

## OPP warn of danger of 'sexting'?

Once it's out there, you can't get it back. That's the message the OPP is putting out to teens across the province.

A mistaken belief that their texted messages and images shared among peers will remain private and secure puts them in real danger of becoming victims of their own words and actions.

Teens frequently engage in relationships with peers through the use of their mobile devices and computers that lead to 'self-peer exploitation' (also known as sexting). As a result of misbelieving that they can remain anonymous, they often also engage in this type of behaviour with individuals whom they don't know but have only ever met online. Teens need to become aware that this kind of risky activity has very real dangers associated with it that includes many unintended consequences and permanent long term threats to their identity and their reputations.

Every day, thousands of teens are photographing and video taping themselves in suggestive and compromising photos and sending the images through electronic devices to their peers. Quite often, this type of conduct can quickly become a dangerous game as those images never stay with the one intended to receive it. Instead they are frequently mindlessly passed along by the recipient to friends, who pass it on to other friends who continue this cycle of distribution while some post them to social networking sites, and download them onto the internet.

The resulting shame and embarrassment that is experienced by the teen that is now a victim of their own actions as a result of their realization of what has occurred can have very tragic results. Officers are increasingly seeing more teens that are unable to cope with the self-inflicted personal shame and embarrassment that they have unknowingly created from what they had previously believed to be 'harmless fun'.

There is also a real criminal risk for those individuals who receive these images and re-distributes them. Often unknowingly, by sending the images to others and posting them, these individuals are engaging in the distribution of child pornography and could face the Criminal charges. Parents, guardians and educators need to learn more about this serious social issue. They should recognize the significance of this problem, discuss it with their teens and monitor their social media activities.

Reminding teens about the short and long term consequences of their social media behaviours will have a positive impact on this public safety risk. Inspector Scott Naylor, Manager of the OPP Child Sexual Exploitation Unit says, 'Self-peer exploitation has become a big social issue that no one has been adequately prepared to manage. Those with a vested interest in the protection of children need to get involved and learn how to protect them from permanently damaging their lives. Understand what self-peer exploitation is, and find out what to do about it. There are ways to intervene.'