to see which one fits your needs. It must be noted that blocking photos is more complex so it is recommended that parents set ground rules regarding cell phone use, and manually check their child's cell phone often.

(Sources: Lincoln Journal Star, 02-05-09; washingtonpost.com, 01-06-09; seattlechildrens.org, 01-05-09; websafety.com; kajeet.com; att.com; alltel.com; verizonwireless.com; sprint.com)

Teen Drivers Impaired By Fatigue

When parents think of their teens driving, one of their biggest concerns is alcohol. But, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, there is another factor that is just as dangerous when it comes to teenage driving: Fatigue. And, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, that can be deadly. "Legal-limit drunk, in terms of blood alcohol level, is equal to 17 hours of continuous wakefulness," says Dr. Jeffrey Durmer, Director of the Pediatric Sleep Medicine Department at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.



In other words, if you wake up at six a.m. and then get behind the wheel at 11 that night, you will, in effect, be as impaired as someone driving drunk. Experts say drowsiness is dangerous for all drivers, but especially for teens. "Their abilities are less than someone who's been driving for 20 or 30 years," explains Dr. Durmer, "so any small change can really throw off a newer or novice driver."

In fact, according to a study in the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, when high schools move their morning start time one hour, from 7:30 to 8:30, students not only got more sleep, they also had fewer car accidents.

(Source: connectwithkids.com; 01-14-09)



'Tween Stores Selling Flasks

A teen accessory store chain, Icing by Claire's, is selling "girl-friendly" flasks. The flasks, decorated with charms and designed to hold 5 ounces of liquor, are available for \$12.50. One-shot keychain flasks with room for the individual's initials are available for \$8.50 each.



The flasks show disclaimers that the product is not meant for minors, and warns the flasks are designed to carry alcoholic beverages and should not be used for beverages with acidic contents like fruit juices.

Advocates for preventing underage drinking are calling on the store to stop selling the flasks. They are concerned that it encourages underage drinking by selling them, while targeting its products to girls as young as 17.

Recent studies show that girls are drinking earlier and increasing their alcohol intake, as well as gravitating towards hard liquor in an effort to get drunk faster.

Icing by Claire's, a subsidiary of Claire's, Inc., has said it will continue selling the flasks at its 3,000 stores throughout the U.S. and Europe, but will post signs at store counters supporting "responsible" alcohol consumption.

Elizabeth Nelson, a community health specialist at the Lake County Illinois Health Department states, "Anything that promotes the perception that alcohol use is acceptable with young people is really disturbing."

(Source: jointogether.org; 01-27-09)

Teen Use of Sleeping Pills on the Rise

Whether it's an over-the-counter medication like Nyquil, or a prescription drug like Ambien or Sonata, more and more teens say they often take something to get to sleep.

Why do kids today need help getting to sleep? Experts say there are several answers: greater academic pressure; more late night stimulation with cell phones, TV, computer games, and instant messaging; more kids with ADHD taking stimulants like Ritalin; and an explosion in the use of caffeine drinks. The result: at bedtime, many kids are looking for help in a pill.

One teen says "It's mainly just stress...you want to study and then you realize you need to sleep because you have a test the next day and then you just take something."

As the lives of children get busier, sleep often gets sacrificed, when actually it is one of the most important things in a child's life. Experts say taking sleep medications unauthorized by the FDA for teenage consumption is not the answer.

A study at Stanford University found that teenagers require approximately one to two hours more sleep than 9 and 10-year olds, who only require about eight hours of sleep.



Psychiatrist Richard Winer, M.D., cautions that sleep aids can be habit forming. He says the solution for many kids is routine: relax for a while and then go to bed at the same time every night.

(Source: connectwithkids.com; 02-18-09)

Gay Teens Revealing Sexuality at an Earlier Age

Gay teenagers are "coming out" earlier than ever, and many feel better about themselves than earlier generations of gays, youth leaders and researchers say. The change is happening in the wake of opinion polls that show growing acceptance of gays, more supportive adults, and positive gay role models in popular media.

Still, many continue to have a tough time. The worst off, experts say, are young people in conservative rural regions and children whose parents cannot abide having gay offspring. One teen stated, "A lot of gay kids think there's something wrong with them for being gay. And it's hard whenever your parents think there's something wrong with you, too." Experts say finding out that your child is gay can be a difficult moment. They add, *think* before you react, because what you say will be remembered for years. Carolyn Wagner, National Vice President of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) believes when a teen comes out, the same expression of love and support is called for. She urges parents to separate their belief in their child from whatever religious beliefs may conflict with a child's sexual identity. "When our 13-year old son talked to us about being gay, my husband said, 'Son, I love you just the same, and you're the same son to me that you were five minutes ago.' It was very straightforward and simple. Our son jumped up, huge tears rolling down his face, and gave his father a big hug. It was only then that we learned he'd tried to commit suicide several times, and had been getting depressed. Talking really was a big relief."

Experts say to take things slow. You don't *have* to tell people until you are ready. It can be helpful to join a support group such as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. They also suggest reviewing literature designed for parents of a gay child.

(Sources: connectwithkids.com, 02-27-09; USATODAY.com, 02-07-08; familyeducation.com)