

Episode 67 - Dr. Poco Kernsmith and Dr. Roger Kernsmith: I <3 U Send Pix: Addressing Youth Sexting

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed the living proof podcast as evidenced by the more than 130000 downloads today. Thanks to all of you we'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcasts in your classrooms. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. Sexting is a port Mantu other words sex and texting. It's an issue that seems to be on everybody's lips. Excuse me. I mean mobile devices. It's been featured on popular television shows such as Chuck Glee and law and order SVU it's been an issue of controversy for celebrities sports stars and even politicians. It's even been the focus of schools get tough efforts and legislative activity. There's even an app for it. But what is sexting. How prevalent is it and is it really a problem.

[00:02:03] Today's Living Proof guests take on these questions and present a balanced approach to practice and policy interventions related to youth sexting. Dr. Poco Kernsmith is an associate professor at Wayne State University's School of Social Work. And Dr. Roger Kernsmith is a full professor at Eastern Michigan University in criminology and sociology. They're collaborative research has focused on the gendered context of intimate violence including intimate partner violence stalking and sexual coercion. The pair have also been involved in advocacy and research related to sex offender management policy. Nicole Fava doctoral student at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work spoke with doctors Poco Kernsmith and Roger Kernsmith by telephone. Please note that this episode contains some background distortion that is due to technical problems we experience while recording. Thanks for listening and enjoy the podcast I'm Nicole Fava a doctoral student at the University of Buffalo and I'm here today speaking with Dr. Poco Kernsmith from Wayne State University and Dr. Roger Kernsmith from southeastern Michigan University to discuss sexting. Thank you so much for joining us. It's a pleasure. Thank you. So to start us off Poco I wondering if you could just explain what sexting is. Yes sexting is kind of a general term used to refer to sexual communication that happens either with cell phones or over the Internet. So that can include sexually explicit messages sending and receiving of sexually explicit nude or seminude photos that can happen either over cell phones and through e-mail through social networking site or any other avenues that are using primarily technological mediums in terms of the evolution of sexting I wonder. And this is something that you view as a friend or something that's sort of a false for us.

[00:04:07] One of the things that we've kind of come to as we started to research is issues that things don't change a lot. And adolescent sexuality isn't that much different. I mean if there are new avenues everyone has cell phones around and Facebook accounts but more things are doing the same things. And we're just sort of seeing them kind of pop out in new ways. So I wouldn't say I would describe it as evolution. I think it's adaptation to new contexts and cultural norms really haven't just caught up with those yet. And I think I would add that essentially the behavior is the same. It's just the medium for doing it is different which then leads to greater potential in the past. If you know you took a picture of yourself with a Polaroid and handed it to somebody you know they'd have to take that to a copy machine to distribute it. At this point you send it over to your cell phone that can instantly be distributed across the Internet and over cell phones much more easily

than in the past. And that's sort of what I was thinking about you know is this really new behavior for adolescents for these sort of doing the same thing. It's sort of coincidental. Yesterday following some links that a personal interest and wound up at looking at a website where they had posted graffiti that they had found in Pompei. So these were you know ancient Romans writing the charcoal on the walls of pubs and things like that. There things like you know I screwed two barmaids to this literally using the words and this person's a blank or you know I'm writing this thing to socially embarrass you.

[00:05:39] So you know I really don't think I'm in the universe of human behavior. Things have changed very much since a medium and how prevalent does sexting seem to be among teens. There's not a lot of empirical research that's available that actually can quantify that specifically. The estimates range from as high as you know about half of all adolescents are doing it and some extremes down to maybe 4 percent of adolescents who are actually sending these kinds of text messages or sharing this kind of information. So it's hard to know that exactly but it seems that the most reliable evidence shows that it's closer to maybe 15 percent of youth that are engaging in these behaviors. And I was wondering if you could talk about your recent projects regarding public opinion towards sanctions for teens sexting a little bit. The recent survey that we did was a telephone survey that was done across the state of Michigan which asked adults about their opinions about sexting behaviors and what they felt would be appropriate consequences for sexting behavior. So for each individual who participated in the study they were randomly assigned to a hypothetical relationship where it was either a male and a female. Two females two males who are engaging in a variety of behavior. So that included sending nude photos receiving nude photos or sharing that nude photo that they had received onto other people. And what we wanted to look at was what was the difference in their support for consequences depending on the type of behavior the age of the people that were involved and also whether it was a same sex relationship or a male and a female who are involved.

[00:07:17] So what we found out we looked at the consequences was that the majority of the adults did support some type of consequence for this behavior. The most common word that they supported either prison or probation as the most appropriate sanction followed by mandatory sex offender counseling there are very few who said they should get counseling or there should be a personal protection order or something like that put in place. But about a quarter of them are suggesting that probation or prison was the most appropriate. We also were primarily interested in the sex offender registry and whether or not they felt that these individuals should be placed on the sex offender registry. And we found that that was actually quite low only about 8 percent supported sex offender registration though when we looked at the specific types of behaviors there was quite a bit of difference. They were most in support some putting someone on the registry or sharing a photo that they had received from someone else for distributing a photo of another person. And that was actually 44 percent who supported that receiving the photo was of course the lowest because they were not an actor in that behavior. They weren't the ones who had actually done anything they just got that sent to them. In addition as there was a wider age gap between the two people who were involved in this hypothetical relationship they were more likely to support registration. So it was a 22 year old with a 15 year old. About half supported registration for the 22 year old.

[00:08:38] We also found that they were more likely to support registration if it was two males in the relationship than if it was two women or if it was a heterosexual relationship and also asking about male behavior they're more likely to support registration of males than of females. And I think to provide also just some context. So it sort of recently what's been happening is teens who have been sort of found to be engaging in sexting have really come in some harsh consequences under child pornography laws. Correct. Yes. In fact even in our results they receive the lowest level of support. There is still considerable approval for either registering or other kinds of consequences for even receiving a photo or initiating sending the photos. We've had some popular press cases that

have entered the popular press where a 14 year old girl takes a photo of herself sends it to her boyfriend or somebody else and then that photo is distributed over a wide network and prosecutors face a real problem with deciding what part of child pornography laws to apply in. Kind of coming back to what I'm saying before you know we're in this lag where we've got this new technology and all these new buildings but in fairly similar kinds of behavior that we've had you know historically forever. But yet these new abilities to be able to distribute it instantly with perfect copies and you know digitally send things across the globe instantly. And our rules haven't kept up with them. So prosecutors are faced with sometimes having a responsibility to apply the law as it's written the laws that apply are these pornography laws which are designed to protect you. Not prosecute you. Yet there are the only statutes that apply to this behavior.

[00:10:21] In fact by their definition do. And so sometimes the sender of the photo is looking at being charged with distributing child pornography. And it certainly is the intent of the law. And anecdotally we've been talking with prosecutors from counties around our area and they're feeling perplexed about what do we do with these cases. How do we handle these cases. Is it appropriate to charge a 14 year old girl with distributing child pornography if she sends a picture of herself. That's not really the intent of the law but yet there needs to be some consequence and they do come before these prosecutors. So that's part of our next plan for our research is to do some more in-depth interviews with prosecutors and judges to find out how are they actually handling these cases how frequently are they seeing them and what they think is appropriate in these cases. And so one of my next questions is going to be sort of what do you see as a practice and policy implications of this research that you either have or in the future. I think the goal would be to try and find a more balanced and nuanced approach to handling these cases. Clearly there are cases where a young adolescent will send a picture of themselves to someone else that person then distribute that to someone else and there can be really devastating effects. So we don't want to say that all the sexting is benign and not a problem because it can be harmful when somebody loses control of that image.

[00:11:44] In addition there are cases of older adult people who are grooming and pressuring kids to send pictures and doing things that are inappropriate in that way and in those cases we feel like that is a place where legal intervention makes sense. But for the cases of you know to kids who are doing this together there's no pressure there's no coercion and then maybe the legal intervention isn't the most appropriate. But some education and some other types of intervention may be more appropriate. There of course the devil is in the details there and developing hand in hand with best practices and policy responses are the statutory limitations and you have state to state legislators and courts involved in deciding what happens here and sometimes their hands are tied by the language of the corresponding statutes. So it seems very apparent that peci tort reform or adjustment at least going to have to happen child pornography laws may need to be slightly limited or new statutes that would apply to youth involved in these sort of consensual behaviors may have to be developed to supersede the child pornography laws in order to allow prosecutors and the police and school officials to know that all the folks involved. But to give them the leeway to make decisions about whether or not there is coercion or what's and sometimes called sextortion where you can send a photo and then somebody uses that against you in terms of threatening to humiliate you into doing things you don't want to do in terms of the practice implications.

[00:13:18] One of our next goals for our research that we're just beginning is to go into schools and to do some in-depth interviews and focus groups with youth parents and teachers to find out more about ideology and sexting to see in what circumstances have happened and how prevalent is that under what conditions what is the context in which it occurs. Because we want to have a better understanding of what is the relationship if any between sexting and teen dating violence. Of course we believe you know there are youth that are being coerced or in the context of an abusive relationship being pressured into engaging in these behaviors but also to understand what might be the connections with bullying or their peers that are pressuring someone or using those kinds of

images or messages to try and harm another person or embarrass another person or is it just you know playful flirtation and to really understand all the nuances behind that behavior. So then we can help to develop prevention programs and other kinds of interventions to help to work with the schools the parents and the youth to find what is the best way to prevent and educate youth about appropriate use of technology in ways that they can then make more informed decisions. Right. I think that's really important. This has sort of become easier in adolescence. Consider almost normative as part of their relationships but also one that has harmful consequences not only legally but maybe for you know their own personal development. They might not even be aware as it seems to hear from them. The really important way to understand where our shared experience with talking with practitioners and when presenting it that's for instance is a generational gap and an older adult a substitute for this as well. But I think we really don't understand the way in which the uses of technology are experienced by today's youth to you know to look at it and bracket's something as oh this is sexting we need to do something about it.

[00:15:13] It may be that you know this is just the same as talking on the telephone for earlier generations or going to the movies or you know where new technology changes the way things go down or you know the presence of an automobile in a teen relationship for instance. So you know one of our goals is really to see how this is really perceived and used in new lives and what the opinions are before sort of jumping to you know making big practice or intervention or prevention claims. It may very well be that these things are really part of just a bigger global category of dating violence or coercion and maybe these are all addressed in the same kind of way. And you talk about them and address them in the same kinds of ways as adults is now 30 40. You know we look at technology as being a part of life you know sort of a segment of life. And for an adolescent. Technology is inextricably linked. You can't pull out technology as a part of their life. It's sort of everywhere within their life. And so to sort of say this is somehow different from their other dating behaviors or their other courtship behaviors. It's really kind of missing the point that to them this isn't new technology. This has always been there. It's just life. One of the things that's been striking me recently too is we talk about sexting and we will think about cell phones and cameras and stuff like that. But this is also as you mentioned earlier inextricably linked to Facebook as well as social networking.

[00:16:38] And so be the convergence of a laptop an iPad a cell phone and iPod Touch You know all of those things together in some ways defied categorization. And then you know integrating that all of those things back into your just your day to day social life. Also you may suggest that these are just part of a bigger phenomenon. Part of that generational gap is also that as parents we don't necessarily know these technologies as well as our kids do. And so being able to monitor these behaviors or even understand what the possibilities of these behaviors are is difficult for many many parents and so that's part of why we're hoping to bring the parents in and get the parents involved because parental supervision is such an important part of keeping these behaviors from getting out of control and becoming problematic and knowing how to identify youth who might be doing something that's not appropriate or getting close to that line of behaviors that are not appropriate. I was just wondering if there was something as social workers that we should be either concerned about or thinking about in terms of being able to support adolescents around this behavioral choice to engage sexting. There's I mean there's a couple sides of one part of that is just not to panic not to overreact to these behaviors because they're new in their porn and they're different. And to think that all kids must be doing it and all kids who are doing this are going to end up in trouble and it's going to lead to these difficult consequences so thinking about not overreacting behaviors but to take a balanced perspective on what's happening and to try and understand it.

[00:18:15] I mean of course I'm not saying that I would want my own 12 year old children to be doing this. Clearly I would not. But as social workers to try and avoid that urge to really sort of

panic and freak out about it and instead try to talk to youth on their level about what's involved what they're doing why they're doing it in order to try and get some of those contextual factors and to understand you know where is there the potential for abuse. where is their extortion. Where is their coercion. And to teach you how to be savvy about how they use the Internet and aware of the potential risks that may be involved if they can lose control of an image or lose control of a message the ways that that can be so easily distributed to those to the whole world. So in some way it's to be realistic about the consequences while also not overreacting too much. I trained as a sociologist have practiced or studied as a social worker and one of the concepts that is a classic in the field is this idea of moral panic and that's not to say that you know these aren't important issues in fact they're very much important. But there is a tendency with new things and actually we came across this great quote that one time the technology is anything that was invented after you were born. Then I think it applies in many ways here because we tend to be rare and we tend to be you know concerned and threatened by the things that we're not familiar with.

[00:19:40] And there is a potential here to overreact and that's of the definitions of a moral panic is when the when the social reactions are not in scale with the real threats of the phenomena or whatever that is. And so in this case seems horrible. Some of the data that we were discussing earlier about the prevalence these numbers vary widely and they vary greatly depending on the definition of sexting the population the method of data collection where we've seen numbers we're saying that 20 percent of teens have distributed a picture a nude or seminude picture of themselves. That's extraordinary. Other research suggests that there probably isn't the scale but it can be really scary and as Douglas would say don't panic. But on the other side of it I think you know just to give you a servant. The other point of view is that it's not necessarily totally benign. And I mentioned before you know we don't we're not advocating that this is OK healthy behavior. And instead I would say I think that prevention probably needs to start as early as elementary school and when kids are having cell phones when they're you know in fourth grade third grade and teaching them that anything that they do online or on their cell phones is not private that you can't expect that you do something and nobody else will see it. Even if your parents have locked down your security settings on your facebook that doesn't mean that it's private and that anything that they do online they can't take back again. So once you put it out there you can't control who see that. Be it where it happens next. So then instead to the skill building around not giving into pressure around considering the reaction that other people might have.

[00:21:19] And the other possibilities of what someone might do or think about what you put out there and just remember that nothing is really anonymous. I think if we start about skill building early and continue that they grow up and become more savvy with the technology that we give us the skills and the ability to really behave responsibly and make appropriate decisions. And I think many of those things you know you just listed are applicable skills and are important strategies for a variety of challenges you face with regard to dating violence and sexual coercion talking and harassment bullying. You know they're all part of the same spectrum of raising your kids to be counseling your kids your clients to be to be strong to make good decisions for themselves to have good esteem about themselves and think about the consequences of the things that they're going to do. Once again that may be part of a larger strategy to help protect kids from a variety of threats and challenges that they face. It seems to me to you that that would overlap also sort of with the way that we think about sort of sexualization of youth and in particular girls especially in our society in the United States in terms of messages that they may be receiving from society or the media. You know what's respect then to decisions they need to keep themselves safe able to follow a healthy trajectory. Absolutely. Absolutely. And those things all support one another. I think in some ways well the media reaction to some of this may actually be encouraging some girls to participate in this kind of behavior.

[00:22:56] If we put it out there in the media that all of the youth are doing it and everybody is

putting these nude photos of themselves up on Facebook then you know a girl or a boy who's feeling insecure or feeling pressure around what are the appropriate behaviors is going to get that message while everybody else is doing it. I probably should put a picture of myself up there as well and so then you add in the person they're flirting with that they want to entice or who may be saying yes sure send me the picture. I'd love to see it if they feel like everyone else is doing it if they're hearing the message that everybody else is doing and they may be more likely to do it. So we may be doing a disservice by overreacting or giving the message that all youth are participating in this activity. If we can reframe it as this may not be as big of a problem with we originally thought then we may actually give those youth permission to make that decision not to participate in these kinds of behaviors. I recently had the experience of mentioning in passing some of my research in my classes with undergraduate students it's interesting the reaction to a person has been Oh it broke Farve who of course got a lot of trouble for sending photos of himself. And I think those kinds of examples can serve as cautionary tales to users as well. You know seeing the consequences and sort of taking the luster off of some of these behaviors. Is there anything else that you were hoping to share with her.

[00:24:21] I guess going back to what I had said about parental supervision and the importance of parental supervision because his parents may not always be as savvy with these technologies and have as much understanding as their adolescents do about how this technology works. I think it's important for parents to try to educate themselves about how the technologies work and what are the possibilities and to try and supervise that online activity and be aware of what their children or their youth are involved in including for just being the one who pays the cell phone bill if you can keep an eye on how many sexts are going in and out how many texts going in and out you know are they happening in the middle of a night or during the day and being aware of what's happening to the act of seeing the cell phone bills can be helpful in monitoring what's going on on the Internet what sites are they going to what are they seeing frequently and just having open communication with their children about what they think is OK and what they think is appropriate behavior and the potential consequences. If you decide to get involved in something that's you know potentially dangerous or important judgment think we've said this but I'm not sure how directly but my sense in my approach to parenting on this is at a personal level is the more they know about the potential consequences which in the current context are great you know a charge let alone a conviction of child pornography or distributing drugs or coffee is really really really a big deal and then I have trouble emphasizing that too are children. But yet you know it is this incredibly serious event of his life.

[00:25:56] And you know it's potentially it's been the sex offender registry and all the consequences that goes along with that let alone the Fine's prison you know of course to the really really extraordinary. So you know I think not soft selling the consequences would be a good parenting strategy as well. And speaking to their own pride and their own sense of self around do you really want everyone in your school to see that picture that you're thinking of sending or do you want everybody in your school to know what you've done because you don't know what will happen to that message after you send them. And I think that also speaks to you as well. The idea of sex offender registration or prison seems unlikely and far away sometime. Those other things about reputation and embarrassment can also speak volumes. Yeah and a serious understanding of the loss of control of anything you put on the Internet whether or not it's a Facebook status post or a picture you post or send out or an e-mail message or send you know once it's sent once it's posted you have lost all control that it's not just even if your friends openly copy the message but are in the picture but it's cached and search engines and perhaps copy by friends of friends of friends and sort of made it very clear the loss of control I think is a major strategy as well. I thank you both so much for talking with me this afternoon. Alex are you reading and hearing about future steps you're painting with this research. I think it's really important for us and also families. Schwartz says their best service deal with sexting. Well thank you very much. It's a great opportunity. Thank you.

[00:27:34] You've been listening to the collaborative research team of Dr. Poco Kernsmith and Dr. Roger Kernsmith discussed the problem of youth sexting and practice and policy responses. Thanks for listening. And join us again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor indeed at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are livingproof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.