Sexting
Gender and Teens
Judith Davidson
Sexting
Teaching Gender

Volume 3

Series Editor
Patricia Leavy
USA

Scope
Teaching Gender publishes monographs, anthologies and reference books that deal centrally with gender and/or sexuality. The books are intended to be used in undergraduate and graduate classes across the disciplines. The series aims to promote social justice with an emphasis on feminist, multicultural and critical perspectives.

Please email queries to the series editor at pleavy7@aol.com

International Editorial Board
Tony E. Adams, Northeastern Illinois University, USA
Paula Banerjee, University of Calcutta, India
Nitza Berkovitch, Ben Gurion University, Israel
Robin Boylorn, University of Alabama, USA
Máiréad Dunne, University of Sussex, UK
Mary Holmes, University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom
Laurel Richardson, Ohio State University, Emerita, USA
Sophie Tamas, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada
Sexting
Gender and Teens

Judith Davidson
University of Massachusetts, USA

SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM / BOSTON / TAIPEI
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1. Gender, Youth, and Intimacy through the Lens of Sexting ......................................................... 1

The Human Curriculum of Sexuality ......................................................................................... 2
Digital Technologies + Sex = Sexting ...................................................................................... 3
The Study Behind This Study: Or Where the Data Came From ............................................ 4
The Genesis and Development of This Book .............................................................................. 6
Why Gender? .......................................................................................................................... 6
Adolescence and Technology .................................................................................................. 8
The Media .............................................................................................................................. 10
Conclusions ............................................................................................................................. 11

Chapter 2. People, Places, and Processes .................................................................................. 13

People and Places .................................................................................................................... 13
Youth ...................................................................................................................................... 14
Parents ................................................................................................................................... 14
Other Adults ........................................................................................................................... 16
Processes ..................................................................................................................................... 17
Notes to the Reader ................................................................................................................. 19

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 21
Youth Voices ............................................................................................................................... 21

Chapter 3. Teen Girls and the Phenomenon of Sexting .............................................................. 23

How Girls Define Sexting ...................................................................................................... 23
Girls’ Understanding of the Motivations for Sexting ................................................................. 24
Romantic Relationships .......................................................................................................... 25
Peers: Social Status, Power, and Control ..................................................................................... 28
Sexuality ........................................................................................................................................ 31
Sexting: Moral Evaluations and Dangers ..................................................................................... 33
Layers of Shame: The Consequences of Sexting from Girls’ Perspectives ............................ 34
Who Will Guide Girls Through These Dangerous Waters? ....................................................... 36
Adults in the Family ...................................................................................................................... 36
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adults in School ................................................................. 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Media ............................................................ 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls’ Lives in These Changing Times ..................................... 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. Teen Boys and the Phenomenon of Sexting ................. 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexting and Boys: Diversity of Opinions and Practices .................. 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivations Propelling Boys to Sexting ...................................... 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ....................................................................................... 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers, Social Relations, and Power .......................................... 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic Relationships .......................................................... 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media as a Motivator for Sexting ............................................. 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences From a Boy’s Point of View .................................. 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, Class, and Sexuality: The Case of the Flip ..................... 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Will Guide Boys? ............................................................ 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents .................................................................................... 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Adults .......................................................................... 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys’ Lives in These Changing Times ....................................... 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION I: CONCLUSION .......................................................... 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparing the Views of Girls and Boys ..................................... 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION II: INTRODUCTION ...................................................... 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Voices ............................................................................ 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. Parenting Teens in These Digital Times ....................... 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender in the Context of Sexting: Parents’ Definitions and Beliefs of Teen Sexting Practices ........................................... 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contexts of Today’s Families and the Issues Impinging on Gender .... 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology .............................................................................. 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sexualized Nature of Society ............................................. 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Gendered Understandings of the Motivations for Teen Sexting .............................................................. 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romance and Intimacy .............................................................. 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers and Social Competition .................................................... 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex ....................................................................................... 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls: Have They Changed? ...................................................... 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen Sexting: Parental Views of the Gendered Consequences .......... 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Parents’ Perspectives: Who Will Guide Teens? ...................... 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion ............................................................................. 82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 6. Other Adults in Young People’s Lives ......................... 85
   Defining Sexting............................................................................ 85
   Making Sense of Sexting in Today’s Digital, Sexualized World ....... 86
   Motivations for Sexting and Their Gendered Implications .......... 88
      Romance .................................................................................. 88
      Peer Social Hierarchy—Power and Ranking............................... 89
      Sex, and Not Sex, As Motivations for Sexting ......................... 89
      Sexting as Accidental or Happenstance .................................... 81
      Blame the Technology............................................................... 92
   Gender and the Characteristics of Youth Who Would or Would Not Sext ........................................................................................................ 92
      Boys Who Would Sext ............................................................... 93
      Girls Who Would Sext ............................................................. 94
   Who Are the Youth Who Do Not Sext? ......................................... 95
   Who Will Guide Young People in Their Need for Information about Sexuality, Intimacy, and Gender? ........................................... 95
   Conclusions .................................................................................. 97

SECTION II: CONCLUSION ................................................................. 99
Comparing the Views of Adults ....................................................... 99

Chapter 7. Conclusions.................................................................. 103
   Findings ...................................................................................... 103
   Recommendations for Practice ................................................... 113
   Caveats and Considerations......................................................... 114
   The Last Words ........................................................................... 114
   References.................................................................................... 117

Index .............................................................................................. 123
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first thanks go to Andrew Harris, professor in the University of Massachusetts Lowell Department of Criminal Justice, who included me in the original study of teens and sexting that led to this work on gender. You have always been generous, insightful, humorous, and kind.

Thanks also to everyone who served on that research team: co-PIs Carl Paternite, Elizabeth Letourneau, and Karin Tusinski-Miofski; thanks also to those who were so helpful in the focus group work: Cricket Meeham, Amy Wilms, and Sarah Hales.

On the UMass Lowell side, we were very lucky to have many wonderful student helpers, including Maryann Ford, Lindsay Tucker, Rob Tanso, Deborah Paul, and Helen Ricci. A very special thanks to Shanna Thompson, who served as research assistant extraordinaire, working with all components of the project.

I also give thanks to the Center for Women and Work at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, from Meg Bond, Director, to all the great associates I have worked with, and students and staff who make CWW such a wonderful place at which to explore the intricacies of gender in today’s world. Sarah Kuhn, a special shout out to you for your continued encouragement.

Many UMass Lowell doctoral students have assisted through their work in my qualitative research class; your help was much appreciated.

In the background, encouraging me since my own doctoral school days, Bertram Bruce and Liora Bresler of the University of Illinois; thanks again!

It has been a pleasure to work with Patricia Leavy, Editor of the Teaching Gender series at Sense Publishers. Many thanks also to Lori Stone Handelman for her editorial assistance.

Bob, you know you get my thanks too for abiding with the ups and downs of my writing process—and thanks also to our extended families in Colorado and California. Thanks to Sarah (dog), Scooby and Leah (cats), for your affection and patience.
CHAPTER 1

GENDER, YOUTH, AND INTIMACY AS SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF SEXTING

This is a book about gender, youth, and the search for sexual intimacy, or what I would call the human curriculum of sexuality. It is concerned with the ways adolescents learn how to become sexual beings in today’s digital world. In particular, I seek to shed light on the ways society shapes adolescent lives and futures through gendered views, expectations, and social practices.

The data for this topic came from a study examining views of teen sexting from the perspective of teens (girls and boys), caregivers and parents, and other adults—educators, lawmakers, youth workers, etc. (Harris, Davidson, Letourneau, Paternite, & Miofsky, 2013). While sexting, meaning the sharing of sexually explicit messages via digital means, is everywhere in this work, at the same time I can say that sexting is merely instrumental, a means to an end. The end, in this case, is gender and the ways gender is a force in shaping teen lives in today’s digital era.

The goal of this work is to take you deep into the perspectives of these four audiences—teen girls, teen boys, caregivers and parents, and other adults who work with and for teens—as they talk about teen sexuality and today’s digital world through the lens of sexting. Listening to these parties debate the meaning of sexting, the motivations propelling teens to engage in sexting (or not), and the ways girls and boys are perceived when they engage in such behavior gives us access to a world of information about the ways gender is embedded in the human curriculum of sexuality during the adolescent years.

While this book is not about what to do about sexting—how to promote, restrict, curtail, legislate or discipline it—the study does reveal information about gaps, problems, perceptions and misperceptions in current social and institutional practices that suggest ways to better address the human curriculum of sexuality during adolescence, and to make sense of the way it shapes gender expectations and behavior, and thus, life paths. For this reason, a discussion of the human curriculum of sexuality, as I am calling it, may be a good starting point for this study.
CHAPTER 1

THE HUMAN CURRICULUM OF SEXUALITY

The primary focus of this book is gender and the ways youth navigate the human curriculum of sexuality. When I use the term ‘human curriculum of sexuality’ I am referring to all the ways youth, meaning young people primarily of high school age, have available to them to explore issues of sexuality and make decisions about their own sexual and gendered identity and the directions it will take them. These explorations can come in the form of parental conversations, talks with peers, input from media figures, and formal education. This curriculum is carried out in all aspects of their lives as they learn to understand their sexuality, navigate sexual encounters, and gain experience about the meaning of relationships. It happens in school and out of school, at the mall, in the park, and at parties with friends. It happens at sports events, family outings, and shopping for clothing. Youth are learning and being taught about matters of gender and sexuality through a curriculum that is part personal narrative, part peer social engagement, part adult interaction, and in today’s world, part digital culture.

Three critical components of the human curriculum of sexuality are gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships. The first two terms, gender and sexuality, require special clarification. After reviewing definitions from several sources, the Wikipedia descriptions of these terms work best for my discussion as they are specific and yet nuanced compared to many I have read.

**Gender** is the range of physical, biological, mental and behavioral characteristics pertaining to, and differentiating between, masculinity and femininity. Depending on the context, the term may refer to biological sex (i.e., the state of being male, female or intersex), sex-based social structures (including gender roles and other social roles), or gender identity (“Gender,” n.d.).

**Human sexuality** is the capacity to have erotic experiences and responses. A person’s sexual orientation may influence their sexual interest and attraction for another person. Sexuality can have biological, physical, emotional, or spiritual aspects. The biological and physical aspects of sexuality largely concern the reproductive functions of the sexes (including the human sexual response cycle), and the basic biological drive that exists in all species. Physical, as well as emotional, aspects of sexuality also include the bond that exists between individuals, and is expressed through profound feelings or physical manifestations of emotions of love, trust, and caring.
Spiritual aspects of sexuality concern an individual’s spiritual connection with others. Sexuality additionally impacts and is impacted by cultural, political, legal, and philosophical aspects of life. It can refer to issues of morality, ethics and theology, or religion ("Human Sexuality," n.d.).

As young people approach these three areas in their lives, the following questions emerge for them:

– Gender
   What kind of gendered person am I? How do I fit myself within gendered structures? What opportunities or challenges will my gendered identity contain? How will I perform my gender? Will my gender work for me or against me?

– Sexuality
   How is sexuality part of my gendered being? How do I express my sexuality? What’s appropriate where and when? Whose advice should I listen to about the issues of sexuality?

– Relationships
   How can I be intimate with someone? How do you start getting close to someone? How do you flirt? When do you know if it is safe to trust? What should I believe? What is sex all about? Should I have sex with this person or that?

With the advent of the Internet and other digital media, youth explorations of gender, sexuality, and intimate relationships have necessarily included technology and the recent phenomenon called sexting.

**DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES + SEX = SEXTING**

Sexting is a phenomenon of our new digital technologies. It is a term coined to explain the ways human beings have found to use these new tools to explore and express sexuality.

As with the terms gender and human sexuality, I am also using the definition of sexting provided by Wikipedia:

**Sexting** is the act of sending sexually explicit messages, primarily between mobile phones. The term was first popularized in the early 21st century, and is a portmanteau of sex and texting, where the latter is meant in the wide sense of sending a text possibly with images. In August 2012, the word sexting was listed for the first time in Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary ("Sexting," n.d.).