Jessica made a mistake. She sent her boyfriend a nude photo of herself using her cell phone. Without her consent, her boyfriend sent the message to other students in their school. An incident like this can be hurtful to the student in the photo. It can make it hard for them to concentrate on schoolwork, and will be a constant reminder of a bad decision.

Sending sexually explicit pictures using a cell phone is sometimes called “sexting.” A recent survey showed that one third of teens in the U.S. had sent this kind of inappropriate picture.

It is not just teens that engage in this kind of risky behavior. Anthony Weiner, a popular seventh-term Congressman from New York, sexted a number of women. When the photos were disseminated widely, he was forced to resign from Congress and publicly apologize to his wife.

Sexting can have legal consequences. Depending on the ages of the senders and receivers, they can be charged with disseminating child pornography. In one case, six middle school students on Cape Cod in Massachusetts faced charges for disseminating a photo showing a semi-nude schoolmate. Their parents argued that such charges would be extreme. They said that what began as a teenage mistake should not end up as a criminal charge on their sons’ permanent records.

Who is accountable for sexting? Should students involved in sexting be charged as criminals, or should their acts simply be seen as teenage mistakes?
USE THE FOCUS WORDS

accountable (adjective) responsible for something; obliged to explain one’s actions

Sample Sentence: Some say that the parents of these students should be held accountable for their children’s text messages.

Turn and Talk: At what age are children old enough that their parents should not be accountable for their misbehavior?

inappropriate (adjective) not proper or suitable for the situation

Sample Sentence: A survey showed that one third of teens in the U.S. had sent inappropriate pictures.

Turn and Talk: Do you think texting while talking to someone else is inappropriate?

constant (adjective) not changing; continuous; happening all the time

Sample Sentence: The humiliation was constant. Students called her names day after day.

Turn and Talk: How might constant humiliation affect a person?

disseminate (verb) to scatter, spread, or broadcast

Sample Sentence: The media disseminates information about the latest national disasters, like hurricanes and tornados.

Turn and Talk: In your opinion, who should be in charge of disseminating information to you about drugs and alcohol: a teacher in school or your parents? Why?

legal (adjective) having to do with the law; allowed by law

Sample Sentence: In some states, texting while driving can have legal consequences.

Turn and Talk: Should drivers caught texting while driving face legal consequences? Why or why not?
According to a recent poll, three in 10 young people have sexted nude or partially nude photos of themselves. In several high-profile cases around the country, prosecutors have worked to hold students legally accountable for forwarding inappropriate photos. A 14-year-old in Washington suffered constant harassment when her explicit photo went viral. She had sent the photo to her boyfriend, and when they broke up, he sent it to one female friend. This friend forwarded it to her entire contacts list, along with a message calling the student in the picture a terrible name. After police got involved, three students were charged with disseminating child pornography.

Option 1: Fourteen percent of male students and 9% of female students report having seen a sext that has been passed around. Which of the following is true?

A. about 1 in 10 students has seen a sext that has been passed around
B. about 1 in 5 students has seen a sext that has been passed around
C. about 1 in 20 students has seen a sext that has been passed around
D. about 1 in 25 students has seen a sext that has been passed around

Option 2: Twenty percent of young people say that a friend has forwarded a text or email without permission. In one case, a student made a mistake and sent an inappropriate photo to his girlfriend at noon. By 1 p.m. she had shared it with two friends (two more people, for a total of three). By 2 p.m. each of those friends had shared it with two other friends (four more people, for a total of seven). If things continue at this rate, by what time will their entire class of 100 students have seen the picture? (Hint: Try making a table!)

Discussion Question: Many students have constant access to cell phones and the internet, and some inappropriate use is inevitable. But when a photo is disseminated that humiliates a student, what is the appropriate response? In the case of the 14-year-old in Washington, prosecutors decided that three students were most responsible for spreading the picture, and held them legally accountable. But when hundreds of students have seen a photo, and many of them have forwarded it, is it fair to single out only a few? Some parents complained that the original sender should be held accountable, because she sent the photo to her boyfriend in the first place. What do you think?
Ms. Kahn has been noticing lots of news stories about “sexting.” Some stories say that parents aren’t holding their children accountable for actions that are inappropriate for their age. Some talk about legal consequences. In all of the stories, the fact that 20% of teens are sexting remains constant.

“Says who?” Ms. Kahn thinks. “This statistic is widely disseminated. But where did it come from?”

Ms. Kahn does some research and discovers that the “20% of teens” statistic is based on a single study. And worse yet, other researchers have been saying that the study was wrong. Ms. Kahn decides to find out for herself if her own students are sexting. She knows that this is a sensitive topic, so she has to think carefully about the most appropriate way to collect the data. She has to consider that her students might not answer truthfully if they feel they will be identified.

Come up with a step-by-step procedure that you could recommend to Ms. Kahn to collect her data.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Compare your method with another student’s. Whose do you think would be most accurate? Most convenient? Most confidential?
DEBATE THE ISSUE
Think back to the scenario presented at the beginning of this unit, where Jessica’s boyfriend distributed a nude photo of her without her permission. Considering what you have learned about sexting, what should be done?

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A

☐ The students who disseminated Jessica’s photo should be held legally accountable.

OR

B

☐ Jessica is the only person accountable. She sent the photo first.

OR

C

☐ No one should be held legally accountable for disseminating the photo.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN

☐ 

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

___________________________________________________

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

“Can you show me evidence in the text that...”

“I believe that...”

“You make a good point, but have you considered...”

“I agree with you, but...”
TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

accountable | disseminate | constant | inappropriate | legal

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