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## School Counsellors' Perceptions of Student Sexting Behaviour

### Perceptions des conseiller·ère·s scolaires par rapport aux comportements de sextage chez les étudiant·e·s

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#### ABSTRACT

Sexting is a relatively recent phenomenon that involves sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit digital messages (Pew Research Center, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2015). Research has demonstrated that sexting behaviour is occurring among youth and that this behaviour affects schools and school professionals (Barrense-Dias et al., 2022; Dodaj & Sesar, 2023; Lemke & Rogers, 2020; Parti et al., 2022). The present study was designed to explore school counsellors' perceptions on their experiences with student sexting. A qualitative study was utilized, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five participants. The results were organized into three major themes: prevention and preparation; school counsellors' roles, responsibilities, and introspection; and school counsellors' perspectives on specific aspects of student sexting. The position of school counsellors is highly advantageous in providing student support. Further research is necessary to confirm effective sexting prevention and intervention strategies for students and to establish proper training for school counsellors, school staff, and parents.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Le sextage est un phénomène relativement récent qui implique d'envoyer, de recevoir, ou de transmettre des messages numériques sexuellement explicites (Pew Research Center, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2015). La recherche a démontré que le comportement du sextage survient au sein des jeunes et que ce comportement affecte les écoles et les professionnel·le·s scolaires (Barrense-Dias et al., 2022; Dodaj & Sesar, 2023; Lemke & Rogers, 2020; Parti et al., 2022). La présente étude a été conçue pour explorer les perceptions des conseiller·ère·s scolaires sur leurs expériences en lien avec le sextage étudiant. Une étude qualitative a été utilisée et des entrevues semi-structurées ont été menées auprès de cinq participant·e·s. Les résultats ont été organisés en trois thématiques majeures : prévention et préparation; les rôles, les responsabilités, et l'introspection des conseiller·ère·s; et les perspectives des conseiller·ère·s

sur certains aspects en particulier du sextage étudiant. La position de conseiller·ère·s scolaires est fortement avantageuse pour offrir un soutien aux étudiant·e·s. Davantage de recherches sont nécessaires pour confirmer l'efficacité de la prévention du sextage et des stratégies d'intervention pour les étudiant·e·s et pour établir une formation appropriée pour les conseiller·ère·s scolaires, le personnel de l'école, et les parents.

This qualitative study sought to explore the perceptions of a subset of Newfoundland-based school counsellors related to sexting among junior high and senior high students. Sexting is defined as sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages that include pictures, videos, or text (Pew Research Center, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2015). Sext messages are sent through multiple media such as cellphones, email, video streaming (e.g., YouTube), and social media (e.g., Facebook, Snapchat; Ringrose et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2015). With such increases in the use of technology, there is still much to be explored about the sexting behaviour of youth (Barrense-Dias et al., 2022; Daniels et al., 2024; Strassberg et al., 2017; Temple et al., 2012; Walrave et al., 2015).

One Canadian study by Johnson and colleagues (2018) focused on the sending, receiving, and sharing of sext messages across 800 individuals between the ages of 16 and 20. Four out of ten had sent a sext message, two out of three had received one, and 46% had shared a sext. Factors such as gender stereotypes, peer pressure, and moral disengagement were associated with the inclination to share sexts. Of the participants in this study, 93% percent believed their friends had sexted, but only 41% had reportedly done so.

Steeves (2014) conducted a survey involving 5,436 Canadian adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17. Students with access to a cellphone accounted for 87% of survey participants, while 8% had sent out a sext including a photo and 24% had received a sext. Also, it was more common for boys to have their sext shared, to have received a sext that was forwarded on, and to forward a sext they had received.

A theme throughout relevant studies is that more boys than girls ask for sext messages and more girls than boys are requested to send sext messages (Barrense-Dias et al., 2022; Foody et al., 2021; Gavey et al., 2024; Parti et al., 2022; Perry et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2013; Temple et al., 2012). Ringrose and colleagues (2013) interviewed 35 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 regarding their sexting practices. Their study demonstrated that “sexual double standards” may exist within sexting, given that boys were more likely to “collect” and share images of girls, whereas girls were expected to send sexts. Moreover, girls were rated based on values ascribed to their bodies, typically their breasts and their bum, and were sometimes shamed for sexting, whereas boys gained popularity according to the quality of images they had acquired from girls.

Mitchell and colleagues (2012) found that of the 149 youth who had disclosed sexting behaviours in their study, 28% of those who had sent sexts and 25% of those who had received texts had emotional responses of shame, distress, and fear. Similarly, Walker and colleagues (2013) noted that some girls expressed feelings of shame or discomfort when they had been asked for pictures or when they had sent pictures, while boys also expressed similar feelings, especially when it came to distributing or broadcasting girls' photos.

Studies suggest that adolescents' awareness of risks and legal implications related to sexting is not sufficient in deterring adolescents from participating in the behaviour (Daniels et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Perry et al., 2022; Strassberg et al., 2013; Strassberg et al., 2017). Strassberg and colleagues' (2013) study of 606 high school students established that one third of those who had never sexted described a positive attitude toward the behaviour, which may be a predictor for future behaviour. Even though one in seven students had consented to sexting behaviours, all still felt bad for participating. Strassberg and colleagues' (2017) study of 656 students found that almost a quarter had reported sexting as acceptable behaviour and that receiving a sext significantly increased experiences of sending out a sext. A 2009 study by Pew Research Center found that sexting attitudes were mixed, with some viewing it as reasonable and flirtatious behaviour and others as illegal and potentially damaging behaviour. Beliefs around occurrences were also mixed according to this study, with some participants saying it happens regularly and others saying it is uncommon.

Sexting behaviours are complex and involve variables such as peer pressure, belonging needs, and personality characteristics. It is important to note that while certain variables may be associated with sexting behaviours and suggest that some students may be more susceptible to them, sexting appears to be a behaviour that does not solely target vulnerable individuals (Perry et al., 2022; Woodley et al., 2025).

School counsellors have many responsibilities, but students' personal and social difficulties is of primary concern (Coy & Sears, 2000). Their goal is to help students face challenges in healthy and effective ways. Their training provides them with a unique position within schools. They provide responsive services, including individual and group counselling, along with referrals to external agencies (Galassi & Akos, 2004). School counsellors may be particularly important for crisis intervention involving incidents such as sexting. As such, they play an integral role in creating a welcoming and safe environment for students.

Sexting is associated with potentially damaging outcomes that can be especially concerning for school counsellors given their central role in supporting students. Research shows that certain behaviour can have extensive emotional impacts on students. Dake and colleagues (2012) and Ševčíková (2016) found connections between sexting and emotional health problems. For Dake and colleagues, this included the presence of suicidal ideation and attempts, symptoms of depression,

cyberbullying, and being a victim of physical violence. Ševčíková's study supported previous links between sexting and alcohol use and found a link between sexting and emotional problems. Similarly, a study by Nordahl and colleagues (2013) identified the psychological impacts that cyberbullying can have on children and adolescents and highlighted that cyberbullying has been linked with depression, anxiety, and externalizing behaviours.

The exploration of sexuality among young people is not new, but technology has now provided new and different means of doing so (i.e., sending and receiving digital images; Daniels et al., 2024; Matthey & Diliberto, 2013; Perry et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2013). While such behaviours are not new in their entirety, they have taken on a different form with different consequences when it comes to sexting behaviour (Siegle, 2010).

It is evident that sexting is occurring among youth and that these behaviours have implications for schools, school counsellors, and the broader community. Student perceptions of sexting dynamics are integral, but we believe other viewpoints are necessary in order to gain further understanding of sexting behaviour. Little research has focused on the views of school professionals (e.g., administrators, counsellors, teachers) about providing comfort, support, and interventions to students around sexting behaviour.

This study sought to gain new insight on the sexting behaviours of students through the perspective of school counsellors. It has been suggested that sexting behaviours may have serious mental and physical impacts on students (Parti et al. 2022; Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Van Gool, 2014). Therefore, the insight and practical knowledge that school counsellors apply in these situations is important in procuring healthy and appropriate responses to sexting behaviours. It may also enable schools to develop better ways of approaching and educating students about sexting, ensuring protective measures, and identifying those at risk of sexting and other high-risk behaviours.

## **Methodology and Methods**

The goal of this study was to acquire a greater understanding of how school counsellors approach sexting behaviours among students. Various aspects of their role were explored including training, preparation, confidentiality, risk assessment, interprofessional collaborations, as well as bullying interactions and the increased use of personal devices within schools. The primary research question was: "What are the perceptions of school counsellors toward student sexting?" The study focused on seven sub-questions:

1. How do school counsellors describe the impact that sexting has on students and schools?

2. How are school counsellors impacted by sexting among students?
3. Do school counsellors feel prepared and equipped to handle incidents involving sexting behaviours?
4. Do school counsellors assess for risk when they work with students around sexting, and how do they feel about having to breach confidentiality?
5. How do school counsellors collaborate with teachers, administrators, and other professionals like educational psychologists in dealing with issues involving sexting behaviours?
6. How do school counsellors describe the interactions that exist between sexting and bullying?
7. What are the strategies currently in place for dealing with an increased use of personal devices in schools?

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

The methodological choice for this study was a qualitative design informed by Merriam (2009) and Patton (2015) that included a practical qualitative approach that observes behaviour without defining how it should be viewed. Qualitative inquiry is a meaningful approach that allows researchers to investigate and understand the significance that people attach to their experiences (Morrow, 2007). An underlying tenet of qualitative inquiry is that people ascribe unique realities and explanations to their lives and therefore have unique perspectives of how they have experienced a certain phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The approach was informed by the tenets of phenomenology.

### **Ethics and Data Collection**

Ethical protocols for conducting qualitative research, as well as those outlined by Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), were followed closely. An ethics certificate was obtained from MUN's interdisciplinary committee on ethics in human research. To gain approval to conduct research involving school counsellors, we also sought and received permission from the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD). Permission was also obtained from the Newfoundland and Labrador Counsellors' and Psychologists' Association (NLCPA) to gain approval for contacting counsellors who are members of the NLCPA.

Counsellors were recruited via a recruitment email sent out through the NLCPA listserv. Purposeful sampling was utilized in the current study (Creswell, 2012). School counsellors have direct correspondence with students on a regular basis. Convenience sampling was used, since we were interested in those school counsellors who work with adolescents (junior high and senior high; Merriam, 2009). We aimed to recruit school counsellors who had had at least one direct experience with student sexting (Hays & Wood, 2011).

### ***Sample Size***

The number of required participants tends to vary across qualitative studies, since the focus is on obtaining adequate data rather than on obtaining a specific number of participants (Creswell, 2012; Morrow, 2007). As such, we believed that we had sufficient data to answer our research question after the completion of five interviews. In qualitative research, the redundancy of data often signifies that the amount of data obtained is sufficient (Morrow, 2007). In the current study, redundancy was noted throughout responses in the repetition of words like “trust” and “pressure” as well as across ideas concerning the loss of control and the lack of forethought. Patterns of similarity were present in how participants responded to questions, with recurring ideas and notions becoming apparent.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection consisted of one-on-one phone interviews conducted outside of working hours (Creswell, 2012). Interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length. Interviews were semi-structured, with 15 questions prepared in advance. Examples of interview questions included the following:

- How do you feel when you hear about students sexting?
- How does this behavior impact you as a school counsellor?
- What are your thoughts about young people sexting?
- How do you feel about dealing with sexting incidents?
- How did you become prepared to address such student behaviour (e.g., training, mentorship, readings)?
- Do you feel prepared to work with students regarding such behaviour?
- Do you think schools are equipped to deal with such incidents?
- How do you collaborate with others such as teachers, administrators, or educational psychologists regarding sexting behaviours?
- Do you see any prevention happening in schools (or in your own work) concerning student sexting?
- What advice would you give to parents or school professionals about student sexting behaviour?

All interviews were audio-recorded. The lead author made notes throughout the interviews.

Each participant was given a pseudonym at the start of the interview, and no identifying information was recorded, in order to protect their anonymity. No personal identifying information was requested during the interview of the participant or any students they have worked with. The audio recordings were kept in a secure filing cabinet along with printed transcripts. No identifying information was put in the documents and computer files were password protected.

## Data Analysis

A basic “inductive and comparative” approach (Merriam, 2009, p. 175) was taken to facilitate a thematic analysis of the data. The ultimate goal was to assemble participant communications into groups that were organized according to meaning and that could then be classified as themes (Tite, 2010). Subsequently, textured descriptions were constructed for main themes, and these provided a rich account of participant experiences.

The first stage of the analysis process involved de-identifying the data, listening to the audio recordings repeatedly, and transcribing them verbatim (Merriam, 2009). This allowed ongoing reflection whereby notes, comments, ideas, thoughts, and feelings were recorded in a separate notebook for each transcript (Merriam, 2009). Further analysis included interpreting the findings and applying a critical assessment (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). This required an honest recognition of personal assumptions and biases during searches for meaning within the data (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). The next step involved formal coding. The data was organized within Microsoft Word documents after the questions and the responses were separated. A column for data identification involved a combination of words, phrases, and colours, which created shorthand names for easier retrieval of data (Merriam, 2009). After the data was coded, category construction began. Data was arranged into appropriate categories until three working themes were developed. A smaller working number of themes enabled easier communication in the discussion of the findings (Patton, 2015).

To take the analysis of the data to the level of identifying themes, a basic “inductive and comparative” strategy (Merriam, 2009, p. 175) was used. This strategy enabled the data to be sorted in order to gain meaning from participant responses (Merriam, 2009). Quotes from the participants were included to enhance the validity of the statements.

## Trustworthiness

To validate the findings, certain strategies were used, including a) a comparison of interview data with personal notes, b) a comparison of interview data with existing research literature, c) a discussion between the lead author and the participants about the findings, d) an external audit process whereby an outside source was used to evaluate the study, and e) the creation of journals (Creswell, 2012; Morrow, 2005). Credibility was supported by the researchers clearly defining the parameters of this study as only addressing the experiences and views of school counsellors as they relate to sexting among students. The findings do not claim to have knowledge surrounding the experiences and views of other individuals such as parents, school administrators, or students (Creswell, 2012).

Dependability can be described as the ability for another to replicate the study (Tite, 2010). Care has been taken to describe the study procedures so that another researcher could replicate the study. The participants in this study are

school counsellors as identified by the NLESD and the NLCPA. Confirmability refers to the justification of the findings through an analysis of the subjectivity of the researcher (Tite, 2010). As subjectivity is noted as being a central component of qualitative research, this study corroborates the pre-understandings that exist. Although the researchers aimed to conduct data collection and analysis with as much objectivity as possible, the presence of subjectivity is recognized. Therefore, the incorporation of detailed memos and side notes were important pieces in adding to the confirmability of this study. These strategies attempt to create a balance between the objective and subjective so that accurate findings can be presented to readers (Tite, 2010). As such, subjectivity is present and can be seen as a key piece in understanding qualitative research (Creswell, 2012).

The researchers employed the reflexivity strategy to address biases and assumptions. Self-reflective journaling, throughout the course of data collection and analysis, was utilized. This journal consisted of a collection of experiences of and reactions to the research process. As such, it brought about greater awareness and clarity related to the researchers' own self-understandings (Morrow, 2005). During the interview process and the data analysis, every effort was made to employ the concept of "bracketing" to identify pre-existing knowledge and assumptions (Wilson, 2015, p. 39). The researchers considered biases and assumptions related to areas such as sexting, counselling, and education through the data collection and analysis stages.

### **Positionality**

During the completion of the study, the researchers were members of the counselling psychology program at Memorial University, one as a faculty member and one as a graduate student. Our backgrounds include both psychology and education. The lead author has experience in the education field as both teacher and counsellor; therefore, there is an underlying understanding and subjective connection to school counsellors. In addition, there are personal interests regarding the sexting behaviours of students, given that the lead author has had experience with student sexting incidents as both teacher and counsellor.

## **Results**

### **Participant Backgrounds**

All participants identified as female and had worked as a counsellor for an average of 6 years. Most of the participants had experience working in both junior and senior high schools within a mixture of rural and urban backgrounds across Newfoundland and Labrador. None of the participants had received any training related to sexting.

## **Theme 1: Prevention and Preparation**

Theme 1 focuses on sexting prevention and preparation in schools. Within this theme, four sub-themes were identified: (1) preventative measures for students, (2) sexting preparation and training opportunities for school counsellors, (3) sexting incidents and school preparedness, and (4) advice for parents.

### ***Preventative Measures for Students***

This sub-theme focuses on the design and implementation of education for students to address sexting. Participants varied in their views on how much schools are providing prevention and education to students, but they all agreed that some prevention is happening. Anna stated, "It's certainly something that we're trying to have some education around."

Participants discussed the Digital Citizenship initiative, which stemmed from the Safe and Caring Schools Act, as one prevention approach (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d.). Anna described it as a mandated set of lessons that targets safe social media use, with a "sexting portion," but expressed concerns about the lack of engaging content. When asked about being prepared, Anna voiced the need for more prevention: "I do feel like it should almost be a part of some sort of course or curriculum that every student is going to get." Anna suggested that an educational piece taught once during the year is not enough and that content needed to be engaging. The need for educational pieces embedded within the curriculum was echoed by all participants. Maggie focused on delivery and training: "With every lesson plan, it's not as simple as just providing PowerPoints and away you go." She added that teachers need guidance on the proper implementation of lessons.

Other prevention strategies mentioned included posters around school, awareness campaigns, and school assemblies with police participation to target social media use. When used, these approaches have tended primarily to target safe social media use that often speaks to the idea of sexting but typically are not about sexting specifically.

Rachel mentioned that education seems to occur more after an incident has taken place. All participants noted that building sexting education into the curriculum would allow for a greater prevention focus.

### ***Sexting Preparation and Training Opportunities for School Counsellors***

All participants noted a lack of training specific to sexting and welcomed such training. While participants admitted feeling capable of dealing with situations, they credited most of their competence to others in the field and to working through situations on their own.

Most participants felt that experience working with sexting situations built their competence and helped them feel prepared to address sexting. All noted that professional development opportunities specific to sexting would be useful.

### ***Sexting Incidents and School Preparedness***

The third sub-theme shifted the focus from an examination of counsellor preparation to the question of whether participants felt that schools are equipped to handle sexting situations.

Rachel and Claire both felt that schools are not equipped. Rachel stated that “it’s a learning curve” and that “some schools don’t have as many incidents as others.” She pointed out that once an incident happens, schools have to figure out how to deal with it and that “depending on the student and depending on the interactions, your approach is different.” Claire voiced her opinion:

Teachers are not equipped to deal with it; the school is not equipped to deal with it. Oftentimes the administrators are not equipped to deal with it—it’s the guidance counsellors that end up dealing with that. Particularly if it’s after the fact and the kids are pretty messed up as a result of it or ... it’s just happened and it’s pretty raw, but as for schools being educated enough to deal with it, no.

### ***Advice for Parents***

This sub-theme focuses on parental involvement, a recurring topic for participants. Participants noted disengagement between parents and the sexting activities of students. When participants were asked to provide advice for parents or school professionals regarding sexting among students, almost all responses solely targeted parents.

Maggie mentioned that her school attempted to educate parents about safe social media use for their kids by holding an information session, but few parents signed up. She identified this disconnect as the “biggest struggle,” adding that “it is falling to the school to deal with these situations and we cannot engage the parents to take an active role in wanting to be aware.” Anna expressed concern regarding parents’ level of comprehension when it comes to social media, stating they “don’t have the knowledge base” and “don’t have the understanding of the apps and of the technology.”

The central message was parental awareness. Participants wanted parents to have more conversations about and more involvement in their children’s activities. They also noted the importance of parents monitoring their children’s cellphones and online activity appropriately as well as teaching their children about the dangers and consequences of behaviours like sexting.

## **Theme 2: School Counsellors’ Roles, Responsibilities, and Introspection**

The second theme considers the central roles and responsibilities of school counsellors where student sexting is concerned, with five sub-themes: (1) reactions and impacts, (2) confidentiality, (3) risk assessment, (4) intervention, and (5) collaborations.

### ***Reactions and Impacts***

This sub-theme includes participants' thoughts and feelings about sexting and the impacts of working with students around these behaviours.

Two participants described actual physical reactions as a result of information regarding a student sexting incident. Claire conveyed that her "stomach sinks" and that often, by the time it reaches her, it means that the situation has escalated and "the student is unable to cope." Rachel commented on the seriousness of sexting, stating that it is challenging and that she has had incidents with students as young as Grade 6. Anna reacted by saying that it is "super concerning" and that she becomes "worried for students and their well-being."

Participants described supporting students once an incident has occurred or is occurring primarily with individual counselling. Maggie described dealing with a situation when it turns into "crisis mode" and "trying to help people through the repercussions of that decision" and how to "move forward." In addition to that, she said, "I can certainly educate and then hopefully try to help a lot of people to make better choices." Similarly, Claire spoke about counselling those involved to help them with "understanding the seriousness of what they've done" while "trying to rebuild the confidence and self-esteem." Tessa expressed, "I want to do more to empower the girls. For them to take control of their own self-esteem, their own bodies, their own feelings about their bodies and to need less boys, or to need less attention from the boys."

### ***Confidentiality***

This sub-theme centres on the matter of confidentiality as it relates to counselling and sexting. School counsellors are ethically obligated to keep an individual's information private, but there are instances when counsellors are obligated to breach confidentiality. All participants stated that they review this information and ensure understanding when they meet with students for counselling.

Tessa said she believes sexting to be damaging and therefore she would breach confidentiality in such a situation.

Participants indicated that they would assess the situation and respond accordingly. They suggested that they would breach confidentiality by calling authorities and/or informing parents or caregivers if they felt doing so was necessary.

### ***Risk Assessment***

This sub-theme considers risk assessment, or the direct questioning of students to determine whether they are at risk for suicide. Participants were asked whether they assess for risk in situations that involve sexting, given that these incidents can have adverse effects on students.

All participants said that they would assess for risk, but the extent would depend on the situation and students involved. Rachel said that if there was a "concern for risk," she would explore that with the student in question. For

instance, if she noticed symptoms of depression in a student who was dealing with a sexting incident, she would do a risk assessment. Likewise, Maggie indicated that she often does a preliminary assessment—as she said, “You can often tell with students”—and will then do a formal assessment if she feels it is necessary.

### ***Intervention***

This sub-theme concentrates on how and when participants intervene in situations in which they learn sexting is occurring.

Participants indicated that each sexting case is unique and that their intervention style changes with the situation. However, most did assert that if they were made aware of a situation, they would intervene in some way. Claire explained that she would intervene, “particularly if it’s in a bullying” way, and added that it depends on the circumstances. For example, if a student reports that someone sent a nude picture to them, then she would have a conversation with the person who sent the photo or the person who was in the photo. However, if a student does not want to disclose what has happened or does not want to talk about it, she will not force the matter. She explained:

I can’t force the student to tell me this is what they’ve done or this is what they’re involved in but I can say, “You know, [this] has come to my attention and I’m a little bit worried about this . . . and I want to make sure you’re informed, I want to make sure you’re making good decisions.”

Participants acknowledged the important role they play in supporting and helping students to navigate challenging situations with sexting. Interventions ranged from informal conversations and check-ins to individual and group counselling.

### ***Collaborations***

This sub-theme examines how school counsellors integrate resources in order to meet the demands of the job. Most participants mentioned pooling resources and insights from other counsellors, administrators, and individuals in external agencies such as social workers and police officers.

Maggie stated, “I do have a couple [of] other school counsellors that I talk to for thoughts, suggestions, and different things.” She also mentioned that police officers are often utilized “to provide support rather than ramifications.” Claire indicated, “There’s a lot of consulting that happens” between teachers, counsellors, educational psychologists, and senior education officers involved in the district. Rachel noted that when thinking about intervention, it is important to recognize that sexting impacts many people, including family and the community.

### **Theme 3: School Counsellors' Perspectives on Specific Aspects of Student Sexting**

The third theme includes aspects that may accompany sexting behaviour and that school counsellors may encounter when working with students, in the form of six sub-themes: (1) pressure, (2) cyberbullying, (3) trust, (4) gender, age, and relationships, (5) attitudes, influences, and no exceptions, and (6) split-second decisions and belonging.

#### ***Pressure***

This sub-theme discusses participants' awareness of pressure when it comes to students participating in sexting. Most participants specifically mentioned the word "pressure" during their interviews and their belief that many of the students they have worked with have felt pressured to send a sext message.

Anna referenced a "direct pressure." She said, "I think that they're hearing 'Send me nudes of yourself, send me pictures—I'm not going to tell anybody, I'm not going to show anybody.'" Claire disclosed that in her experience, "There seems to be a lot of pressure from the male to the female to be sending nudes."

Maggie described a situation in which a boyfriend had asked for a picture and the girl's friends were telling her to send him a picture. "I see it within the couples, not every couple but certainly some couples," she observed. "I see the messages where it's like, 'Just c'mon—send me one of those pics.'" Similarly, Rachel spoke about peer pressure and the importance young people place on fitting in with their peer group.

#### ***Cyberbullying***

This sub-theme considers sexting behaviours that are interconnected with cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can be defined as victimization that occurs through technology media or bullying that happens online. The combination of sexting content with cyberbullying, in which images are shared or forwarded, can have a significant impact on an individual (Barrense-Dias et al., 2022; Perry et al., 2022).

Tessa recalled an incident in which "the girls were threatened [that] if they didn't send a picture then they would find a nude picture on the Internet and say it was them and spread it around." In this particular case, follow-through occurred and pictures were circulated.

#### ***Trust***

This sub-theme considers the perceived level of trust that exists between senders and receivers in a sexting exchange. Participants repeatedly mentioned the word "trust" and demonstrated that adolescents are quick to grant trust to someone they believe cares about them, which sometimes leaves them in a vulnerable position.

Tessa indicated that the amount of trust between individuals is especially concerning when it comes to sexting. Anna mentioned the idea of trust in a

“particular moment in time” because adolescents believe that the “relationship is going to either last forever and that they can trust that person or [trust] that that person is never going to betray them.”

### ***Gender, Age, and Relationships***

This sub-theme focuses on three characteristics that were referenced during interviews: gender, age, and relationships. For most of the participants, the most common exchanges are from girls to boys, where a female student sends a boy a sexually explicit photo of herself and then the boy forwards that photo to his friends without the sender’s consent or knowledge. Participants discussed the role that consenting relationships play with sexting among students and the effects sexting can have depending on the age of the participants.

Tessa described the sexts females are sending as photos of private body parts such as “top shots” or “boob shots,” often without the girl’s face or head in the picture. Consensual exchanges between students who are boyfriend and girlfriend are also popular. Most of Maggie’s experiences have included women sexting to their “boyfriend or significant other.” She indicated, “Usually I’ve seen it as a way to impress or a way to ... a lot of cases it’s a gift for their boyfriend ... to make them feel better that day or whatever.”

Tessa explained that much of what she encounters involves “junior girls” or girls in Grades 7, 8, and 9. She noted that initially she was dealing with it mostly with high school girls but that now it is mostly girls from Grades 8 and 9.

Participants are attentive to how gender, age, and relationships interact in sexting practices. Collectively, participant experiences primarily involve female students, but all were quick to note that males are also active participants in sexting.

### ***Attitudes, Influences, and No Exceptions***

This sub-theme discusses perceived student attitudes and the impacts that outside influences may be having on sexting. Throughout the interviews, participants contemplated how carefree attitudes and social media influences might be making individuals more susceptible to this behaviour.

Claire reflected, “Like they seem to think that the sexting—ah, it’s no big deal.” She said that students are often not open about their sexting behaviour “until it really affects them.” Claire expressed that the magnitude of student decisions is not felt until it personally affects them and “causes issues.” To students, “that’s usual, normal, acceptable behaviour.”

Anna referenced the impact that outside influences may be having on students:

I think they’re seeing a lot of things on social media and they’re seeing a lot of things on TV. They are unrealistic expectations and they’re seeing a lot of celebrities out there—you know—sex tapes and nude pictures of themselves, posting on social media half-naked pictures of their private parts ... and they

start to think, “Well this is the norm, this is the expectation, this is what I should do.”

Interestingly, most participants noted that anyone can be influenced to participate in sexting behaviour.

### ***Split-Second Decisions and Belonging***

Impulsive decision-making can be a precursor for unfavourable consequences in high-risk situations. Given that sexting can be considered risky behaviour, particularly for adolescents and young adults, the fact that these decisions are often made without participants considering the consequences is concerning for school counsellors. In addition, participants in this study associated an apparent need for belonging with students and sexting. They suggest that the desire to belong may impact a student's willingness to sext even when the risks are obvious. Maggie asserted that one-second decisions can become life altering: “It's tempting but it's also way too accessible ... and the regrets are—you can't change that, it's one second.”

## **Discussion**

This section considers the complexity of sexting behaviour and the relationship between cyberbullying and sexting. Study implications, including what counsellors can do to address sexting, as well as education and training needs for school professionals, are considered. Study limitations are also addressed.

Sexting is an important matter in today's digital society. Students are growing up in a culture that prides itself on how it is perceived through an online lens. Students are devoting more time to online interactions, feeling pressure to belong, and for some, sexting is being viewed as normative, typical behaviour (Burén et al., 2021; Daniels et al., 2024; Woodley et al., 2025).

Part of the complexity of sexting includes consent and the law. While school counsellors follow a code of ethics, such a code does not always address the legalities and ethical complexities involved in behaviours such as sexting (Bradley et al., 2020). Legal matters with sexting among minors are often nuanced, and it is suggested that they be explored on a case-by-case basis (Bradley et al., 2020). This can create challenges for counsellors, given that policies and laws regarding sexting are still not clear or specific (Lemke & Rogers, 2020). That said, ethically, counsellors must assess the potential harm and risks involved and consider current legislation that exists to protect children. The following points offer some further discussion on the issue of reporting in such situations. As noted above, it is best to consider each case in the context of relevant ethical and legal guidelines. It is recommended that any counsellor facing such decisions consult with a local expert or colleague.

Counsellors have an ethical responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of their clients (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association [CCPA], 2021). Having said that, parents and guardians have the legal responsibility to care for their children, which often necessitates them having access to information about their children (Truscott and Crook, 2021). Wiczorek and Dobson (2022) highlight different minor statuses in Canada including a minor, a mature minor, and an emancipated minor. Having an understanding of the client's age and minor status would be an important first step in determining how to manage information about the student's sexting behaviour.

There are also limitations to confidentiality that are relevant in this context. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the Children, Youth, and Families Act (House of Assembly, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2018) outlines conditions where a child (under 16) or a youth (16 to under 18) may need protection, and in such cases, a counsellor may need to make a report. Under the Children, Youth, and Families Act, a child or youth at risk of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or emotional harm (i.e., depression, significant anxiety, significant withdrawal, self-destructive behaviour, aggressive behaviour, or delayed development) would be in need of protection. This would create a need for a report to a guardian and to a protective agency. This would be consistent with the CCPA (2021), whereby a counsellor may need to breach confidentiality due to imminent danger to the client (or someone else) or potentially due to child abuse. Sexting behaviour could potentially fall into some of these above reporting requirements depending on the nature of the sexting, the associated risks, the age of the client, and the emotional state of the client.

Another consideration related to reporting would be around child pornography laws. Canada's Criminal Code of Canada notes that child pornography is defined in part as

- (a) a photographic, film, video or other visual representation, whether or not it was made by electronic or mechanical means
  - (i) that shows a person who is or is depicted as being under the age of eighteen years and is engaged in or is depicted as engaged in explicit sexual activity, or
  - (ii) the dominant characteristic of which is the depiction, for a sexual purpose, of a sexual organ or the anal region of a person under the age of eighteen years. (Government of Canada, 2026)

The Criminal Code goes on to highlight the criminal nature of the creation, distribution, possession, and assessment of such child pornography. What is worth noting is that the Criminal Code's definitions are broadly based, but legal interpretations are contextually nuanced and include prosecutorial discretion and diversionary responses in certain cases. Taken together, counsellors need

to consider carefully their reporting responsibilities when it comes to student sexting. It is possible that different agencies (e.g., law enforcement, child protection) could be involved in such situations. Consulting with a local expert or colleague is advised.

Participants identified variables that seem to have an impact on sexting behaviour. They pointed out that the age of adolescents engaging in sexting is getting younger. They noted that the expanding use of technology among younger children has the potential to open the door for sexting behaviour. Studies show that it is more common for sexting to occur among older adolescents (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Dake et al., 2012; Parti et al., 2022; Rice et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2015), but a study by Mishna and colleagues (2009) did indicate that the use of technology has increased among younger people.

Sext exchanges are built on trust. Participants identified the level of trust students impart to other people in their lives as worrisome. Students are often unable to take a long-term view of how situations and relationships can change or the possibility of others betraying their trust. This lack of foresight can leave them in vulnerable positions. Studies indicate that adolescents are aware of the risks involved in sending a sext but are willing to take a chance based on the trust they perceive (Gavey et al., 2024; Ševčíková, 2016; Walrave et al., 2015).

Participants suggested that any student is susceptible to sexting and that current peer attitudes and influences may impact young people's decision to sext. Studies indicate that the more time adolescents spend socializing, particularly through online media, the greater the chances are for sexting to occur (Baumgartner et al., 2014; Dake et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2014; Wolfe et al., 2016). Social media outlets seem to influence how adolescents present themselves in the virtual world, with standards being influenced by celebrities and influencers (Bobkowski et al., 2016). Perceived social normalcy, positive attitudes toward sexting, and a need for popularity may impact adolescents' decisions to sext (Daniels et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2012; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017; Walrave et al., 2015; Wood et al., 2015). These factors are of importance as they may predict future behaviour.

The findings indicate that participants believe adolescents' willingness to act impulsively is problematic in terms of sexting behaviour. Studies have linked sexting with other high-risk behaviours. For example, those engaging in sexting were more likely to engage in sex as well than those who did not engage in sexting (Hicks et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2014; Temple et al., 2012). Sexting among males and females was also associated with other dangerous sexual activities, such as having concurrent sex partners, using drugs and alcohol, and being promiscuous (Dake et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2012; Temple et al., 2014). Studies linked sexting with adolescents who are troubled emotionally (Dake et al., 2012; Mishna et al., 2009). Participants suggest that

some students may sext as an attempt to secure a sense of belonging. Behaviours like sexting may be utilized to gain attention or acceptance or may represent attachment needs, something that may be particularly true for girls (Burén et al., 2021; Dake et al., 2012; Jonsson et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2015).

The findings show a connection between sexting, relationships, and gender. Sexting may occur between individuals within both committed and casual relationships, including those among peers (Burén et al., 2021; Burkett, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012). Participants demonstrated how individuals comply with sexting exchanges as part of a relationship or to make their significant other happy. They also noted that there are perceived differences as to how girls and boys interact with sexting. It appears that girls are more likely than boys to seek support if a sext becomes problematic. Studies indicate that the biggest motivations for sexting include as a joke or a prank, as affection within an existing relationship, or as a way to establish a new relationship (Mitchell et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2015). While there is research to support the idea that males participate more in sexting and that females are more bothered by it (Temple et al., 2012; Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, et al., 2014; West et al., 2014), other studies suggest that there are not any gender differences among sexting practices (Dake et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2016).

Pressure appears to influence sexting behaviour. Participants indicated that pressure is often present in situations they encounter, especially with female students. These findings correlate with multiple studies that suggest girls often feel pressure from boys to sext. They comply with requests to impress in an attempt to maintain the interest of boys or to prove their commitment or because they believe they have no choice (Daniels et al., 2024; Dake et al., 2012; Gavey et al., 2024; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Walker et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2015). Boys may experience pressure from their same-gender peers to forward images of girls they have received (Walker et al., 2013). Adolescents are more likely to participate in sexting if peer pressure is present (Lee et al., 2016; Walrave et al., 2015).

There is a connection between sexting and cyberbullying. The findings of the present study demonstrate how students may use sexting as a tool to manipulate, shame, or humiliate another person. A personal sext can be forwarded on to others or broadcast for all to see. Girls are more likely to participate in sexting if they are experiencing coercion (Dake et al., 2012; Gavey et al., 2024; Mishna et al., 2009; West et al., 2014). The main link between sexting and cyberbullying involves the forwarding or sharing of sexts. Twenty-five percent of adolescents who receive a sext forward it on, a practice that is more common for males than for females (Strassberg et al., 2013). This can result in emotional distress for the individual in the sext, who often becomes the target of ridicule and harassment (Ringrose et al., 2012; Strassberg et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2013). Girls are more likely to experience negative effects from the incident than boys (Wood et al., 2015).

## Implications

The study findings support multiple implications and recommendations related to practice, policy, and training. These implications and recommendations are detailed below.

Importantly, education and intervention related to student sexting behaviour should take gender and relationship context into consideration. In addition, understanding the sexting behaviour in a broader context of risk is critical. Thus, a risk assessment should be considered. What are the risks associated with the sexting behaviour and what risks exist in relation to the sexting behaviour? Are students engaged in a broader set of risk-related behaviours? Counsellors should consider impulsivity and broader indications of mental health concerns and strengths in considering sexting behaviour and risks. Counsellors and teachers also need to consider the ethical and legal implications of student sexting behaviour, including the duty to report such behaviour.

Counsellors and teachers should consider sexting from a relationship and peer-to-peer perspective. Education and interventions focused on social skills training, assertiveness training, peer relationship development interventions, and peer pressure strategies could be useful considerations given the study findings.

School-wide policy and education could be a useful approach to draw attention to student sexting, including the risks involved. Collaboration with other school professionals as well as with community professionals can add to the depth of knowledge and availability of support for teachers and students when it comes to student sexting. It is important to consider if student sexting incidents are occurring in the context of cyberbullying. If so, teachers and counsellors can consider bullying policies and interventions to help address sexting incidents. Cyberbullying policies should include a focus on sexting.

According to Smith (2016), schools should choose intervention methods that are suited to their current situation. Adolescents are more responsive when methods involve dialogue and scenarios that are realistic, relevant, and current (Ringrose et al., 2012; Woodley et al., 2025). Content that has the potential to provoke deep emotions and reactions may help adolescents challenge current thoughts and beliefs (Ringrose et al., 2012). Moreover, a study by Allen (2005) considered adolescents' views on how to improve their sex education. Students identified interactive and practical lessons as most engaging. Participants in the current study expressed concern that students do not consider sexting a big deal until something serious happens to them. This coincides with the fact that many schools do not implement sexting education until after an incident has taken place. These attitudes and actions are reactive in nature and, as a result, appear inadequate in addressing these trends.

Participants acknowledged the importance of providing prevention measures but identified concerns regarding the limited time and focus that sexting

education is given throughout the school year. They also pointed out concerns regarding the effectiveness of prevention that is seen as lacking engagement. A study by Cross and colleagues (2016) examined the implementation of a school-wide Cyber Friends Schools program (CFS) to target cyberbullying. On average, teachers were able to implement three out of nine required modules. Time constraints and the quality of attention given for implementation were identified as conditions that impacted the effectiveness of the program.

Participants insisted on enhanced prevention topics like sexting by embedding them within the curriculum and making them a part of regular education and conversations. Interestingly, Johnson and colleagues' (2018) study of Canadian adolescents indicated that general lessons about sexting did not lower sexting rates. This may indicate that schools are more likely to implement a lesson after an incident has occurred. Therefore, sexting education might be more effective as a regular topic within a school curriculum.

In addition, participants felt that individuals who provide sexting education to students would benefit from proper training on delivery and implementation. Teachers have identified a "lack of confidence" as one barrier when delivering content about topics like cyberbullying (Cross et al., 2016, p. 175). Ringrose and colleagues (2012) pointed out that some teachers may feel embarrassed discussing matters like sexting. This discomfort requires attention, given that it is important for students to have opportunities for open dialogue with adults to discuss issues involving sexuality (Ringrose et al., 2012). School counsellors may play an important role in supporting such work directly and indirectly.

Ringrose and colleagues (2012) suggested that teachers can gain credibility by being knowledgeable about the technology youth are using. Participants communicated that they had not received any training that focused on sexting behaviours. While each participant had encountered sexting among students within their role as a school counsellor, none had received, beyond their general counselling education, proper training on prevention or how to support students throughout sexting incidents. At least 50% of school professionals do not feel prepared to deal with cyberbullying among students, while students are often hesitant to ask for help because they feel adults do not understand or are unable to help (Cross et al., 2016; Li et al., 2015). Research suggests the need for more precise education concerning sexting behaviours and current technology for all school professionals as well as for parents (Johnson et al., 2018; Pistoni et al., 2023; Ringrose et al., 2012). Training and intervention that educates on ways for individuals to respect others in digital spaces, just as they would in person, is an important consideration (Hicks et al., 2021; Woodley et al., 2025). Offering professional development in this capacity may help school professionals feel supported and prepared to prevent and address sexting behaviours (Johnson et al., 2018). It is recommended that schools offer training workshops on student sexting interventions to teachers, counsellors, psychologists, and administrators.

An apparent knowledge gap between parents and young people was identified, which suggests that the digital practices of young people, including sexting practices, can be hidden from parents. Participants called for greater awareness, monitoring, and education surrounding sexting, social media, general technology use, and the risks involved.

In a study by Mishna and colleagues (2009), students reported that they had found ways around technology rules imposed by their parents and schools. Students viewed adults as oblivious when it came to the intricacies of technology. This disconnect in technological knowledge may limit the protection parents provide if they are not able to assess properly the dangers of their children's online activities or if they simply take an avoidance approach (Mishna et al., 2009; Woodley et al., 2025).

School counsellors and administrators can help close the gap by opening communication between school and home as well as by providing education with resources that are aimed at parents specifically (Dodaj & Sesar, 2023; Johnson et al., 2018; Li et al., 2015). Schools can provide teachers and counsellors with effective and useful interventions (Dodaj & Sesar, 2023; Johnson et al., 2018; Li et al., 2015). Research showed that many youth had rules at home regarding safe technology use, but for many this did not include sexting (Johnson et al., 2018). Adolescents communicated a preference for discussing topics like sexting with parents rather than with teachers, seeing discussions with parents as more comfortable and valuable than discussions with teachers (Ringrose et al., 2012). Ringrose and colleagues (2012) found that two out of three adolescents actually desired greater parental interest in their digital lives, with only one out of three disregarding parental views of online safety. West and colleagues' (2014) study noted that when parents set rules regarding sexting, it decreased sexting odds with both boys and girls. However, when parental care was not as present or adolescents viewed their parents as not caring about their sexting behaviours, the probability of engagement in sexting increased for both boys and girls.

### **Limitations**

The study consisted of a small sample of five female voices, with participation limited to school counsellors from Newfoundland and Labrador. A mixture of rural and urban experience was received, but not all areas were represented. Therefore, while the perspectives of these five participants add much knowledge to sexting research, the findings of this research are not generalizable and should be carefully considered in terms of transferability.

The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data are an individualized assimilation. There is subjectivity involved in the organization, deciphering, and analysis of the data. Having said that, the researchers have outlined above the steps taken to help ensure reliability and trustworthiness of the data.

## Concluding Thoughts

Research on the subject of sexting is still evolving. The procurement of professional perspectives as they relate to sexting among students is limited. It appears that the present study is one of the first to examine school counsellors' perceptions in this capacity. We identified critical perspectives from school counsellors who have had experiences with student sexting. Such perspectives have elucidated important implications for schools as well as for school counsellors, teachers, administrators, and broader community organizations. The findings indicated that sexting is perceived as an issue within schools and that more prevention and preparation are necessary to address the needs of students. Participants recognized the importance of a collaborative approach in working with sexting behaviours and identified multiple aspects that may contribute to student sexting behaviours.

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