



**CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION**  
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**July 14, 2010 – The Dangers of Sexting**

Stacy Parks Miller is the Centre County District Attorney. This weekly column, published on Wednesdays, is a collaboration of Centre County *Communities That Care* serving Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley, and Philipsburg-Osceola Area School Districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region *Communities That Care* serving the State College Area School District.

According to recent surveys, 20 to 60 percent of teens are sexting. Most people are aware that the phrase “sexting” is a combination of the words “sex” and “texting” and refers to the sending or posting of pictures that are inappropriate, show nudity, or depict sex acts. Such pictures might be sent via cell phone, posted on Facebook or shared by any electronic means. What might surprise people is that under current Pennsylvania law, these actions are Felonies even if the sender is under 18 and the picture they send is of themselves. When the minor hits send, they have committed a Felony. When anyone receives such a picture of someone under 18, and that person sends it on, they have also broken law, along with all of the people who have received it. Teens charged in juvenile court could end up registered sex offenders and be dogged for life with a permanent felony record.

Teens report that they "sext" for a variety of reasons and tend to share such pictures when in relationships. The problem is that the moment the relationship ends, someone is in possession of a highly compromising image that can be easily posted on a social networking site or sent around via email or text and can survive on the internet forever. The news has recently reported on teen suicide as a ramification of humiliation from such an experience.

There is no question that minors sending and receiving “sext” messages could benefit from counseling they can receive in juvenile court. Whether they need to develop better decision making skills, the ability to foresee long term consequences or the assistance to see how the behavior exploits the subject in the photo (or themselves if it was self-posted), intervention is beneficial. What they do not deserve however, is a permanent Felony record. That consequence was intended for adults who exploit children via child pornography.

The Pennsylvania District Attorney’s Association is in the forefront of this issue, and we are seeking to implement an appropriate law to handle these cases. The goal is to find a way to provide services to juveniles without ruining their lives. The PDAA has recently sponsored legislation that would make the offense between minor peers a misdemeanor, eligible for diversionary programs with no permanent record. While we are actively pursuing a better response that fits the crime, one that will not haunt minors on college admissions, military service, and in future employment, I urge parents to know what is going on on-line and with their children’s texts messages, before they have to meet me or members of my office. I would rather see teens and young people realize the severe moral and social costs of their actions before they commit an act that will have long-term legal and social consequences. While I can offer assistance once cases come into Court, my office cannot erase the possibly permanent social stigma attached to a compromising digital footprint that could float around cyberspace forever.

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