

Don't Wait To Discuss Sexting With Your Child Or Teen

(NAPSA)—Digital technology connects children in a way that no previous generation has experienced, with social media sites such as Facebook and MySpace surpassing e-mail as the preferred method of communication.

Although kids today may be more digitally savvy than their parents, their lack of maturity and life experience can land them in hot water for abusing these new social tools. For this reason, parents should help children navigate this online social landscape.

It's important that children and teens learn about the dangers lurking in the digital world. Online bullying can be vicious and easy since it all takes place behind a keyboard. Children and parents have been charged with crimes for spreading rumors or publishing personal information about others online.

Another way trouble can arise is through "sexting." Sexting is sending a text message, via cell phone, that contains inappropriate photographs—or links to photos—of people naked or engaged in sex acts. According to a recent survey, about 20 percent of teen boys and girls have sent such messages. Texts like these can be emotionally devastating and have serious legal implications for senders and receivers. Parents should discuss the consequences of sexting as soon as a child has a cell phone. Here are some tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics on how to start these conversations:

- Talk to your kids, even if the issue hasn't directly affected your community. "Have you heard of sexting? Tell me what you think it is." First learn what your child knows about the issue and then add to it an age-appropriate explanation.

- Use examples appropriate for your child's age. Alert younger



As soon as children are old enough to have a cell phone, parents should explain the serious consequences of sexting.

children with cell phones that text messages should never contain pictures of naked people.

- Make sure kids of all ages understand that sexting is serious and considered a crime in many jurisdictions when minors are involved. Possible consequences include police involvement, suspension from school, and notes on the sexter's permanent record that could hurt the child's chances of getting into college or getting a job.

- Impress upon children the emotional effects this dangerous game can have on others.

- Peer pressure can play a major role in the sending of texts. Parties can be a contributing factor, so collect cell phones at social gatherings to reduce this temptation.

- Monitor media headlines for articles about sexting that illustrate the very real dangers for both senders and receivers of offensive images. Ask children questions such as "Have you seen this story? What did you think about it?"

- Encourage school and town assemblies to educate parents, teachers and students.

For tips and more information about social media safety, talk with your pediatrician or visit www.aap.org.