



Contact: Roy Wooten
Tel.: 281.894.7222
Cell: 832.748.0199
Email: credmon@FightingForHearts.org

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Cyber-Bullying and Sexting

Over the last five years, cyber-bullying and sexting have become significant issues in the American media and culture. Sites like Facebook, MySpace, and chat rooms have made it possible for everyone, even minors to stay linked-in with friends 24/7, but such a connection has provided an avenue for stalking and bullying via the internet. The definition of cyber-bullying is, according to the National Crime Prevention Council, "when the Internet, cell phones or other devices are used to send or post texts or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person." Sexting, a recent addition to the American vocabulary, can be described as the sending of explicit pictures, videos, or sexual language via texts through cellular devices.

Both cyber-bullying and sexting prove highly dangerous and inappropriate, and even illegal once minors are involved. When an explicit sexual message is sent to or includes minor, charges of child pornography are possible. Additionally, sexting can become cyber-bullying when a person gets a text message from someone and they did not want the sexual picture or text.

Both sexting and cyber bullying are widespread among younger people. In a recent survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 20% of teenagers have sent a nude or semi-nude picture of themselves to another person. The same survey concluded that 39% of teens have sent sexually explicit texts to another person. The National Crime Prevention Counsel finds that over 40% of teenagers with internet access have been bullied through sites like MySpace, Facebook, or through personal email addresses.

So how can you help keep your teenager safe while they use the internet and cell phones?

- *Know your adolescent's passwords to their social networks. Encourage your teen not to give passwords to friends or dating partners.
- *Educate your teen on the dangers of online bullying, what sexting messages are, and the consequences of sending inappropriate messages.
- *Monitor your child's cell phone usage and computer access closely. Help them establish healthy boundaries with technology.

Help your teenage make healthy choices--know what they are doing online and with their cell phones.

Chelsie Sargent, M.Ed., LPC, CART, is a counselor at Shield-Bearer Counseling Centers who provided Dating Violence Prevention programs to over 15,000 students last school year. Upcoming presentation dates in the Greater Houston area include: November 10, 2010, December 12, 2010 and February 16, 2011
Call Roy at 281.894.7222 to observe a live presentation. Learn more about Chelsie and Shield-Bearer, a 501c3 charity, at FightingForHearts.Org.